

POWER LANGUAGE, POLITICAL MYTHS AND SYMBOLS.

Structure of the Lecture

- I. **Politics & Mythology:** Constructing a Political Pantheon. Raoul Girardet's Typology.
- II. **The Faces of Power:** Political Representations.
- III. **"Truth, Justice, and the American Way":** The Myth of the American Dream.
- IV. **Conclusions.**
 - **Myth – definitions and functions** "In anthropological terms, the **essence** of **myth** is that it provides a **narrative structure** and a coherence to the history of the community; it is a **shared narrative** that **gives meaning**."
 - What myth presents is a **symbolic reconstruction** of the community's formation.
 - This reconstruction **may be based on real events**, or on phenomena which have no existence independent of the myth itself"

Myth

- **Myth** is therefore foundational for the community in the sense that it provides the **basic rationale** for the **community**, a sense of its **meaning** and **purpose** as well as how it came about.
- What is **important** is less the empirical basis of the myth than that the **myth** is **accepted** and **believed in**.
 - To cite Murray Edelman, myth is 'a belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning; it is typically **socially cued** rather than empirically based'.
- ☉ Myth is therefore socially constructed and is a means of both **defining and explaining reality** for those who believe in it.

(Gill, 2011, 3-4)

"While this definition of reality will **differ** from **community** to community, because the mythical underpinnings themselves will differ, **anthropologists** have argued that myths throughout the world have had three themes of particular importance:

- THE EXISTENCE OF AN **EVIL CONSPIRACY** AGAINST THE COMMUNITY,
- THE **PRESENCE OF A SAVIOUR** WHO CAN RELEASE THE COMMUNITY FROM THIS THREAT,
- THE **COMING OF A GOLDEN AGE**. THE CONSPIRACY

◎ THE SAVIOUR

◎ THE GOLDEN AGE

The nature of the conspiracy, the saviour and the golden age will differ from community to community and myth to myth, but clearly **these three elements are linked**.

They provide **major structuring** devices for the community's myths, with other components of those myths locking in with these themes. It is these themes which provide the main sustenance for the community's myths.

(Gill, 2011, 3-4)

- Myth: Other approaches
- **Myth** as “a **tale** concerned with past events, giving them a special **meaning** and significance for the present and thereby reinforcing the authority of those who are wielding power in a particular community” (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1961, 99).
- Myth as “a **vision of the future** which makes crude but practical sense of the present” (Sorel 1990,19).
- Myth “functions as a **timeless model**”, which “deprives historical phenomena of their specificity and transforms them to [sic] omnipotent patterns” (Törnquist-Plewa 1992,14).
- Politics & Mythology: Constructing a Political Pantheon
- “Religious sentiment was growing among the population, and socialist festivals were thought to counterbalance the compelling beauty of the Russian Orthodox service.[6] The festivals also fed on nostalgia for the Revolution's spontaneous enthusiasm, something long absent from Soviet public life. (Von Geldern 1993: 5)
- **Rooted in the religious procession** (*krestnyi khod*) the Communist parades were inspired from “traditional **popular culture, liturgical rites, and even tsarist ceremonies**.”, (Von Geldern 1993: 8)
- It is noteworthy that already in 1920, middle-level Party leaders ...gave precise and detailed instructions on organizing **holiday celebrations**. For example, it pointed out the **advantages of organizing celebrations on the dates of traditional** festivals. (Kenez 92)
- “After the Revolution, the regime created a new **holiday calendar** of its own, which for several years coexisted and **competed** with the extensive calendar of Orthodox religious holidays.” (Von Geldern 1993: 7)
- One suspects that those who thought up the celebrations were consciously trying to **create alternatives to church holidays. The Bolsheviks were creating a civic religion.** (139)

- Raoul Girardet's typology

In his classical work "Mythes et Mythologies Politiques" (1986), Raoul Girardet classified political myths as following:

