

THE SPHERE OF POLITICS WITH MYTH AND STEREOTYPE IN THE BACKGROUND

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Abstract

From time immemorial myths were connected with the beginning of the existence of civilization. Genealogic and eschatological myths identified the history of humankind with chaos. Every myth is in some way connected with politics.

The political myths shape the public opinion. They are means of ideological propaganda. While they cannot adapt rules of scientific explanatory rules, they adhere to the “understanding faith”, exclude discussion and interpretation. Among the genres of political myths one may name: spontaneous myths, adopted by individuals and social groups, and myths “consciously” created. They are often used in politics.

The political stereotypes are important emotional clichés in the conceptual system accepted by an individual. They are also universal mechanisms of interpersonal communication. The contemporary myths and stereotypes base on emotional states immune people to truth and falsehood.

Key words: *Political myth, ideological propaganda, political costume, stereotype, emotional states*

From time immemorial, myths are connected with genealogy and the beginning of existence. It were genealogic and eschatological myths that identified history with chaos, while myth of the beginning described the virtues of the existing order and presented chaos as a state which had been overcome.

Thus an attempt to arbitrarily demarcate political myths as an autonomous phenomenon is a misunderstanding. All of the myths are related to politics at least in some extent. One may show among them those, which have played a special role in politics. One should agree that “a myth became a peculiar invention of politics of the 20th century” [Filipowicz 1988: 76].

The dialogue between “tellers” and “listeners” is a transcendental principle of myths in every culture [Ibid.: 60].

In this *theatrum mundi* priests, wise men and politicians were actors. The truthfulness of the political ideas are impossible to prove, so the art of political

persuasion is based on making people accept the truth without any proof. In the contact with broader audience the symbolic meaning, shamanic gesture is more important than discursive elaborates. Thus the art of political persuasion does not depend on arduous explaining tangled and complex issues. It also has nothing in common with intellectual comprehension. Not the depth and perspicacity of the reasoning, but the power of suggestion (a kind of magic) breaks the barrier of distrust, thus becoming meaningful and convincing.

“Magic is indeed an unattainable ideal of political efficiency, an obvious destiny of political efficiency, which always has to be based on word at the point of entry, but eventually strives towards certain real effects” [*Ibid.*: 190].

Over the centuries the emerging mythologies recovered the initial truths, uniting the historical time with “sacral time” – time of the beginnings. Succumbing to the rules of variability, the imitating the sacral patterns becomes more and more desacralized. Every transition of this kind has, however, its own mythology. In the contemporary societies the needs, which were satisfied by myths in the primordial communities, do not vanish, because every new form of the social order has to be confirmed by adequate values.

The necessity of manipulation and control over the collective consciousness always exists in politics. In order to do that, one must “run his imagination”, always opened towards the model resolutions. The presence of “sacrum” understood as the primary attribute of faith and morality is necessary here. The mythogenic situation in the pattern given above is created by the division into “tellers” and “listeners”. Persuasion is most often an attempt to win over the approval, leading directly towards dominating the mass imagination.

The mythogenic structures are created in the moment, when thought is not subordinate to procedures, which make making the verification of convictions possible. The problem is the scientific knowledge itself becomes an object of mystification. It happens especially when science is connected with particular political options, which by definition cultivate “worldview-valuating humanities” – the “magical thinking” occurs [*Ibid.*: 109].

The “magical thinking” in politics is directly connected with symbols. They send a signal to the visions and tales, often of prophetic character, referring to the primordial patterns, which are authentic and “enable manipulation with empirical sense of events (...), valorize the sense of political actions, overshadowing their direct empirical sense” [*Ibid.*: 186]. They have a magical power of effect, are ruled with its own logic, which make facts gain another meaning.

The symbolic of political myth covers many designates of reality, both historical and tradition-based. It may concern days and periods of commemoration, holy and public sites, monuments, music, songs, banners, decorations, sculptures, collections of stories and tales, ceremonies, parades, mass demonstrations etc. Thanks to those symbols, power is treated as superior power, as sacrum and taboo.

