

MIHNEA S. STOICA

POLITICAL MYTHS OF THE POPULIST DISCOURSE

Mihnea S. Stoica

Babes-Bolyai University, Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising, Cluj, Romania.

Email: stoica@fspac.ro

Abstract: Studies point out that populism, a concept still in dire need of clarifications, resembles more of a rhetorical strategy than a fully-fledged ideology. Actually, populism has become a concept so frequently used that its original meaning seems to have been lost, leaving it as an empty shell, at least from an ideological point of view. I argue that in spite of this – or rather as a means of compensation – populism uses a very robust mythological apparatus, creating narratives that allow voters to easily understand its messages. The current article underlines that in an attempt to over-simplify its discourse, populism makes use of all four political myths identified by Raoul Girardet. The conspiracy myth represents the main element revolving around the populist discourse. Politicians who embrace this rhetoric denounce a secret society that is rigorously organized, the actions of which defy morality, using all means to attain political power. The other three political myths, i.e. the myth of unity, the myth of the savior and the myth of the golden age, act together only as a counterweight for the first. The paper also points out that the success of Euroscepticism lies in the fact that it represents the perfect embedding for such myths, and that the EU needs to generate its own narratives if it hopes to confront the so-called “populist temptation”.

Key Words: populism, political myths, savior, unity, conspiracy, golden age, political communication.

1. Introduction

“[...] so that Italy, left as without life, waits for him who shall yet heal her wounds and put an end to the ravaging and plundering of Lombardy, to the swindling and taxing of the kingdom and of Tuscany, and cleanse those sores that for long have festered”, Niccolò Machiavelli (Machiavelli 2006, 251-2).

Myths have been a constant companion of communication, which would be virtually void of its meanings without the fantastic aura engineered by such structures of belief. The importance of myths lies in the fact that they individualize groups of people, from as simple as networks to as complex as states. Myths therefore represent guides of normative behavior that establish what is and what is not desirable in a society, setting levels of acceptability for individual attitudes (Ferris et al. 1989, 86). Nevertheless, they also set levels of aspiration for an organization, developing expectations and fueling the desire to reach goals of one's own or of the society in general, that are as close as possible to those described in the mythological stories. As Mircea Eliade wrote in his famous essay entitled “The Myth of the Eternal Return”, the importance of myths resides in the fact that they validate today's world, given the extraterrestrial prototype that served as its model. Eliade's exact words in his famous work, translated from French were: “For the moment, what we wish to emphasize is the fact that the world which surrounds us, civilized by the hand of man, is accorded no validity beyond that which is due to the extraterrestrial prototype that served as its model” (Eliade 1959, 10).

Precisely because it seeks to influence the development of society, politics cannot escape the deeply rooted relation between myths and communication. Rather, more than that, today's societies force the revitalization of symbols as part of a space of significance that manifests itself mostly in the political arena (Frunză 2014, 167). Marked by the witnessing of the end of ideology, postmodernism needs to ensure the continuity of its narrative by relating to other systems of communication that are less complex and therefore easier to comprehend. The cold war brought about two competing ideologies that – as all others – promised to bring about happiness, but in their constant attempt to counterbalance each other, they have potentiated what has threatened to be one of the most dangerous global nuclear wars in history. This is the reason why ideologies have arrived at the point of being perceived as rather bringing humanity on the brink of disaster than a means for reaching any other goal in the benefit of the people (Ionescu 1999, 18-19). Therefore, it is now commonly considered that they have reached the point that drained their energy and their power to convince of their utility. Moreover, the rough political consensus that most intellectuals have reached in the last decades was considered to represent the ultimate argument for ousting ideo-

logies. Daniel Bell mentions, amongst others, the general acceptance of the need for a welfare state, the desirability of decentralized power and of political pluralism. He also notes that the driving forces behind ideologies were more cultural in their nature, whereas today societies seek to find solutions primarily for economic problems (Bell 1988, 402).

Even so, the debates on the nature of postmodernism have been conducted mainly on political grounds, with both liberals and conservatives trying to shape the new societal ideals (Hutcheon 2002, 3). The much-acclaimed end of ideology is a very much different phenomenon than the end of political utopia, and it does nothing but to express the need of keeping utopia, but building it with other means (Bell 1988, 406). This new situation makes more room than ever for political myths, and communication is granted a crucial role in this process. One can therefore argue that politics arrives strengthened out of this development of events, liberated from the tight and outdated cast of the ideology. It is important to note that as opposed to ideologies, which history has demonized and extorted of credibility, political myths harbor an authority near to sacredness (Flood 2002, 6). Moreover, they exhibit a strong immunity to rational arguments, and therefore transcend logic (Tismăneanu 1998, 9). As such, myths offer the perfect setting for achieving political authority and legitimacy.

