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Between Myth and Fantasy: On the Application of Psychoanalytic Tools to the Analysis of Political Discourse

Abstract:

This article is a critique of the research perspective that analyzes political myths based on the methods of the study of myths. The author points to the need to supplement this perspective with the Lacanian theory of fantasy, which allows for capture of subjective desire manifested in myths. Theories in the study of myths (of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes) conceptualize myth as an attempt to overcome the original antinomy of human experience by constructing a space of ahistorical meaning deprived of contradictions. Based on the analysis of classic study of myths texts and Marcin Napiórkowski's work, the author points to a paradox within the methods of the study of myths: while it describes myth as a tool for getting rid of historical contradictions, it creates ahistorical, and therefore, mythologized, interpretative categories. Supplementing this method with the Lacanian theory of fantasy allows us to overcome this paradox by pointing to historicized interpretation of desire that is manifested in myths.

Keywords:

study of myths, psychoanalysis, fantasy, political myth, Jacques Lacan, political discourse

Political discourses can be interpreted as collections of stories. Stories about how things are, but also, and perhaps primarily, about how things should be. The latter allows us to understand those discourses as expressions of a certain politically oriented desire. This understanding seems even more accurate in the case of discourses using political myths, that is, stories whose essence lies in the affective register – the register of desire.[1] Agreeing with this understanding comes with certain methodological complications since the analysis of this kind of discourses should certainly consist in identifying the desire underlying the myths. This, however, is tricky since said desire is rarely individual in nature. Myths, including political ones, are not only stories operating within a community but also stories that create communities. Therefore, if there is a subjective desire that underlies them, the subject of that desire is a collective one.

But what is this collective subject of desire and how can it be tackled? In philosophy and social sciences, researchers most often choose one of two approaches to apply the category of desire to collective subjects: study of myths[2] or psychoanalysis. In the case of the discourses using political myths, the approach of choice is seemingly obvious. However, as will be demonstrated in this text, applying the methods of the study of myths to analyze myths constructed within a political discourse encounters serious limitations. Therefore, the study of myths approach will be supplemented with psychoanalytic tools drawn from the theory of Jacques Lacan, which will allow us to look at myths from a slightly different perspective and uncover the underlying political desire. Still, we must begin at the beginning. That is, with what myth is from the study of myths perspective.

Myth – The Abolition of Diachrony

Any attempt to precisely define myth is doomed to fail. This thesis is advanced by Karen Armstrong, who sees the fundamental difficulty of such an endeavor in the symbolic and sacred nature of myth, which is hard to interpret discursively.[3] This

1) The affective nature of political myths is emphasized by key researchers of this phenomenon, including George Sorel and Ernst Cassirer. However, as will be demonstrated later in this text, political myths are no different from other myths in this respect, and therefore there is no need to treat them as a separate category.

2) I understand the term "study of myths" broadly – as the achievements of researchers representing various disciplines who deal with the analysis of myths.

3) Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, chap. *i*.

objective problem is most probably the reason why there are so many different theories of myth. However, drawing on the work of classic myth scholars, I intend to demonstrate that there is something those theories have in common: they understand myth as a tool for resolving fundamental contradictions of human experience by constituting an ahistorical space of meaning that responds to a hidden desire.[4] These features are present not only in the mythical stories of "primitive peoples" but also in contemporary political myths.

In Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory, the aforementioned features of myth are associated with a specific language, possessing qualities distinct from everyday and literary language. In "The Structural Study of Myth" Lévi-Strauss shows these differences by juxtaposing myth with poetry:

> Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions; whereas the mythical value of the myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation. Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader throughout the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells.[5]

There may be many stories told in myths, but their purpose, according to Lévi-Strauss, is always the same: each serves to organize a vision of the world and provide a logical model for resolving contradictions. Resolving these contradictions occurs through mediation.

A clear model of how this mechanism works is the myth of Oedipus, which, according to Lévi-Strauss, attempts to deal with the opposition between human autochthony (origination from the earth) and the fact of their birth from the sexual union of a woman and a man. In this myth, the main elements of the contradic-

4) The structure and genesis of myth discussed here are particularly evident in structuralist theories of myth, and therefore this paper will focus on them. However, the characteristic features of myth identified by structuralist theory are also present in other theoretical perspectives. Similar conclusions can be drawn, for example, from the theory of Mircea Eliade.

5) Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Study of Myth," 430.

tion are replaced by pairs of images, which, on the one hand, diminish the kinship of the characters (Oedipus, by killing Laius, negates the kinship between them) or exaggerates it (the incestuous relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta), and on the other hand, negate the autochthony (the killing of chthonic monsters) or confirm it (the names of the characters suggest difficulties in walking straight).[6] Thanks to this procedure, it turns out that "the overrating of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it."[7] Consequently, "Although experience contradicts theory, social life verifies the cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence cosmology is true."[8]

The notion (of autochthony) is confirmed despite the testimony of experience, which loses its power to undermine the imagery and is therefore abolished as irrelevant. The eternal truth of cosmology remains intact. Duality is transformed into unity by eliminating the contingent in favor of the necessary. Lévi-Strauss sees a similar structure in Freud's analyses of the Oedipus myth. In his opinion,

> Although the Freudian problem has ceased to be that of autochthony *versus* bisexual reproduction, it is still the problem of understanding how *one* can be born from *two:* how is it that we do not have only one procreator, but a mother plus a father? Therefore, not only Sophocles, but Freud himself, should be included among the recorded versions of the Oedipus myth on a par with earlier or seemingly more "authentic" versions.[9]

Incorporating Freud's theory into the sources of the Oedipus myth means that the analysis of myth becomes a part of it. It itself becomes a myth. This statement reveals the specific temporal structure of myth. Myth is distinguished from other kinds of language use by its relationship with language as structure (*langue*) and speech (*parole*). It is both synchronic and diachronic. Lévi-Strauss writes: "On the one hand, a myth

6) "Limp" Labdacus – the father of Laius, "clumsy" Laius – the father of Oedipus or "swollen-ankled" Oedipus.

7) Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Study of Myth," 434.

8) Ibid.

9) Ibid., 435.

always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created, or during its first stages – anyway, long ago. But what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future."[10] The essential value of myth, therefore, turns out to be its structure, that is, the synchronic aspect that creates lasting meaning. This, in turn, seems to be constituted by the negation of the diachronic layer. As modern analyses of myth adopt its function and structure, the differences between the ancient myth and its later analysis become blurred, even abolished. Historical time loses its significance. This logic is already visible at the level of the plot. Jezilar Mieletynsky observed that in myths, the initial state of contradiction is erased through the mediation of the character's action[11] – the character functions in time only until the contradiction is resolved. The story ends with a synthesis, immobile and eternal, abolishing the contingency of experience in favor of the "truth" of imagery. Thus, according to Lévi-Strauss, by killing Laius, his father, Oedipus negates the bonds of kinship that bind them. This negation, however, goes much further – Oedipus's act of self-blinding and exile after discovering the truth is yet another manifestation of this negation. Blinded, Oedipus finds solace in Colonus, where he no longer has to face the facts. The contingency of birth gives way to the eternal truth of cosmology, which requires no visual confirmation. The eternal truth of cosmology becomes the source – both of Oedipus's solace and the meaning of myth.

No wonder. What brings solace is meaning. This, in turn, is constituted in the act of eliminating cognitive dissonance, the contingency of experience, and inconvenient facts creating an unchanging, exemplary model of the world and humanity, one that teaches us about how things were, are, and always will be. Thus, based on Lévi-Strauss's theory, the creation and repetition of myths is driven by an unconscious desire for meaning, being, and identity, which is realized by overwriting the contingent, material world with eternal meanings. The cosmological truth of human origins creates an unchanging vision of the world, devoid of contingency and contradiction, sustained by the specific temporality of myth, the temporality of the eternal present, which is realized in the abolition of the diachronic element in favor of synchronicity.

10) Ibid., 430.

11) Mieletynski, "Claude Lévi-Strauss: czy tylko etnologia?," 333.

This kind of temporality, however, is not reserved exclusively for primordial mythical narratives. It can be also found in politics, which according to Lévi-Strauss has replaced myths in modern societies.[12] The similarity between mythical thinking and political thinking is revealed in the figure of the French Revolution. According to Lévi-Strauss: "to the French politician, as well as to his followers, the French Revolution is both a sequence belonging to the past […] and an everlasting pattern which can be detected in the present French social structure and which provides a clue for its interpretation, a lead from which to infer the future developments."[13] By recounting the story of the French Revolution, the politician gives it the function and structure of a myth. This means that the political practice of recounting this event itself acquires a mythical character. The myth of the French Revolution, like the myth of Oedipus, creates a specific vision of the world and identity, a specific "truth" about the world, which, like cosmological truth, is invoked to sustain this vision of the world. It is a recurring axis that gives lasting meaning to the past, the present, and the future, and to the French – a specific identity. It is what creates reality and what responds to the desire for meaning, being, and identity that also underpinned the Oedipus myth. The political narrative thus has the temporal and logical structure of myth. As Lévi-Strauss notes, "it is that double structure, altogether historical and anhistorical, which explains that myth, while pertaining to the realm of the *parole* and calling for an explanation as such, as well as to that of the *langue* in which it is expressed, can also be an absolute object on a third level."[14] Political myth, like every myth, belongs to both the realm of speech (parole) and the realm of language as structure (langue), creating a third plane that is a synthesis based on the abolition of the difference between parole and langue through the negation of the former. Myth possesses the quality of an absolute object because, by resolving the contradiction between diachronic speech and synchronic language, it introduces an eternal temporality in which meanings are immutable, and the contingency of experience and history loses its significance. In this approach, political myth is a story about an unchanging truth that is constantly realized in the act of

12) Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Study of Myth," 430.

13) Ibid.

14) Ibid.

telling. And political discourse that tells this story seems to function on a similar principle. It thus appears to be a discourse driven by an unconscious universal desire for meaning, being, and identity, a discourse devoid of diachrony, devoid of contingency, including its own historical conditions and interests. In other words, it is a discourse devoid of any political agenda.

