Introduction

Contemporary political philosophy tends to depict politics as an activity involving rational individuals. For instance, the image of politics that emerges from John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* or Habermas' *Between Facts and Norms*, perhaps the two major works of political philosophy of the last fifty years, is that of a sphere of human life in which one can count on the rationality of the actors involved. However rationality is conceived, either as rationality with regard to ends and values, or as communicative rationality, the image of politics resulting from these works is that of an activity which can and should be guided by rational procedures.

Nevertheless, when one looks at the everyday activity that goes under the heading of "politics", one is confronted with quite a different picture.[1] People involved in this activity are not so easily persuaded to adopt rational procedures of communication and decision. Therefore, a purely rational model of society risks being a model for a world that does not exist.

Indeed, quite often, people seem to act on the basis of arational elements, some other kinds of powerful symbols and images of the world, which are not taken into account by a purely rational image of politics.

[1] Clearly, the purpose of both Habermas and Rawls is not to give an account of everyday politics but to propose a model for it. All the same, they both implicitly suggest with their models that politics is an activity where one can count on the rationality of the actors involved.

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The twentieth century, with the rise of totalitarianism and its two world wars, contains countless examples. While the grandiose parades of totalitarian regimes exhibited the power of arational elements, such as myths and symbols, in a patent way, there seems to be reason to suspect that these elements still manoeuvre among us. Despite the fact that their presence is not always conspicuous, they might still be there, exercising their power in a more subtle way.

Scholars of different disciplines have long recognised the political role played by arational elements. Sociologists, historians and anthropologists, each in their own way, have devoted an important part of their work to the analysis of these kinds of phenomena. Anthropologists have always had to deal with such issues. As external observers catapulted into remote regions of the world, they were, perhaps, in the best position to do so: the foreignness of the "primitives" made their myths and symbols conspicuous to the anthropologists' eyes. Furthermore, in the study of traditional societies, the presence of such phenomena seemed to be the obvious consequence of the fact that politics could hardly be separated from religion in those cultures.[2]

Historians, too, have long dealt with such phenomena, at least from the time of Bloch's *The Royal Touch* (1973) and Kantorowicz's seminal work on medieval political theology, *The King's Two Bodies* (1957). These two works, in particular, by starting from the observation that rulers share some properties with gods, opened the path for a new line of study on the mythical and symbolic dimensions of power. But all these studies were still confined to traditional societies, in which the influence of myths and symbols could still be attributed to the proximity between politics and religion that characterises these societies.

Sociology has also dealt with these topics for a long time: one just has to think of the founding fathers of this discipline, Durkheim and Weber.[3] On the other hand, precisely by moving from Weber's

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[2] See, for instance, the classical Malinowski (1992) or, more recently, Geertz (1983). However, both Geertz and Malinowski deal with myths under the general category of symbolism and do not focus specifically on the concept of political myth.

[3] On this point, see, in particular, Eisenstadt's collection of Weber's works on charisma and institution building (Weber 1969). However, Weber's concept of charisma refers to the belief in the exceptional qualities of the leader, and does not focus on the specific notion of political myth.

prediction of the transformation of the spirit of modernity into an iron cage (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*), one could think that modern politics, as a consequence of its increasing rationalisation and bureaucratisation, had become immune to the influence of myths and symbols: in a rationalist iron cage, there seems to be little room for them. If modern politics is deemed to have become the business of bureaucratic "specialists without spirits" (Weber 1976: 182), one could easily be tempted to conclude that there is no more need for myths and symbols.[4]

Rather recently, a number of new studies focusing on the mobilising power of modern myths and symbols have emerged. The rise of identity politics and the revival of nationalism in recent decades have, perhaps, rendered manifest that, to paraphrase Geertz, the extraordinary has not gone out of modern politics, however much of the banal may have entered it (Geertz 1983: 143). As well, the emphasis both on constructivism and on the linguistic turn have given rise to a new interest in the symbolic dimensions of social phenomena. As a consequence, titles such as "The invention of *x*" or "The symbolic construction of *y* and *z*" are quite common today.[5] The result of this new emphasis is that there is now a striking number of publications whose titles contain the word "myth" and/or the word "symbols".

The exponential number of publications on this topic would suggest the existence of a refined and consolidated theoretical framework for their use. However, there is not one yet. The aim of this book is to help to fill this gap and the way in which it does so is by proposing a "philosophy of political myth". The purpose of this proposition of a philosophy of political myth is not only to propose a new theory of political myth, but also to provide this theory with a philosophical framework that addresses the questions of what political myths are and why we need them.

Indeed, while there exists a vast theoretical literature that deals with the symbolic dimension of power in general, the different forms of political symbolism are rarely dealt with separately. To deal with these phenomena under headings such as "the extraordinary" or "political

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4 In reality, at some points, Weber himself seems to be aware of the possibility of new prophets: see, for instance, the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1976).