2. Political myths: their origins and their utility

Studies identified different typologies of the myth, ranging from natural, social and anthropological myths, to theogonic, cosmogonic and eschatological myths (Milošević and Stojadinović 2012, 77). Pinned at crossroads between what some consider having been an ancestral reality and others nothing but pure fiction, the 'myth' is yet another concept highly over-stretched by the literature (Tanasoiu 2005, 113). As such, the profoundly divisive character of the concept is of no surprise. There is a general agreement that myths belong to a category of discourse that is opposed to the rational, and which is engraved with symbolic meanings, but the approximate overlap of scholarly views on this specific issue ends here, as part of them accuse myths of being misleading given the ultra-simplifying mechanism that they enact, which reduce the complexity of the phenomena described and appeal only to basic human feelings. Others, however, see it as a *sine-qua-non* condition for the survival of a particular community, the existence of which is shaped by the essential truths formulated by myths. It is in this sense that myths have also been viewed as *sui generis* ideologies, because they contextualize socio-historical settings, thus generating sense to those who come in contact with their meanings (Lim 2011, 114).

Scholars have also been divided between those who considered that

political myths are as powerful as the sacred myths of the traditional society (Girardet 1997, 6) and those who argued that political myths do not have the special aura of the latter (Flood 2002, 41). Amongst the many definitions formulated in time, political myths were considered to represent an ideological explanation of the political phenomena that constitute a source of belief for a specific social group (Milošević and Stojadinović 2012, 78). However, the current paper considers political myths to represent the means for grounding a political phenomenon in a specific ideological setting. Such a practice has been constant ever since the formation of nation-states, which always needed stories to fundament their unity and to shape their identity, a process that also aimed at separating them (at least symbolically) from other neighbouring ethnic, linguistic, political and religious communities (Wunenburger 2003, 35). Moreover, given the fact that politics represents an inescapable logic for the human nature, one can easily grasp the inevitability of the political myth (Frigioiu 2013, 15). Once states have solidified, the political actors within became the main generators of the new political myths, which primarily aimed at aiding to their electoral gains. In other words, political myths, as an integral part of the political discourse, are an essential instrument in ideologically legitimizing political practices, and laying the foundation for various actions (Stoica 2014, 22).

The emergence of political myths is strongly related to the tendency of the contemporary human being to reject narratives that were popular for the archaic societies and which have always been strongly related to religion. Surprisingly enough, the corroding levels of religiousness have not significantly affected the adherence of individuals to mythological formulas, as humans are still attached to narratives that relate to different forms of spirituality. The connection between religion (or, for that matter, alternative forms of religion) and politics has always been very strong, regardless if outright or only subtle. Therefore, myths have remained an essential part of politics, and more so in a society dominated by communication, as is the postmodern one, a society marked by crises, from an individual level all the way up to a systemic level. Studies point out that individuals who undergo crises are more inclined to seek symbolic explanations for the situation they are experiencing, much more so than during non-exceptional times (Frunză 2012, 183). This hypothesis accounts, at least from a communicational point of view, for yet another plausible explanation on the populist surge during the last years.

3. Political myths according to Raoul Girardet

Raoul Girardet's account of the mythological aspects pertaining to the political field remains one of the most appreciated perspectives on the issue. The author argues that his description is the result of a long process of crystallization of French realities, but his narrative can very well be used to describe most of today's politics in Europe (Flood 2013, 158). We therefore argue that the four main political myths are very much visible in the strategies embraced by most European populist parties. The myths that Girardet writes about in his work are the conspiracy, the golden age, the saviour and the unity.

The conspiracy myth refers to a highly articulated plan of an occult organization to conquer the world with the intention of ruling against the general will, or against what populists would simply call "the People". At the core of the conspiracy myth lays the deeply secretive character of this organization, which chooses to put its plan into motion from behind the shadows, or by wearing masks. The further the author dives into analyzing this first myth, the more the readers find about the vow of silence (something approximating *omerta*) which maintains the unity of the hidden group, about the mysterious rituals to which its members are allegedly subjected, as well as about the codes that characterize communication between them. This secret society is rigorously organized, with an absolutely unquestionable hierarchy, and in reaching its goals it will not hesitate to make use of all possible means that defy morality, as it considers its actions to be legitimized by its ultimate and extraordinary goal, i.e. attaining political power. This myth is associated with what Girardet calls "The Empire of Darkness", because he who conspires lives in darkness. It is in perfect opposition to the religious symbol of the light, associated by the same author with the Saviour. This first myth therefore depicts the image of the Stranger, i.e. of a specific group of individuals who seek to overthrow the status quo only to obtain personal benefits (Girardet 1997, 21-35).