Myth as Depoliticized Speech

This paradoxical depoliticization of political discourse caught the attention of another structuralist thinker, Roland Barthes, who analyzed the myths of bourgeois popular culture in the mid-twentieth century. Barthes, who in *Mythologies* stated that "every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society,"[15] defined myth as a word appropriated by speech, a word whose synchronic aspect is abolished in favor of the diachronic one. It might seem that this definition is the exact opposite of the definition of myth that emerges from the theory of Lévi-Strauss. However, this is not the case. For Barthes, the intention behind the spoken word is crucial. Appropriation through speech occurs by "giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal."[16] Myth is therefore a word with a historical intention that has been hidden so well, that it escaped Lévi-Strauss's ahistorical theory of myth. It is a word that conceals the diachronic layer, pretending to be a purely synchronic structure devoid of contingency, including historical circumstances and political interests.

In Barthes's theory of myth, as in Lévi-Strauss's, what underlies the abolition of the diachronic layer is unconscious desire. According to Barthes, however, this desire expresses a class-based political interest of an economic nature. Still, this desire is similar in structure and mode of realization to the desire that characterized the societies studied by Lévi-Strauss: it aims to construct and maintain a specific vision of the world and to give it a universal character. According to Barthes: "in a bourgeois culture, there is neither proletarian culture nor proletarian morality, there is no proletarian art; ideologically, all that is not bourgeois is obliged to *borrow* from the

15) Barthes, *Mythologie*s, 107.

16) Ibid., 141.

bourgeoisie."[17] The bourgeoisie creates a vision of the world in which everything is bourgeois, but this vision is presented not as bourgeois, but as human. This universalization is possible because the desire behind it remains anonymous: "The bourgeoisie has obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation, from economic man to mental man… . It makes its status undergo a real *exnominating* operation: the bourgeoisie is defined as *the social class which does not want to be named*."[18] The bourgeoisie maintain their self-created vision of the world by eliminating themselves and their economic interests from the narrative they create. Like Oedipus, the bourgeoisie blind themselves – so as not to see the facts and to exist in the "truth" of their imagery. They do this by presenting their historical intentions, identity, and interests as natural, universal, extra-historical, and therefore eternal. The historical situation is presented as a universal model of the "Eternal Man"[19] with whom everyone, not just the bourgeoisie, can identify. Myth, therefore, enables full identification with an imagery, eliminating contradictions, contingencies, and conflicts. In other words, it serves to impose a specific historical identity on everyone, while simultaneously feigning its ahistorical, universal character. Synchrony seems to triumph over diachrony, although in reality the opposite is true. Barthes claims that "myth is depoliticized speech."[20] This depoliticization, however, is illusory, as it occurs only in the imagery. According to Barthes, *political* means "the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world."[21] Therefore, depoliticization consists in falsifying this political capacity to produce the world by legitimizing the constructed image based on a supposed naturalness.

Lévi-Strauss and Barthes are thus saying something similar: myth creates a comprehensive, exemplary model of the world and human identity, creating meanings by eternalizing them and eliminating their diachronic source. Barthes, however, goes further, arguing that the process of eternalization is a deliberate (albeit unconscious) act, driven by a specific political desire. Reading Lévi-Strauss

17) Ibid., 138.

18) Ibid., 137.

19) Ibid., 139.

20) Ibid., 142.

21) Ibid.

through the prism of Barthes, one can come to the conclusion that the desire behind the myths constructed by primordial societies also had a political aspect. That in each of these cases, a hidden political agenda was at work, realized through the creation of a unified meaning, a unified identity, and the imposition of this identity on ourselves and others. In this way, a political community is built, whose members recognize themselves in the "truth" of the imagery imposed on them, rejecting everything uncomfortable, including the awareness of the political interest behind the myth-making activity. Barthes' historicized study of myths perspective – enriched by a deeper understanding of the political – seems to allow for the unmasking of this hidden interest.

Study of Myths as Mythmaking: The Polish Case

In Poland, such a historicized analysis of myths and the political agenda behind them was undertaken by Marcin Napiórkowski in his work on the myth of the Warsaw Uprising titled *The Rise of the Dead. The History of Memory 1944–2014*.[22] According to Napiórkowski, the Warsaw Uprising myth is a pillar structuring Polish identity and contemporary political disputes. Therefore, analyzing this myth and its retellings is intended to clarify the social and political situation in contemporary Poland. This analysis, one might assume, will allow for getting insight into the political interests behind the practices of the retelling of this myth and the way public debate is conducted in Poland today.