- The Conspiracy Myth
- The Myth of the Saviour
- The Myth of the Golden Age
- The Myth of Unity
- The Conspiracy Myth
- This myth involves the fear towards a threatening, "conspiratorial organization ... shrouded in **mystery** and ... hierarchically regulated.
- The organization is driven by 'the will for power and the **repetition** of the **eternal dream** of building a planetary empire in which the whole world will be united by the same power' (Girardet, 39)". (Milošević & Stojadinovic, 2012, 80)
- The perspective involves community paranoia and responsibility outside the group; compensation is needed for past suffering and in the name of moral superiority.
- The Myth of the Saviour
- In the myth of the Savior, Girardet discusses the four **basic patterns** that are able to accommodate **mythical construction**:
 - "Cincinnatus mode" (named after the Roman consul and dictator);
 - the "pattern of Alexander the Great"
 - the next pattern is known as the "Solon lawmaker" whose most general expression is found in the memories of the "nations' fathers", i.e. famous ancestors;
- the last model is Moses, or the archetype of the preacher – demonstrates the **merging of individuals** with the destiny of the **entire people** in the parade of the numerous great leaders in the 20th and 21st century."
- The myth of the saviour can be related in a more general typology of myth with the following categories:
- Salvationist myths: the need of a strong leader able to save the situation (authoritarian approach)

- Messianic myths: having a special mission, the nation is endowed with particular characteristics that place it above other nations (the nationalist approach)
- The March 4, 1977 Earthquake
Ceaușescu (the Saviour) 'coordinating' the rescue operation
- ◎ The Myth of the Golden Age

This myth can be both:

- **foundational**, *past-oriented* and focusing on the origins of the community.
- **eschatological**: *future-oriented*, proposing a **vision of the future** which most commonly involves **political mobilization** (a way to escape the present and to find a new Golden Age).
- The Myth of Unity
- It is a myth of **kinship** and **shared descent**: the unity as a solution in fighting the Enemy; the **modern nation**, as an **extended family**
- Other political myths
- Myths of **(divine) election**: the group is endowed by nature or by divine right with special qualities.
- Myths of **unjust treatment**: conspiracy, fatalism (the laws of history) or assigning blame to the Other, the Enemy.
- Myths of **military bravery**: male values of courage, honour and generosity are promoted to national value status.
- Myths of **rebirth and renewal**: a dark period of decline is to be followed by a new cycle of prosperity and glory for the community.
- The Faces of Power: Political Representations
- The Beginnings of visual propaganda
- "Mass propaganda took many different forms during the early years of Soviet power, but there was a **privileging of the eye** in the task of political education.
- This meant that a great deal of effort and ingenuity went into the production of **visual propaganda** of all types.

- **Visual methods for persuasion** and indoctrination appealed to Bolshevik leaders because of the low level of literacy in the country and the strong visual traditions of the Russian people.” (Bonnell, 1998, 3-4)

The Communist Iconography

- “The Russian Orthodox **icon** occupies a special place in Russian religious practice. As Leonid Ouspensky observes in a study of icons: "It can be said that if Byzantium was preeminent in giving the world theology expressed in words, theology expressed in the **image** was given preeminently by Russia."
- For the Orthodox believer, "the **holy image**, just like the Holy Scriptures, transmits not human ideas and conceptions of truth, but truth itself—the Divine revelation."
- The **image** itself had sacred powers for the Orthodox believer. The power of saints, for example, "was thought to be especially concentrated in their icons, sometimes referred to as 'gods' (*bogi*), which in time of need or on ritual occasions were used for special blessings." (Bonnell, 1998, 4)

The Communist Iconography

- “As the 1930s proceeded, **visual propaganda** became more intensive and widespread.
- The **themes, texts, and images** of posters were **dictated** to artists and closely regulated by official **censors**. This centralization and control over poster production coincided with a tremendous expansion in the volume of posters. Whereas Civil War poster editions seldom exceeded 25,000 or 30,000, in the 1930s (especially the second half) key posters appeared in editions of 100,000 to 250,000.
- Russia's entry into the **Second World War** in 1941 coincided with yet another major effort to use **visual propaganda** for the purpose of mass mobilization and indoctrination. World War II posters, also produced in vast editions, presented a new set of images resurrecting traditional themes that dated back to tsarist posters of World War I.”
- The Communist Iconography
- “A period of **High Stalinism** (1946–1953) followed when political art was once again transformed into a vehicle for an otherworldly socialist realism depicting life in the **Soviet Union as paradisiacal**.
- The problem was that the **effectiveness** of political art depended on the artist's ability to "speak the language" of the viewer, to use **images, symbols, and styles of representation** that people could understand. This meant drawing on familiar vocabularies and forms in order to convey a new message.” (Bonnell, 1998, 7)