In respect to the myth of the saviour, Girardet argues that what characterizes it is a strong collective dimension, regardless if it is related to the legendary figure of the hero in times of peace or war, to the providential human being or to the prophet. This myth does nothing but to convince of the strong correlation – up to the point of an almost complete overlap – between the destiny of such a person on the one hand and the destiny of the community it refers to on the other. In spite of the fact that the hero lives under a constant outside threat, he refuses to give in and strives to restore order by avoiding the imminence of a disaster. Only the hero's enthusiasm and knowledge can restructure life in such a manner that it resembles the former social and political structure, towards which the members of the community long to return (Girardet 1997, 53-74).

The third political myth, i.e. that of the golden age, is strongly related to the image of childhood and to the entire spectrum of symbols that derive from such a representation. The harmonically substantiated convergence between innocence and happiness on one side and the safety of the patriarchal authority on the other represents the strongest trait of this specific myth. The life rhythm that the golden age refers to is a predictable one, characterized by the protection of a closed social group, immune to dangers as it lived in solidarity and in a strictly defined hierarchical structure, which ensured order, discipline and respect. However, Raoul Girardet highlights that the legendary socio-political landscape of the golden age is characteristic to a time that escapes a rigorously defined historical chronology; the description is rather placed in a time that he calls "of non-history" (Girardet 1997, 78). This myth is in fact an expression of the refusal to accept contemporary political developments and it simultaneously represents an opportunity for revenge. It is an outburst against the passing of time, or as the author splendidly formulated, the golden age is a World in which time has stopped (Girardet 1997, 101).

Lastly, Girardet mentions the myth of unity, which cannot be dissociated from the idea of a common or shared (political) destiny. It resembles the image of a sum of individuals who strive for the same ideals and who live together under the sign of harmony. Unity ultimately represents the quintessential condition for the political salvation of any community that dares to hope or to dream for a better common future (or, for the same matter, for a return of the lost glorious times). Unity is portrayed to be the best answer to the variety of crises that shake civilization, therefore being raised to the status of a characteristic specific only to exceptional communities, more specifically to those that are highly determined to surpass the difficulties that they have encountered – totally independent of their own will, as the myth of the golden age allows us to understand. The ultimate aim of the myth of unity is to pull together all forces and to avoid that the society becomes atomized in the sense of annihilating all collectively coherent action. The internal conflict would therefore tear it apart and would make all efforts (be them of a political, social or economic nature) useless (Girardet 1997, 134). It is this last myth mentioned by Girardet that allows his readers to understand the circular character of political communication viewed from this perspective. It is very difficult to believe that the four political myths mentioned above can function in the total absence of one another.

4. Girardet's political myths, as reflected in the populist discourse

For more than half a century now, populism has been under the constant scrutiny of historians and social scientists in their attempt to understand the concept and the degree to which it affects national, European and World politics. The economic crisis has unleashed a rhetoric that champions support for various forms of illiberal democracy, associated with what many authors call "populism". However, despite much interest on the subject, the conceptual confusion persists. In trying to keep pace with the dynamic development of the concept, scholars have counted a few dozens of different definitions for populism, of which some are unquestionably incompatible. Amongst others, populism has been defined both as an ideology and a strategy, which clearly indicates the lack of uniformity in the manner the topic is treated by scholars around the World. The fact that the concept is still very loose has been explained by referring to a set of major drawbacks that have greatly affected research so far, amongst which poor historical and cultural context specificity and unclear negative pole (Pappas 2016, 5). In the words of Ernesto Laclau, the renowned scholar who dedicated an important part of his research to understanding populism, "the term continues to be used in a merely allusive way and any attempt to ascertain its content is renounced" (Laclau 2015, 111).

Most scholars consider populism to represent an outright threat to democratic values, in spite of its apparently sincere interest to promote the interests of the People by breaking down intermediary structures between them and the decision-making process. However, it still remains unclear precisely who the People they avow to speak in the name of are (Canovan 2004, 247). More famously, populism carries the label of a political pathology (Akkerman 2003, 147-159). The vigorous anti-elitist discourse remains one of its essential characteristics, as populism promotes the idea that elites are essentially corrupt and that they disregard the needs of the so-called "pure people" (Mudde 2004, 543). It is in this context that the concept of "diploma democracy" emerged, defined as a political system which offers rewards on the basis of formal educational achievements, thus leaving a great majority of the population with few – if any – means of achieving political influence (Bovens and Wille 2009).