However, Napiórkowski understands these interests differently than Barthes. While Barthes equated political desire with economic interest, thus ruling out the possibility of a different nature of political desires, Napiórkowski recognized the affective dimension of political interest, which consists of the subjective, or even personal, desires of the Polish community, manifested in various practices of retelling the myth of the Warsaw Uprising. The essence of these practices is unresolved mourning, which is linked to the repression that the authorities meted out to the memory of the uprising during the Stalinist era and throughout the entire period of the Polish People's Republic, as well as the neglect of commemorating this event during the transforma-

22) Napiórkowski, *Powstanie umarłych. Historia pamięci 1944–2014.*

tion period and later – until 2014. Due to the repression, Polish collective practices of commemorating the insurgents were grassroots and unofficial, thus acquiring an oppositional and anti-systemic character that persists to this day. According to Napiórkowski, contemporary grassroots political demonstrations during official commemorations of the uprising's anniversaries – including booing, jeering, and anti-communist chants – are linked to the anti-systemic nature of Polish collective commemoration practices. As Napiórkowski writes: "The persistence of forms of memory has caused a role reversal in our country. In a sense, the dead (more or less cynically) are now exploiting the living for their own interests. Therefore, in a certain metaphorical sense, one could say that Polish politics of memory is being perpetrated by ghosts from beyond the grave."[23] Napiórkowski seems to argue that contemporary grassroots political demonstrations, and more broadly, right-wing political discourse in Poland, occur because the trauma of the uprising has not been processed, the insurgents have not been properly commemorated, and it is their voices that can be heard in the annual boos and outraged voices of right-wing journalism, which constitute a kind of grassroots moral appeal from the collective Polish unconscious to the official authorities who refuse to remember.

Thus, two types of memory emerge from Napiórkowski's book: the official one, which refuses to remember, and the grassroots anti-systemic one, which demands commemoration. These two types of memory are linked to two *topoi* that emerged in Poland after World War II. Napiórkowski calls them the *Topos of the March* and the *Topos of the Procession*. The Topos of the March speaks of constantly moving forward, commanding us to leave behind the past and the dead. The Topos of the Procession emphasizes the importance of mourning and focusing on the past. Napiórkowski identifies the Topos of the March with the official narrative of the authority – it was used by both the communists in their propaganda and the liberal technocrats, whom Napiórkowski calls the modernist camp. The Topos of the Procession, in turn, is linked to the anti-systemic memory that dominated grassroots opposition practices and is currently being implemented by the traditionalist camp – at the demonstrations at Powązki Cemetery and in the right-wing politics and journalism. According to Napiórkowski:

23) Ibid., 26.

> The Topos of the Procession rejects mourning in favor of the cult of righteous martyrs, imposing a vision of history based on rupture – the erasure of the past in favor of the future. The Topos of the Procession, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of processing mourning, which, in their vision of history, is the only form of forgetting that allows for a return to everyday life.[24]

The narrative framework and forms of commemoration that continue to organize the myth of the Warsaw Uprising in Polish political imagination thus create something akin to two distinct identities. The Procession identity seems inherent to Polish society and appears to advocate for actions aimed at restoring socio-political balance in Poland. The Procession serves the interests of the dead in order to restore normalcy for the living. The March identity, in turn, is associated by Napiórkowski with something external, imposed, and obscuring the essential truth about Polish society. This identity, unlike the Procession identity, utilizes propaganda and pursues interests that are not the interests of the Polish collective.

These two identities seem to perpetually reproduce themselves regardless of socio-political circumstances, condemning Poles to the everlasting repetition of the same. As Napiórkowski notes, "individual faces and political labels change, but the clash between memory and oblivion continues."[25] This clash seems to structure all contemporary socio-political conflicts in Poland, including the conflict surrounding the political transformation. The Procession identity, waging a moral combat against oblivion – reproduced by the camp of contemporary traditionalists – occupies the position in which certain social groups find themselves after the political transformation. It is the position in which, for example, Home Army soldiers who survived the uprising found themselves during the Stalinist era – a position of exclusion and repression. In turn, the March identity, replicated by the modernists, is a position of power and privilege, and thus the position of groups that do not want to return to the past:

24) Ibid., 58.

25) Ibid., 345.

> A prospective value system, symbolized by dreams of highways or a fast underground railway, is the essence of "modernism," while those focused on celebrations, memories, and museums are more likely to be "traditionalists." It's easy to see that these two attitudes toward the transformation… inherit many characteristics of the opposing topoi of the March and the Procession, so crucial to the long-standing struggle to preserve the memory of the Uprising.[26]

The conflict between the identity of the March and the identity of the Procession thus manifests itself also in fields not directly related to the Uprising. And yet, it is precisely this conflict that determines the meanings of other contemporary Polish disputes, simultaneously being realized through them. It seems, in fact, that there is only one dispute—the dispute over the memory of the Uprising, which eternally recurs in various forms and on various levels. It is a fundamental dispute that, according to Napiórkowski, will continue to recur, condemning Poles to eternal repetition of the same patterns until they process the trauma and undertake the proper work of mourning – and even then it may not end. As Napiórkowski writes: "Perhaps reconciliation between the official and grassroots commemorations at Powązki Cemetery will never be possible! Any government, regardless of its provenance, that attempts to organize a ceremony at the Gloria Victis will encounter varying degrees of resistance, because – to use a now-classic metaphor – it will 'stand where the ZOMO once stood.'"[27] Napiórkowski's intuition regarding the impossibility of reconciling the official and the grassroots commemorations is more fraught with consequences than it might seem. It leads him to question the possibility of ending the grieving process, and thus to question the very diachronic essence of this phenomenon. Mourning is a reaction to loss, which, according to Freud, differs from melancholy in that it is processed, and thus ends. This end signifies not only a temporal limit to mourning but also its result, namely the subject's separation from the mourned object.[28] The questioning of the diachronic dimension of mourning thus results in the figure of eternal repetition of

26) Ibid., 347.