5 See, for example, *The Invention of Tradition* by the historians Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and *The Symbolic Construction of Community* by the anthropologist Cohen (1985).

symbolism" (Geertz 1983) can be misleading, because it might suggest that all that is not rational is symbolic or extraordinary. Works such as *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Edelman 1976) or *The Construction of Society* (Cohen 1985) quite often end up unifying very different phenomena under their very general categories – and this, in its turn, has led to the conflation of myth with the much more general category of symbolism.

The problem, however, is that myths and symbols do not coincide. Despite the fact that myths operate with symbols, the two concepts of myth and symbol must be kept separate: to conflate the two would be to lose the specificity of myth. Myths operate through symbols, but not all symbols are myths: the sequence of letters of a mathematical equation is also a symbol, but nobody – or only a few – would argue that it is a myth. As Cassirer argues, symbols, in this sense, are the transcendental conditions of the human mind: myth, science, language itself, these are all "symbolic functions", that is, functions of the human mind through which only the multiplicity of experience can be grasped and communicated (Cassirer 1977).

It is precisely the conflation between these concepts that has generated most of the confusion surrounding this topic. In turn, this has also generated a great reluctance to use the concept of myth at all – particularly in relation to the realm of politics. Why make recourse to a concept as cumbersome as myth, and not resort instead to other concepts such as "tales", "narratives" or "legends"?

Much of this book is devoted to showing that to make recourse to such substitutes is neither possible nor necessary. It is not possible, because all of the alternatives are inadequate to convey the semantic complexities of the concept of myth. Indeed, the word myth has been used – and abused – in so many different and various ways. Faced with the varieties of the conceptions of myth, Cassirer, more than fifty years ago, recalled the scene of the witch's kitchen in Goethe's *Faust*: Faust, waiting for the drink by which he shall regain his youth, stands in front of an enchanted glass and has the wonderful vision of a woman of supernatural beauty. Faust is enraptured and spellbound, but Mephisto, standing at his side, scoffs at his enthusiasm because he knows that what Faust has seen is not a real woman but only a creature of his mind (Cassirer 1973: 5). Myth, Cassirer suggests, is a sort of enchanted mirror in which scholars have found the objects with which each is most familiar: the linguists found a world of signs and names;

the psychologists a product of the unconscious; the philosophers both the opposite of philosophy and a form of primitive philosophy; and so on. Hence, the varieties of the conceptions of myth, and the complexity of the semantic area covered by the term as well. When faced with this complexity, one cannot simply disregard it.

Indeed, it is precisely because of this complexity that none of these alternatives are suitable. A myth is not a simple tale, because there are plenty of tales that are not mythical. *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer are not myths – they might have referred to myths, they might have worked as myth in the past, but they do not seem to operate as myths any longer. Myth is not co-extensive with the concept of narrative, either: it suffices to think of all the failed myths, that is, all the narratives that did not succeed in acquiring the status of myth. Neither is a myth a legend, because there are myths that are not legends, and vice versa. We can talk of the "myth of the French Revolution", but nobody would talk of the "legend of the French Revolution". At least, those who use the expression "the legend of the French revolution" mean something different from what is understood by "the myth of the French revolution".

Finding a substitute for myth is not only impossible, it is also unnecessary. With regard to *political* myth, there is now, indeed, a vast literature that examines from different perspectives the role that myths play in politics. Still, there is a striking asymmetry in the state of the art on this topic. On the one hand, there is an ever growing amount of literature that deals with specific case studies – beginning with the pioneering studies of the 1960s by Norman Cohn and Eric Hobsbawm on the role of eschatological myths in peasant rebellion (Cohn 1970; and Hobsbawm 1963), and the long series of studies on nationalism.[6] On the other hand, there are very few theoretical studies that clarify the different uses of the concept of political myth and even fewer that address the question of why this concept should be used at all.

In particular, while there is an overwhelming number of historical and sociological works that deal with specific case studies, political philosophy seems to be reluctant to accept the concept of political myth as an object of specific inquiry. Moreover, most of the (few) contemporary

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[6] On myth and nationalism, there is now a vast literature. See, for example, Smith 1986; 1991; 1999, and Stråth 2000.

works that have undertaken this task have done so by approaching political myth through general categories such as "political symbolism" or, recently, "veil politics" (Wingo 2003). It is to this latter concept that Wingo, by criticising Rawls's liberalism, had recourse in order to vindicate the importance and legitimacy of elements such as monuments, flags, national heroes, political myths and rituals (Wingo 2003). According to Wingo, not only do "veils" operate in liberal democratic societies, but it could not be otherwise: they are a crucial means of both political persuasion and propaganda. Moreover, in his view, "veils" are not incompatible with the principle of individual autonomy if they meet the criterion of consensus from all sectors of a nation.