Anti-elitism represents the main footing of the populist rhetoric, and euroscepticism has proven to be an ideal embedding for populism, in spite of all the processes that the European Union has undergone in its endeavor to democratize its institutions, e.g. more referendums, greater power for the European Parliament etc. It seemed that "[t]he era in which relatively insulated elites bargained grand treaties in the shadow of an uninterested and generally approving public has come to an end" (Hooge 2007, 5). But such improvements proved to be insufficient in the eyes of an

important part of the electorate because in spite of all these attempts, only a small number of decisions within the EU would be legitimized by public support through referendums (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005, 61).

The effects of a sustained Eurosceptic campaign across Europe have been more visible than ever. The Brexit vote of 2016, a clear protest against the functioning of the EU, has proven that the rhetoric promoting the idea of disposing of the “unelected elite” deciding the fate of Europe remains popular amongst the general public, which does not shy away from voting against them. Nigel Farage, former leader of UKIP, declared several times that the European Union is not “undemocratic”, but that it is “anti-democratic”. Such attitudes have been a constant feature at both ends of the political spectrum, with the radical right arguing that the European project is threatening national identity and sovereignty, and the radical left supporting the idea that the bureaucratic apparatus in Brussels does nothing but to decide severe measures that only create new burdens on the shoulders of the ordinary citizen, without actually helping the economy (De Vreese and Edwards 2009, 5). In this context, immigration developed into one of the main concerns of those on the Eurosceptic side who believe that elites promote minorities (amongst which immigrants) in the detriment of the People – an approximate sum of the “ordinary” citizens who populists so dearly claim to defend. “Anti-immigration sentiments, economic considerations and the evaluation of domestic governments” are the main elements that drive voters against the European project and towards the populist discourse (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005, 59).

The four political myths Raoul Girardet described in his work are perceptible within the political discourse attached to a variety of ideological identities. In this paper, I argue that political myths are even more noticeable in the discourse of political movements that do not have a solid ideological foundation, such as populism. The following figure proposes a schematic representation of the relations between Girardet’s political myths, with the conspiracy myth being the only one antagonizing the other three myths against it. The golden age, the savior and the unity exert what one could consider to be a force of attraction between each of them, in an effort to fight against the authors of the conspiracy.

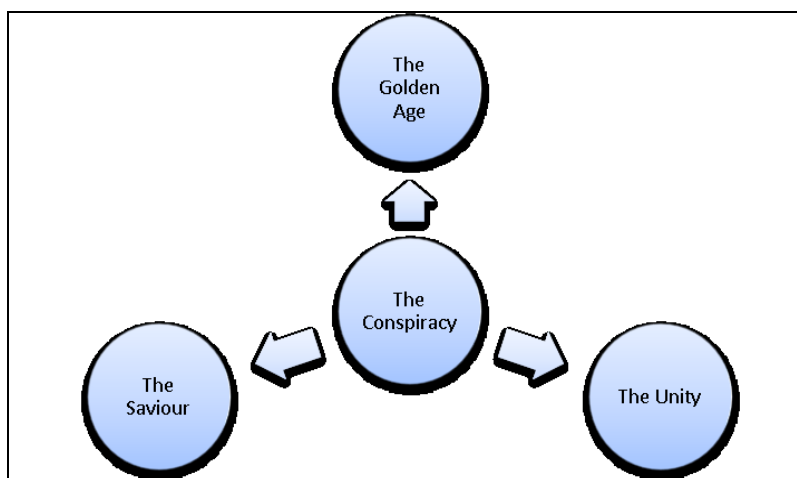


Fig. 1. Schematic representation depicting the antagonism and harmony between the political myths as described by Raoul Girardet

Understood as a complex communication strategy, philosophically rooted in the argument of the exhaustion of ideology (Bell 1988, 393), the core political dimensions of populism rest against the myth of conspiracy. All other myths revolving around its rhetorical strategies are only secondary in relation to the first, which represents a strong pulling force for this type of discourse. From suspicions over one's next-door neighbor (Nigel Farage, former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party famously declared that he would not want to be the neighbor of a Romanian family) to issues such as migration and globalization, populists portray the world as a space of uncertainty, where one can never be too careful when relating to others – especially to some specific “others”, most frequently minorities – ethnic, sexual, racial etc. The reactions to this constant insecurity alarms hinge on a range of antagonisms, amongst which the one referring to the “pure people” versus those who are portrayed as threatening to deny the validity of a society, the existence of which is in the near vicinity of the sacred, with well-known rules and almost historically established roles for its members. In consolidating this myth, populists frequently make use of a violent anti-elite and scape-goating rhetoric, assuming the role of whistleblowers (Pyrhönen 2015) that refuse the silence of a “single truth” imposed upon them by the elite (Raunio 2012).