27) Ibid., 348.

28) Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 243–58.

the same – at least on the part of the "people," who, due to the unprocessed trauma, will see every authority as the ZOMO. This eternal repetition is inscribed in a mythical reality that abolishes time and continually recreates the same order, condemning us to the constant reproduction of the same identities.

Identity, once formed, is eternally recreated. This is how myth works. And this, apparently, is how the study of myths analysis works – by reinforcing and cementing this state of affairs. In Napiórkowski's case, this seems to be connected to the language used by contemporary traditionalists, or rather, to the faith the author of *The Rise of the Dead* places in that language. According to Napiórkowski, the traditionalists' articulated agenda is to process trauma and undertake the work of mourning. Yet this demand remains constant – it is perpetually articulated regardless of the changes in political realities that should lead to such processing. Thus, the work of mourning becomes a never-ending work. The contradiction between the temporal structure of the concepts used by the traditionalists and the unchanging temporal structure of the utterances in which these concepts function is unquestionable, yet it does not arouse suspicion in Napiórkowski. He allows it to work in his analysis, on the one hand, making the immortalized structure of traditionalists' utterances the premise that full processing of trauma is impossible, while on the other, maintaining faith in their articulated desire to engage in the work of mourning. This dual belief leads him to construct a single, enduring, Procession identity based on the same desire, one that encompasses both the Home Army soldiers of the Stalinist era and contemporary Polish traditionalists. In this way, Napiórkowski mythologizes his subject, thus grounding the historical and political intention – at least that of the contemporary traditionalists – in eternity, stripping it of its contingency. Moreover, even the particular political interests of the modernists lose their particularity and become perpetuated. According to Napiórkowski: "Those who whistle, boo, and shout are repeating… the gestures of oppositional memory, so crucial to preserving national identity throughout the period of the Polish People's Republic. Meanwhile, the authorities of Poland and Warsaw have inadvertently positioned themselves in the position of communists, attempting to displace competing 'grassroots' memory through official ceremonies."[29] It seems that the contemporary government is necessarily taking the

29) Napiórkowski, *Powstanie umarłych. Historia pamięci*, 349.

position of the former government, pursuing the same political interests inherent to the previous government. That is because the contemporary Polish people are in the position of the historical people repressed by the authorities, demanding the realization of the affective political interests of the Polish national community. The interest of the modernists is thus defined here by negating the interest of the traditionalists, and thus by negating the affective Polish interest, thereby merging with the interest of the former government, imposed on Poles from the outside.

But do the modernists not have their own interests, which are not a carbon copy of communist interests? And do traditionalists really want to work through trauma and thus realize the interests of the Polish community? Could they not have other political interests themselves? Could they not engage in propaganda, exploiting both the myth of the Warsaw Uprising and the language of Freudian psychoanalysis for this purpose? Perhaps the traditionalists also have other, less innocent desires that determine and define this form of collective identity?

Perhaps Napiórkowski cannot answer these questions affirmatively because he does not use the tools necessary not only to understand the mechanics of change occurring in collective identity, but even to perceive it. Perhaps a study of myth analysis, even a historicized one, necessarily mythologizes the subject of its research, immobilizing and simplifying it, because in the process it takes over the function and structure of myth.

In *The Rise of the Dead*, the perpetuation, consisting in the abolition of diachrony, undoubtedly occurs, and on several levels. Both the diachronic aspect of mourning, which is supposed to be the essence of the practice of recounting the myth of the Warsaw Uprising, and the particular, historical interests of contemporary Polish political camps and social groups disappear, leading Napiórkowski to create something like Barthes's model of the Eternal Man. Or rather, Two Eternal Men – the man of the March and the man of the Procession.

In *The Rise of the Dead*, diachrony also disappears at the level of the narrator's position. Napiórkowski, as one might assume, undertakes the analysis of the functioning of the myth of the Warsaw Uprising in order to understand and explain contemporary Polish political realities. Yet the result of this analysis is entirely different: it is, above all, a mythologization of the very subject of study, that is, a mythologization of both the Uprising and the Polish political realities. In this

way, Napiórkowski seems to confirm the intuition emerging from the theories of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, that the desire behind the construction of myths is unconscious. But precisely because Napiórkowski's desire is unconscious, it remains unarticulated – just as the desire of the twentieth century French bourgeoisie remained hidden in the discourse Barthes examined. This multi-leveled elimination of diachrony means that Napiórkowski not only fails to grasp the desires that underlie the various ways of telling the myth of the Warsaw Uprising in Poland today, not only fails to explain the contemporary Polish political situation, but also fails to recognize the desires behind his own activity – he fails to see his own affective interest, which is realized in *The Rise of the Dead*.