The effect of symbols is often connected with wider area of myth and mythogenesis. A myth can be placed between religion and science. Religion attempts to explain the essence of being on the basis of the existence of God and thus becomes fully detached from reality and rationality. The belief of myth has a different nature: “the believer in myth analyzes reality, but only to confirm the myth and never to question it. Contrariwise, the claims of science never definitely prejudges the reality. The system

of scientific claims is an open set, contrary to the myth, which is closed, definite set” [Blok 1999: 189].

The contemporary myths, which are not par excellence acts of symbolic expression, use detailed and concrete information in order to gain credibility and trust. Concerning the mythogenic character of mass culture, they became well-tried mean of social engineering and psychological engineering [*Ibid.*]. They are accompanied by particular keywords, gestures, paraphernalia, dresses which are called “a political costume” by Stanisław Filipowicz [1988: 62].

Considering the functional and semantic aspects of myth in the politics, should analyze the relation between social and political situations and emergence of the phenomena which may be qualified as political myths. Political aspects of myth create a complex of visions, which concern its relation with politics [Biernat 1989: 7], particularly with an integration of social group in fight for political power. The question of mystification of political goals is directly connected with this problem.

Characterizing the features of mythical thinking, Tadeusz Biernat emphasizes that the first manifestation of this phenomenon is mythical identity – the lack of difference between what is real and what is ideal: thought and being are indivisible. The second feature of mythical thinking is lack of difference between subject and its attributes; the third is specific attitude towards causality: “post hoc, ergo propter hoc” – “after this, therefore because of this”. In other words: everything way is the cause of everything, and incidental temporal relation is enough to notice a casual relation.

The political myth in its form and content does not differ from the traditional mythical images. Its peculiar feature is the fact that it is related to a particular section of reality, which is politics. We use it while motivating particular political attitudes and modes of behavior. The most looked for are spontaneous myths, emerging in the consciousness of social groups, because the main task of ideology is shaping people’s beliefs in order to motivate attitudes and modes of behavior in the field of politics.

Ideology is always the result of social conflict. The myth supports ideology and participates with it in creating rituals of political life of society.

It was mentioned that pseudo-scientific logics of myth, contrary to scientific reasoning, has closed and definitive character. The basis of this kind of myth is a “friend-enemy” dichotomy. In the same time, clearly and simply articulated evaluations make the real world play a subservient role in relation with created meanings, compatible with the myth’s intention.

In the political theories the world is perceived as an image of struggle, conflicts, imminent confrontation of contradictory social forces. “Hence the political theories, like myths, present the conflict between good and evil, revealing antinomy of Logos and Chaos” [Filipowicz 1988: 115].

With the creation of political myth comes the technique of creation of political myth, which depends on compatibility of aims and aspirations of political leader with the system created by people. If this kind of compatibility exists, the ordinary information impact, referring to “the state of information arousal, is enough” [Biernat 1989: 7]. If compatibility does not exist, one should act in order to create the state of “emotional arousal”.

In the stimulation of the “emotional state”, the political images and deeply rooted views, connected with the collective consciousness of group and nation, simultaneously connected with emotional experience of historical events. Most often

the uncomfortable facts and events are omitted or left unsaid. As a result of the presented situation, “myths of political meaning” emerge. “This kind of dogmatized and mythologized version of history is perfectly suitable for composing different irrational visions of reality” [*Ibid.*: 144].

The irrational images of reality are seen in its fullness when the cognitive functions of political myth are considered. This function allows the reconstruction of the information structure of “mythomaniac” and uniformization of all experiences and beliefs.

In the political myth, the target ideological vision plays a particularly important role. “It is very difficult to materialize, but has a very strong power to call on action” [Przybylski 1996: 117].

The integrating, evaluating and explaining functions of political myth make group coherent, are patterns of conduct, models of relations, actions and orders. The functions given above exert direct influence on “stabilization, dissolution and formation of power, results of political processes, and – most of all – the genesis and development of political movements” [*Ibid.*].