In validating their theories, populists appeal to the distortion of historical events so as to fit the newly created reality into their own stories (Calance 2015, 678). In fact, it has been demonstrated that political extremism (which is very much related to populism) is strongly associated with conspiracy beliefs (Van Prooijen et al. 2015, 7). Therefore, conspiracy theories are usually considered to be a rhetorical weapon within the immediate reach of the populists, albeit they can prove to very much work

like a double-edged sword, as conspiracy myths are also used against populist or other forms of radical or extreme political movements. Throughout history, conspiracy panics have fueled scares over communists, fascists or terrorist. Therefore, conspiracies can be considered propaganda techniques that work against rationality and which encourage attitudes specific to the political paranoid (Bratich 2008, 31).

However, for populism, the conspiracy myth would not be able to produce effects in the absence of the other three myths that Girardet identified, i.e. the savior, the unity and the golden age, that work separately but which intimately represent a single counterweight to the actions of the elite, accused of secretly plotting against the people. These three myths create the much-needed aura around the populist leader, portrayed as the only one capable of turning time back and restoring the solidarity of those who constitute the troubled majority. It is in this sense that not only for populist parties – but especially for them – the charisma of the leader is a very important feature, given the necessity of guiding popular enthusiasm in the absence of a well coagulated ideological infrastructure (Van der Brug and Mughan 2007, 33). It represents the type of leader that can mobilize followers and demonstrate the uselessness of intermediary structures in the decision-making process (Pasquino 2008, 15). The image of the leader is that of a brave warrior, who can identify and solve the difficult problems facing his or her followers. Just months before the European elections of 2014, referring to the dangers posed by the EU elite and bureaucracy, Marine Le Pen (leader of the French *Front National*) and Geert Wilders (leader of the Dutch *Party for Freedom*) promised to “defeat the monster in Brussels” (Brummelman 2013).

Only such a leader can ensure the unity of the masses, depicted as a sum of individuals that need to bring their forces together in a common effort to overthrow the elites. Therefore, the myth of unity is what allows the majority to become “The People” – a concept that defines the populist rhetoric. Moreover, the myth of the golden age is used to vividly create the ultimate aim of this movement, which in the populist imaginary engages all, or at least the majority of, the discontented with the *status quo*. For populists, the present as a moment in time represents nothing but a chronological parenthesis between what Girardet called the golden age and what can be considered to be a revenge of times, a turning of fait. Therefore, nostalgia for the past represents a basic characteristic of populism and it is a reaction against what is generally referred to as “modern times”, characterized by the positive appraisal of liberal values (Andersen and Bjørklund 1990, 200). It is therefore easily understandable how and why the three myths, i.e. of the savior, of unity and of the golden age, can always be seen as constituting a unity in the populist discourse.

5. Conclusions

Making use of political myths to an extent that seems to surpass other political movements might be a necessity rather than a well-established strategy for populism. The void generated by the lack of ideological substance is filled with stories rooted in political mythology, depicting characters with memorable and strongly opposed features (“good” versus “bad”, “us” versus “them” etc.) as a means of simplifying the messages and of reaching out to all of those dissatisfied with the political process or simply uninterested in understanding the complexity of it. Reductionism is a strategy frequently used by populists, who over-simplify the political discourse by dividing the social field into two very loosely defined camps: “the People” on the one side and the elites on the other (Beasley-Murray 2006, 363).

It is in this context that the four political myths described by Raoul Girardet are easily identifiable within the discourse of populism, which still remains a very loose concept, seemingly unable to go beyond the stories that it is constituted of or which it inspires (Littlefield 1954, 47-58). However, the core political myth that populism is built around is the conspiracy myth, an element that inspires and which allows political imagination to go as far as the communicator is willing to. Therefore, if the ideological argument remains quite thin for populism, the mythological reality it creates is definitely a robust one, making use of the four myths to full extent.

It is beyond any doubt that an increasing sympathy for the populist discourse – regardless if it accompanies political movements of the right or left – casts a long shadow over the political systems of Western Europe and, even more so, over the institutional architecture of the European Union as a whole. The narratives originating in Brussels seem to be unable to keep pace with the temptation of populism (Žižek 2006, 551-574), and the major risk is that of delegitimizing the EU. The solution for surpassing such a difficulty might lie in the capacity of the European Union to formulate its own myths so as to bring its actions closer to the understanding of its citizens, the support of whom ultimately provide its legitimacy.

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