This result, however, was inevitable. The study of myths analysis either fails to distance itself from the language of its subject, resulting in the perpetuation of its discourse, or – if it can distance itself – it fails to acknowledge the complex nature of desire behind mythical constructions, or fails to recognize its own desire, which is realized in the analysis, and thus cannot prevent its own myth-making activity.

Recourse to Fantasy

But there is a method that avoids these problems. Psychoanalysis, for that is what we are talking about, not only does not take the word of the characters and narrators of the stories it examines but also understands the affective and contingent nature of the unarticulated political desires that underlie the mythical constructions that shape human identity – both individual and collective.

Jacques Lacan's theory is particularly useful for analyzing myths. Not only does it align with the structuralist thought, but also uses a category that is very close to myth in the study of myths sense. This category is fantasy, which structurally closely resembles myth and – generally speaking – performs the same function, responding to the same desire. At the same time, fantasy is, in a sense, the negative of myth, the other side of the overt myth-making discourse. A negative that recovers the diachrony of myth, its historical conditions, including the affective political interests behind a particular mythical construction.

The category of fantasy is linked to the Lacanian theory of the subject, which is not a fixed substance but a dynamic structure shaped by interactions with the world

– other subjects, language, and law.[30] Understood in this way, the subject is a lack because it lacks a fixed identity. Rather, it is an eternally produced result that – through the medium of language – is absolutely connected to other people.[31]

The relational nature of the subject also means that it is a desiring subject. According to Lacan, this desire expresses the lack of being, because "desire is the relationship of being to lack. This lack is, strictly speaking, the lack of being. Not the lack of this or that, but the lack of the being through which being exists."[32]

The subject is not a being, but desires to become one. It desires to become a fixed identity, which it can never become. Therefore, as Bruce Fink notes, "lack and desire are coextensive for Lacan."[33] Desire is expressed in the subject's striving to fill the lack, and thus to give themselves an identity that can only arise within the structure of language. This same lack also characterizes the social relations that produce the subject. Lacan's Big Other, that is, the system of social relations expressed in language, does not possess an immutable identity. It is a structure, a system of relations, and as such cannot become a thing.

The subject's response to this original lack is an attempt to fill it through fantasy which serves primarily a defensive function: it is, as Lacan writes, a "barrier opposed to reality"[34] created by the subject. Such fantasy is the subject themselves as consciousness or identity, that is, what appears to be the subject, while in reality being merely an imagery. This imaginary subject is, as Slavoj Žižek writes, a way to avoid "the trauma of the too direct exposure to the terrifying abyss of the Other."[35] This abyss is a lack in the Other, which is also expressed through desire. The Big Other – like the subject it shapes – is a system of desires, and therefore a desiring system that also desires something from the subject it shapes; it desires this subject to be something. This desire is never directly articulated. However, the subject constantly asks about it. As Lacan writes, "the Other's question (*la question de l'Autre*)… which takes some such

30) Burzyk, "Psychoanaliza a polityka: stawka podmiotu," 4.

31) Ibid., 9.

32) Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, *Livre II*, quoted in Kowalska, *Dialektyka poza dialektyką*, 239.

33) Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 54.

34) Ibid.

35) Žižek, *Lacan. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, 71.

form as '*Chè vuoi?*,' 'What do you want?,' is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire."[36]

The subject's response, defining the path of its desire, is a fantasy of themselves as a certain identity, which – as the subject believes – is desired by the Other. Identity fantasies may differ from one another, but they are not entirely arbitrary. The structure of each fantasy translates into the clinical structure of the subject that generates it. Consequently, a neurotic subject with a hysterical tendency will answer this question differently than the neurotic subject with an obsessive tendency and certainly both of their answers will be much different from the answers of the perverse and psychotic subjects.[37] Still, all those answers reveal the particular relationship between the subject and the object of desire specific to each of these clinical structures. They account for how the subject escapes the lack within themselves and the Big Other by filling it with an imagery of specific content and structure – an imagery that answers the question "what does the Other want from me?" – thus creating a subjective structure in the clinical sense. Understood in this way, fantasy is what structures subjectivity – both individual and collective. As Andrzej Leder notes:

> The phantasmatic construction is the fundamental structure organizing the subject, both individual and social. This structure is the Other's desire; what the social world, in its linguistic form, desires from the subject, situated in a particular position. The influence of the phantasmatic construction can be found in conscious action, speech, dreams, and ultimately in the meanderings of life, individual or collective fate.[38]

Leder writes about the "influence" of phantasmatic construction, not its direct articulation, because fantasy is a largely a construct of the unconscious. The imaginary identity of the subject, and therefore its conscious content – what the subject thinks of themselves – is only a part of the fantasy. Besides that, at the level of the unconscious, the very structure of subjective desire is constructed, but remains hidden. Therefore,

36) Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject," 690.

37) Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VIII*, 295.

38) Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja*, 13.

the answer to the question "what does the Other want from me?" does not take the form of an utterance. It is, as Leder notes, "a scenario. Or a drama, a story unfolding in a certain sequence and in a certain topography."[39] Fantasy is therefore something that answers the question "what does the Other want from me?" in a fictionalized form. It is what stages the unconscious desires – and these, in Lacanian theory, always have a supra-individual dimension. Desire is always, as Žižek notes, "the desire of the other, both in the subjective and objective sense of the genitive. It is about the desire for the other, the desire to be desired by the other, and especially the desire for what the other desires."[40]

The phantasmatic scenario stages the unconscious desires of the subject, simultaneously giving them order and direction. It is what, as Žižek notes, "literally teaches us how to desire."[41] These desires, in turn, are always supra-individual desires, connected to other people and the world. Like myth, fantasy is a story that teaches us who we are and what we desire, as well as who others are and what they desire. It is therefore a story that provides an exemplary model of the world. And, as with myth, the source of this story is the desire for being, meaning, and identity stemming from the disappointment with a *deficient* reality. However, unlike myth, which operates primarily at the conscious and articulated level, fantasy is primarily an unconscious construction.

This does not mean, however, that it is completely hidden. As Žižek notes, "The Unconscious is outside, not hidden in any unfathomable depths – or, to quote the X Files motto: The truth is out there."[42] This *outside* is the conscious side of fantasy – the way the unconscious desires are presented to the imagination through a phantasmatic scenario. This imaginary side is inhabited by imaginary figures (events and characters from our lives, from the history of our country and the world) that appear in a specific configuration and act in a specific way as a result of the subject's particular unconscious structure of desire. The unconscious desires, organized by fantasy, remain unconscious because they possess a dimension that transcends the rules and

39) Ibid.,14.

40) Žižek, *Lacan. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, 56.

41) Ibid., 71.

42) Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 1.

representations accepted by consciousness. Consequently, fantasy that organizes and structures them also attempts to justify them by creating narrative scenarios that, in a form acceptable to consciousness, express a hidden intention, often clearly questionable from the perspective of consciously accepted ethics. The conscious side of fantasy is thus a kind of fictionalized sequence of images intended to conceal hidden desires of a traumatic (because unacceptable) nature – for example, envy, resentment, or jealousy can take the form of a fight for justice, and a desire for violence can be masked by the need for defense.

The unconscious content of fantasy, as Žižek notes, consists of "repressed preconceptions and assumptions, which we can't admit even to ourselves, but which determine our actions and feelings."[43] It seems, then, that the overt side of fantasy is constructed to distort unconscious desires so much that they become unrecognizable. Yet this is not its only function. By concealing the nature of desires, fantasy simultaneously enables their fulfillment – even if only partially and in a distorted form. The overt side of fantasy thus functions like a Freudian symptom, through which the unconscious reveals itself in a distorted way, allowing the subject to substitutively resolve the internal conflict. This fulfillment of desire, even if only partial, is necessarily linked to pleasure – and the greater the pleasure, the stricter the norms prohibiting the fulfillment of repressed desires. As Fink notes, using sexual desire as an example, "'Naïve,' 'simple' bodily pleasure is transformed into jouissance – something far more erotic, dirty, bad, and evil, something really exciting – thanks to prohibition."[44]

Fantasy is therefore a script through which the subject's unconscious desires are organized, manifesting in consciousness in fictionalized form in a way that is as distorted as it is enjoyable. Such manifestations can be found, as Leder noted, "in conscious action as well as in speech, dreams, and finally in the meanderings of life, individual or collective fate." However, it seems that they can also, and perhaps primarily, be found in myths, that is, stories that share the same genesis and purpose as fantasies. In stories that create and sustain structured imaginary constructions that generate specific collective identities and visions of the world. In stories that seem to be nothing more than the overt side of collective fantasies.

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43) Žižek, *Lacan. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, 76–77.

44) Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 67.

Psychoanalytic Phantazmatization of Myth

The study of myths analysis presents myths as lasting constructs that sustain unchanging collective identities guided by unchanging desires. Indeed, it is hard to resist the impression that political communities retell the same myths over and over again. The recycling of myths ensures that the collective imaginary is inhabited by the same characters and events, giving it undoubted continuity. However, the continuity of the imaginary does not necessarily mean the continuity of identity. According to Lacan, the subject's identity is determined not by the imaginary, but by the unconscious structure of desire specific to particular clinical structures. In other words, it is not the figures of imagination, but the way they position themselves against each other, that determines who the subject is and what they desire. As a result, a single myth with specific protagonists can be told differently by different individuals or groups. The myth of the Round Table can be a story of the triumph of democracy over a criminal regime or of national betrayal – depending on the structure of desire behind each storytelling.

These structures, however, do not construct themselves spontaneously. As Žižek notes, "Human desire is structured by the symbolic order, a 'decentered' Big Other: what I desire is predetermined by the Big Other, the symbolic space within which I live."[45] It is precisely this symbolic order, expressing social relations (laws, ethical commands and prohibitions) in language, that gives a specific structure to the subjective desire and the phantasmatic scenario produced by the subject. The structure of fantasy corresponds to the clinical structure of the subject, and this seems to correspond to the structure of the Big Other. This is because every subjective identity is an attempt to meet the expectations of the Big Other, to become the object of its desire. To achieve this, however, the subject must know who the Big Other is. This means that the phantasmatic answer to the question "what does the Other want from me?" is simultaneously an answer to the questions "who am I?" and "who is the Big Other?"