The myths in politics, as well as so-called political myths, play regulating functions in relation to society are the factor of legitimization of political order. The main function of this myth is creation of power infrastructure. The relation of power, myth, and sacrum is the relation of values, which mutually imply themselves. Thus the analysis of relation between power and sacrum is a natural complement to considerations of the regulative functions of myths [Filipowicz 1988: 138].

The temporal dimension points to the regulative character of myth. In the primordial society the myth told the hierophanic events, which had universal dimension. The “political hierophany” undergoes a quick and permanent erosion by the influence of time, permanent transition and degradation. That is why “the political holidays glorifying particular events have substantial meaning for the formation of social balance, but never exert a direct influence like myth-based ritual” [*Ibid.*].

The temporal changeability causes the atrophy of temporal limitations in human beings. Rules which arrange experience do not exist anymore; there are no rules and values arranging the experience. The fact that political leaders still need persistent religious, historical and political eschatology should not be a surprise.

The distribution of myth in the politics is always connected with change of views on the existing reality. Two aspects of myth – prospective and retrospective – undergo a permanent re-evaluation. The prospective myth emerges in the crisis situations. This kind of situations take place when there is no chance of the fulfillment of current needs of society and when particular aspirations of different circles, social groups, nations have no chance to materialize. It is the situation when the myth of the “Promised Land” appears in order to mobilize to action through sacrifice.

The retrospective myth plays a role which is complementary to the prospective myth – it “restitutes” forgotten values and ideals. It is a form of remedy for the “present evil” [Przybylski 1996: 16-17].

The creation of political myths, their goals and aspirations, is sometimes perceived as a phenomenon of the creation of myths [Biernat 1989: 137]. The introduction of myth-creating “technicization” depends on whether the aspirations of the myth creator are coherent with potential followers or there is no compatibility between the sender and the receiver of the myth-creating signals. In the first case, “the ordinary

information action generating the state of emotional arousal” is enough to reach the consensus [*Ibid.*]. In the situation when this kind of agreement does not exist, a particular mode of influence to induce this state is needed.

In order to achieve social and political success, one should adhere to images and notions deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of particular groups and nations. Moreover, they should have a large emotional charge and be imprinted by historical events.

The political myth is usually collocated with the political society. Within the “political society” the social groups which do not accept the myth also participate in it (albeit “ineffectively”), creating so-called “antipolitical” myths [*Ibid.*: 247]. Some researchers claim that political mythology is in the first place a mythology of nation and state, and those spheres and political movements of particular social groups and classes are the most important area of the formation of myths [*Ibid.*].

From the beginning of Polish statehood, the nation became harnessed into the mystical and mythical image of “a bulwark”. Polish national mentality was formed through the ages, both in the times of enslavement and sovereignty. It was connected not only with the Catholic faith, but also with West European civilization. (“What Frenchman invents, Pole is going to like” (Adam Mickiewicz: *Pan Tadeusz*), “you were a peacock and a parrot of nations” (Juliusz Słowacki: *Grób Agamemnona*) are only two examples from Polish literature that confirm the existence of myths about Poles and Poland).

The myth of “Antemurale Christianitatis” was reactivated at the beginning of the 20th century. As a result of the new ideological divisions (like the victory of the October Revolution, the Yalta order, which emerged after the Second World War), the Polish myth of a defensive “bulwark” of the Western civilization against the “barbarity” of the East was strengthened by the new creative force [Biernat 1989: 215]. The extremity of the political situation in Europe has grown exponentially because of “the cult of personality” and “distortions in socialism-building”.

New inspiring legends, like “Miracle at the Vistula” or “Solidarity” were created. The word “solidarity” has soon turned into a keyword, a word-spell; it became a legitimacy for the highest ideas which has grown on a Polish ground. The eighties of the 20th century, particularly the year 1981, became a myth-creating turning point; abound with political and national mythology. The message sent by “Solidarity” to the nation beyond the “Iron Curtain” was a convincing sign of vitality of Polish mythology connected with “Antemurale Christianitatis” and Messianism. This message and mission of our nation were strengthened during visits of John Paul II, Polish Pope in his homeland.