- The Power of Symbols & visual language in political campaigns
- “Thoughtful **candidate** positioning was accomplished in the old retail politics, but it gained importance with the rise of **new-style campaigns**.”
- As **mass-marketing becomes more customized**, the focus is turning toward highly specific forms of communication, helping candidates and their consultants reach individual voters with **personally tailored messages**. (Burton & Shea, 2010, 116)
- “Not long ago, it was believed that serious candidates should wear **business attire in public**.”
- Jackets might be doffed at barbecues and icecream socials, but for the most part, candidates should arrive at political events wearing a suit.
- In some areas, this advice still holds, but in a time when the corporate world endorses “**casual Fridays**,” formal business attire might connote self-importance.
- **Campaign ads and brochures often show a candidate talking to citizens with a jacket casually draped over the shoulder.**
- And when a candidate—any candidate, local or national—is photographed with sleeves **rolled up**, the intended meaning is obvious: **it’s time to get to work.**” (Burton & Shea, 2010, 35).
- “Truth, Justice, and the American Way”

The American Dream as —a richer **happier life** for all our citizens of every rank which **promised Americans** a new dynamic **hope** of rising and growing of hewing out for themselves, a life in which they would not only succeed as men but be recognized as men, a life not only of **economic prosperity** but of social and self-esteem.

- **Adams’ American Dream is about the future not the past.**
- “That dream was not the product of a solitary thinker. It evolved from the hearts and burdened souls of **many millions**, who have come to us from all **nations**.” (Adams 416).
- The heightened economic output generated by **World War II** continued after the war’s end, with defense manufacturing giving way to technologically advanced consumer goods.
- The race for **home ownership** with **gleaming appliances and automobiles** in the driveway picked up pace and appeared attainable as a result of the abundance of **well-paying, private-sector, blue-collar jobs** and those created by the government’s investment in such infrastructure projects as the national interstate systems and the construction of public buildings, including new schools.

- “The **American Dream** has moved beyond the stale domain of print culture into the glow of mass media, being invoked by jubilant athletes, aspiring businessmen and opportunistic politicians.
- Harvard University historian and noted American Dream scholar **Jim Cullen** called the “*pilgrims, founding fathers, and illiterate immigrants a collection of creative imagination*”, as they each contributed to and benefited from the American Dream.” (Gupte, 2011)
- Questioning the American dream
- “The fulfillment of the Dream for some was, for others, a **nightmare** of inner-city crime, drugs, unemployment, poverty, and despair” (McNamee & Miller, 2004,19).
 - “By 1933 some 13 million Americans were unemployed. People found themselves in a bizarre, impossible situation: Out of work in the land of opportunity and with no prospect of ever having a job again. Black Americans were in the worst position of all. Employers didn’t take them if they could avoid it, and got rid of them as soon as they could: ‘Last to be hired, first to be fired’, as people said at that time” (Lang, 2008:148)
- “To be consistent to the American Dream, our society would need to become one that truly creates **equal opportunities** to develop **merit**, recognize genuine merit and equitability reward it”(McNamee & Miller, 2004,18)
- Conclusions

In order to conclude, I would like to emphasise the following issues one could detect in relation to contemporary political myths.

- The survival (recycling) of myths in order to **advertise** and **legitimise** leaders and/or policies.
- A **power paradigm replacement** – mythology and religion being replaced in terms of functions by civil religion and the so-called political religion (Voegelin, 1938)
- **Political visual representations** and performances - staged and associated to recycled visual and behaviour patterns: an issue of **manipulation and persuasion**.

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