The answers to these questions may, of course, differ. Within one community telling the same myths, there may be several representations of the symbolic order using different visions of principles and laws. Those differences translate into different fanta-

45) Žižek, *Lacan. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, 66.

sies that the community produces. Of course, each fantasy is a system of unconscious, hidden desires, but which of these must remain hidden depends on what a specific concept of the Big Other allows. It follows that just as every phantasmatic construction is determined by the structure of the symbolic order, so the symbolic order is constructed by fantasies operating on a specific concept of it. Consequently, each concept of the Big Other is a sum of phantasmatic stories sharing the same structure of desire – a sum of stories that, in the same way, answer the question of what the social world is and what it wants. These answers translate into different ways of organizing collective enjoyment. For, in Lacanian theory, what unites a community is a specific, shared way of experiencing enjoyment, resulting from a specific, shared structure of desire. Žižek illustrates this mechanism using the example of a national community:

> Lacan does not reduce the (national, etc.) Cause to a performative effect of the discursive practices that refer to it. The pure discursive effect does not have enough "substance" to compel the attraction proper to a Cause – and the Lacanian term for the strange "substance" which must be added so that a Cause obtains its positive ontological consistency, the only substance acknowledged by psychoanalysis, is of course *enjoyment* (as Lacan states it explicitly in Encore). A nation exists only as long as its specific *enjoyment* continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices.[46]

Žižek is right – national myths transmit and sustain a specific structure of desire for the community and, consequently, its way of experiencing enjoyment. However, due to the multiplicity of representations of symbolic order operating within a single community, there may be many structures for organizing enjoyment. The differences between them may not be immediately apparent, as the myths told within that community often belong to a same imagery. This does not mean, however, that these differences do not exist.

It seems that every community is a battleground for competing notions of the Big Other, which, through their own fantasies, attempt to impose their structure of

46) Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 202.

desire on as many members of the community as possible, and thus to create a specific identity for that community. This is the political stake of Lacan's theory of the subject. The Lacanian subject, including the collective one, is, after all, a lack. This means that it is constantly filled with an identity that is a product of the world of social relations, language, and law. This identity, however, is not fixed once and for all. It is an imaginary, non-substantial creation, and can be changed by the Big Other.

On the basis of Lacan's theory, it can also be reasonably assumed that the structure of the Big Other can also undergo changes. The space of social relations is not, after all, substantial and fixed once and for all. The fundamental lack that the subject discovers within themselves is also present in social relations. However, if several different notions of the symbolic order can function within a single community, one can assume that they are constituted and changed through mutual contact. In this way, the unconscious structures of desire themselves, constituting specific notions of the symbolic order, can evolve. This, on an articulated level (for example, in myths) will manifest itself in a shift in the position of the story's protagonists or in a revaluation of their actions.

All this seems impossible to grasp through the study of myths analysis, which understands myth as a permanent structure constituting an unchanging collective identity based on the same, eternal desire. However, the contingent nature of collective desires and the mutability of collective identities can be grasped when myth is understood psychoanalytically, as a manifestation of an unconscious collective fantasy resulting from a specific structure of desire.

Such a juxtaposition of myth and fantasy is not a methodological overreach. The connections between those categories are evident – even to Lacan himself, who, in "The Neurotic's Individual Myth," when analyzing the case of Freud's obsessive patient known as "the Rat Man," observed: "What gives a mythic character to this little phantasmatic scenario? It is not only the fact that it re-enacts a ceremony which reproduces almost exactly that inaugural relationship, as it were, hidden there, it also modifies this relationship in accord with a certain propensity."[47] Myth not only presents to the imagination, in a fictionalized way, the fundamental structure of the subject's desire (and thus the structure of their fantasy). Myth *modifies* this structure

47) Lacan, "The Neurotic's Individual Myth," 414.

toward a certain *propensity*. This propensity is self-reproducing and self-expanding. Myth, even an individual one, is a manifestation of the structure of desire, and every structure of desire is linked to the symbolic order in which the subject functions. Lacan's Big Other not only desires the subject to be something. It desires *subjects* to be something. Only plural subjects can create and sustain a specific structure of the symbolic order. Subjects, desiring a specific imagery of the Big Other, a specific system of social relations, produce and repeat the myths that constitute this system, and this system, in turn, reproduces its structure, imposing it on other subjects. This is precisely the political agenda of myth: it aims to replicate and expand the unconscious desires behind the myth and the ways of fulfilling them, that is, the ways of experiencing enjoyment. In other words, it is about fulfilling the affective political interests of groups that create and maintain a specific vision of the world, and simultaneously extending these interests to other groups by imposing on them a specific identity and vision of the social world.

The affective interests within a single community can be numerous, and they can undoubtedly change. Therefore, the myths in which they are manifested cannot be treated as narratives with a permanent meaning that continually reproduce the same, unchanging identity. This means that the understanding of myth must indeed be historicized. However, historicization of the understanding of myth means, above all, its phantazmatization.

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