The question if we can speak about the rebirth of “the Bulwark of Christianity” myth and messianism seems rhetorical. The nation is in the situation of search for its new state and political order. In the background of political and social transition, new phenomena are being re-read and re-given to the nation to accept them: national consciousness, Polish reason of state, Eurocentrism (Polonocentrism), freedom, tolerance and ethics of collective life within the canons of Catholic faith. In the relation between nation and state, the nation prevails. The national and state ambitions are based on the fact that “we wanted and want to claim our historical post among the nations of Europe once more” [*Ibid.*].

The contemporary political myth is most often expressed by the general notion concerning the reality, trying to keep the semblance of the truth. It does not recognize any form of verification of authenticity of its words. The myth may adopt a complex shape – then it appears as a “myth-like” structure.

The political myth shapes the public opinion; it is the mean of ideological propaganda. While it cannot (or does not want to) use the rules of scientific justification and explanation, it confines itself to the “understanding belief” [Kołakowski 1968: 47]; it excludes discussion and interpretation.

Among the kinds of political myths, we meet the most often spontaneous myths, embraced by social groups and individuals and myths which are consciously created [Jabłońska-Bonca 1995: 27]. Spontaneous myths are often used in propaganda and politics.

THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF THE STEREOTYPE

The phenomenon of mythologization and stereotypization is connected with subjective cognition. The ideas about the world appear to be one-sided and schematic. In the stereotypes we have to do with freedom of rations and arguments appearing after another; casual and personal creation of temporal and special connections. In both cases we can notice a particular susceptibility to personification [Biernat 1989: 320].

Walter Lippmann draws stereotype out of myth. He claims that stereotype and myth appear with the same intensity: both affective and cognitive. However, on the basis of the emergence of myth, two distinct elements appear. The first is located out of the subject, imposed from the outside by the information context. The other is located within the context, processed as a component of consciousness.

Every day we face the differences in differing the myth from the stereotype. “They are connected by the fact that they assign the facts without the necessary personal experience. The difference is that the stereotype is the active impulse of the word’s collocation – the name, which is also a call sign [Jabłońska-Bonca 1995: 30].

Francis Bacon in his considerations over the stereotypes derived them from “idols of mind” and “fallibility of the senses”. Moreover, he added “traditional prejudice” and “imperfection of language” [Bacon 1955: 27].

The answer to the question whether stereotype is a form of consciousness or only an attitude seems to be complex. There exist a number of opinions on this matter. The claims emphasizing the social nature and social conditioning of stereotypes seem to be theoretically creative.

The exploration of the stereotype (according to Lippmann’s theory), an attempt to to explain and define the consciousness phenomena lead directly to identifying stereotypes with attitudes. This notion is confirmed by the structuralist definition of attitude, formulated by Milton Rokeach: “The attitude is relatively enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner” [Nowakowska 1975: 174].

This subject was also covered by M. Marody [1976: 17] who introduced three basic components of stereotypization: cognitive, affective and behavioral. Which of those components dominates – it is a different problem. At first glance it seems that affective

component dominates. However, the consciousness of one's distinctiveness, for example ethnic, makes the cognitive component a basis for emotional states. In the sphere of the consciousness processes, concerning social and political facts, myths, stereotypes and superstitions contain a large emotional charge.

While the inner consciousness state is the most important for the myth, the stereotype is mostly based on the elements imposed from the outside by the information. The myth has thus the wider plane of reference than the stereotype, which makes the annexation of the existing stereotypes possible. It must be noted that myth is not a sum of stereotypes.

The political stereotype may not be seen in the categories of "inability to recognize complex social life" [Rozciecha 1979]; it cannot be evaluated from the point of view of lack of sense, the fatal force or any human voice. Stereotype is the second nature of a thinking human.

The idea of stereotype is described in the fullest way in *Encyclopedia of Political Science*: "the stereotype belongs to the sphere of imagination and beliefs. The images and beliefs are inseparable attribute of human nature. Thus the stereotype always exists on the level of consciousness and is historically, socially and culturally conditioned, relatively enduring, emotional, taking a form of generalization or categorization" [Maj 1999: 272-273].

Adam Schaff defines the features of the stereotype and adds that it is always connected with value judgment (negative or positive), connected with belief. The object of this belief are groups of people: racial, national, class, political, professional, gender etc., and also the secondary social relations between them. This stereotype is an expression of public opinion transmitted to the individual by family and the environment through the process of upbringing, irrespectively of the personal experience of the individual. It has an emotional charge (negative or positive).

It may be fully inconsistent with the facts or partially coherent with them, pretending to contain the real meaning. The stereotype is resistant to changes and thus independent from experience, emotionally persistent.

The features of the stereotype which were listed above enable it to realize their social functions, defend the values accepted by the society and group, which condition the integration of the individual with the group. The stereotype is tightly connected with a word-name. The name used by the stereotype is connected to the particular idea mystified by the stereotype. The emotional charge is particularly important for the stereotype, the apparent authenticity of its content, the endurance of its influence and resistance to changes, as well as ability to defend accepted beliefs and norms conditioning the integration of the individual with the group [Schaff 1981: 115-116]. The most important feature of the stereotype is its vitality and resistance to changes. The Greek nature of stereotype: "stereos" – "tightened", "solid", typos – "type, image, imprint" – was repeated in late 18th century, when this word was used to describe printing matrices.

The one who introduced this term into the social science was Walter Lippmann, who described the political stereotype as "an image in the head" having the feature of individuality and schematicity.

The continuator of Lippmann's research, J. Fishman, divided stereotypes into four major groups: stereotypes as information contrary to facts, those who are partially consistent with facts, stereotypes as a processes of formulating imperfect

judgements, stereotypes as an expression of inflexibility of attitudes, stereotypes as an expression of group conditioning [Borowczyk, Pawelczyk 1993: 21].

According to Adam Schaff, we can say that non-verbal stereotypes do not exist. This notion is confirmed by Jan Betting and Christine Vilain-Gandossi, claiming: "Stereotypes are not ideas, but more or less general reflections of social phenomena. They are often connected with linguistic questions, and their verbalization induces a network of somewhat hazy associations or connotations" [1995: 14]. Czesław Mojsiewicz adds: "the human thinking is a verbal thinking, and great importance should be attached to the mastery of word. One should remember about the ambiguity of words" [2000: 170].

The process of stereotypization has psychological substructure, expressed and manifested by a cognitive dissonance, described as "theory of frustration and authoritarian personality" [Borowczyk, Pawelczyk 1993: 26]. The people having this kind of personality are ruled by unconscious motives, which make them perceive the word in a simple and brief way. For them the stereotypes are a tool which they use for their biased thinking.

The clinical recognition of stereotypical degeneration – the illness of "homo politicus" was presented by Th. W. Adorno, who connected it with conventionalism – strict obedience to contractual values and authoritarian subordination (the individuals of so-called authoritarian personality usually have a black-and white image of social reality, are intolerant and easily-prejudiced, mistrustful, and feel endangered). The authoritarians uncritically follow the authorities of their own group and behave aggressively towards those who break the conventional norms. They unconditionally believe in superstitions, express the cult of strength, think with the ready stereotypical language, project and impose their own impulses on the outside world [Wiatr 1980: 369].

The basic features of the stereotypes are their social dimension and context they originate from. The prerequisite of the functioning of the political stereotype are their potential of emotional impact: the emotive, stabilizing, rationalizing and strengthening function. The emotive function enables us to evaluate and choose "emotional charge" (to create an emotional bond with it and later enrich this charge with another elements in order to create possibly full and multifaceted stereotype existing in collective consciousness as a comprehensive mode of examination of a particular phenomenon [Tyszkowska-Gosk 1980: 114].

The stabilizing function of the stereotype provides a feeling of security for an individual and group, making it fit to the reality in both situations when stereotype seems to be coherent with the facts and in the situation of lack of coherence. The special case of a stereotype is a prejudice. The researchers of this phenomenon perceive it as a negative stereotype, because it is based on animosity, hostility towards others. A prejudice is also: "attitude towards any matter not based on one's own experience. They are judgements, views, expectations acquired from the others without verification" [Szacki 1980: 140].

As an effect of this function, the identity, which awakes the aggression against the aliens, becomes enforced. This is so-called "canalization of aggression".

Stereotypes, like many other concepts, are the result of social learning. The "socialization" of individual is thus necessary here – being a part of a group, members of which demonstrate stereotypes and prejudice. The stereotypes contradictory to the

character of society are treated as “alien”, posing a threat national, ethnic or group community. The objective points out to autostereotype and heterostereotype, which is a result of individual and collective dimension of stereotypization.

From the point of view of ideas and beliefs, the stereotypes may be divided into negative, attribute to the “others”, and positive stereotypes. Negative evaluation may not be a part of definitive essence of the stereotypes, but possibly is an element of prototype stereotypes (...) Nevertheless, even positive stereotypes may awake negative reactions [Marcae, Stangor, Hewstone 1999: 345-346].

It turns out that some social groups are particularly prone to the stereotypization. The social psychologists are most of all interested in racial and national stereotypes. Racial and national groups are particularly prone to stereotypization because of their cultural separateness and their “foreignness” from the ethnocentric point of view. This are the categories of distinctive membership index and strong emotional tone [*Ibid.*: 341].

Taking the “power” of different categories in the field of stereotype creation under consideration, they can be divided into “natural” and artificial”. The natural categories are stronger motivated, but culture (sometimes confessional affiliation) undoubtedly plays a large role too. For example, the stereotype connected with Islam strongly revealed itself after the terrorist attacks against Washington and New York. The racial and religious affiliation after this events seem to be the equally distinct category for Americans and Europeans, although the authors of *Stereotypes and prejudice* disagree with this notion [*Ibid.*].

Ethnic and national stereotypes also play a large role. They are connected with “us” and “them” division, concerning people of different culture. In the changing relations of peoples and nations connected with the actual state of international relations, the ethnic stereotype turned out to be very durable, considering the characteristic features ascribed to different nations. The national stereotypes are perceived as durable features associated with Poles, Jews, Germans, Russians or Ukrainians. A specific case may be observed in the ever-changing dynamics of Slovak – Hungarian relations reflected as shifts from ethnic and language stereotypes to symbolic questions [Mihálik, Marušiak 2014: 128-148]. Some images of “separateness” or “foreignness” coded through the centuries seem to invariably last in human memory. They durability and petrification are a kind of template, which enables to separate “us” from “them”, “aliens”. This difference mobilizes the members of a particular social group, emphasizing the feeling of affiliation and bond with “own” community. In the same time, it excludes and discriminates people and groups, whose culture is considered to be inferior.

In the time of crisis “a scapegoat”, blamed for the existing situation, is easy to find [Girard 1982]. Thus the possibility of modernization or revision of stereotypes is so important. They may be modified by applying different psychotherapeutic, sociotherapeutic and educational techniques, however it is known that people easily transform one stereotypization into another, addicted and entangled into snares of their own identity and culture.

Apart from many research perspectives, the political stereotype takes a special place. “What plays in one’s soul, what is seen in one’s dreams” (Stanisław Wyspiański: *Wesele*) formula mutates into renewed matrix of “words and names”. According to the *pars pro toto* rule, the “slogan-template” emerges and falls onto fertile soil of social

expectations as something natural and obvious. It is not a subject of discussion, it is an a priori truth in relation with experience.

The political stereotypes are the purest and the most meaningful primary emotional clichés in the conceptual system accepted by the individual.

The stereotypes are the most universal mechanisms of interpersonal communication, and thus communication between people which would be free of stereotypes of any kind is impossible.

The contemporary myths and stereotypes free of archaic metaphoric, allegoric or symbolic sheath disable skepticism, exclude discussion, rely on emotional state of society; make it resistance to truth and lie.

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