The problem, though, with this view is that by unifying such different phenomena as flags, rituals, national heroes, and political myths under the heading of "veil politics", not only does one lose the specificity of political myth, but one also risks ending up in a generalised defence of all sorts of "veils". For instance, it is disputable whether the cult of national heroes, which Wingo mentions among the possible forms of "veil", is compatible with the principle of autonomy.

The reluctance of political philosophy to focus specifically on the concept of political myth is particularly striking in light of the richness of the philosophical studies on the concept of myth. If the philosophical literature on political myth is very limited, the literature on myth without further qualification is endless. Myth has been the object of much Western speculation: the other side of philosophy; the side against which philosophy has defined itself as an intellectual enterprise; but also the cumbersome other side that has continually recurred throughout the centuries, despite all attempts to rationalise it. Notwithstanding the pervasiveness of myth, both the enlightened thinkers who argue for the dismissal of mythical thinking and the nostalgic romantics who advocate its renovation have rarely expressly dealt with *political* myth.

Indeed, there is not a vast tradition of philosophies of political myth. This may be due to the fact that it is only under the conditions of modernity that the specifically *political* role played by myth emerges as a topic. While political myths are hardly distinguishable from religious myths in archaic societies, in modern societies, with the separation of politics from its religious anchorage, on the one hand, and its democratisation on the other, the role of specifically *political* myths becomes

conspicuous. As Sorel argues, when it comes to explaining typically modern phenomena such as major social movements, the fact that the people participating in them represent their action in the form of grand narratives that depict their success, becomes so evident that there seems to be little need to insist on the role of political myth (Sorel 1975: 22).

In spite of this conspicuousness, there seems to be something in the concept of political myth that renders it recalcitrant to a philosophical treatment. Indeed, if one looks for the classical theories of political myths, one discovers that philosophers themselves have focused on specific political myths rather than on political myth in general. Most noticeably, the theories of political myth that can be derived from the two most important philosophical works on the topic, namely, Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (1975) or Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* (1973), are encapsulated in reflections on singular political myths: the proletarian general strike, and the myth of the Aryan race respectively. It seems as if political myths have an intrinsically particularistic nature, and this has not favoured the proliferation of a philosophical reflection on this topic.

However, there is nothing that, a priori, prevents a philosophical treatment of political myth. In particular, the debate on myth that took place in Germany in the 1970s focused on this particularistic nature of myth. Among the philosophers who participated in this debate, Hans Blumenberg best captured this in his theory of myth as "work on myth" (Blumenberg 1985). For this reason, Blumenberg's philosophical reflections on myth provide the ideal platform for a theory of political myth that specifically addresses their particularistic nature. A myth, Blumenberg concluded, is not a product that is given once and for all, but is instead a process of the continual reworking of a basic narrative core or *mythologem*. Blumenberg conveyed this idea through the German expression *Arbeit am Mythos*, which literally means "work on myth". If myth consists of the work on myth, not only are there no single myths, which are given once and for all, but the same *mythologem* also changes over time because, on each occasion, it is reappropriated[7] by different needs and exigencies. In order to work as a

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7 On Blumenberg's concept of reappropriation (*Umbesetzung*), see Blumenberg 1971 and Leghissa 2002.

myth, a narrative must always answer a need for significance (*Bedeut-samkeit*). If it cannot do so, it simply ceases to be a myth (Blumenberg 1985).

Blumenberg, however, puts forward his theory more through a phenomenological analysis of single myths than through the development of a systematic theory. Furthermore, he mainly focuses on literary myths and does not specifically deal with political myths: the political scope of his theory remains, in general, in the background and is not explicitly problematised. The overall German debate on myth (*Mythosdebatte*), the philosophical debate that took place in Germany from the 1970s onwards, rich as it is in theoretical insights does not, however, systematically focus on political myth.

My aim in this book is to construct a philosophical framework for a theory of political myth understood as "work on myth". In this way, I situate it between philosophical theories of myth, on the one hand, and the social science literature on political myth, on the other. Among the latter, together with the huge body of literature devoted to single case studies, there are also works specifically devoted to political myth. None of them however, has treated political myth as a process rather than as an object. Most of them remain therefore incomplete from different points of view.

For instance, both Lincoln's *Discourse and the Construction of Society* and Flood's *Political Myth* aim to build a theory of political myth.[8] However, both Lincoln and Flood treat political myth as an object, and, in particular, as an object that advances a claim to truth – and this approach, as we will see, is essentially flawed. Lincoln defines myths as those kinds of narratives that possess credibility and authority, in which a narrative possessing authority is "one for which successful claims are made not only to the status of truth, but, what is more, to the status of *paradigmatic* truth" (Lincoln 1989: 24). Similarly, Flood, who understands political myth as the synthesis of political ideology and religious myths, defines it as "an ideologically marked narrative which purports to give a *true* account of a set of past, present, or predicted

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[8] Other works are conceived as surveys of existing theories. For instance, Tudor discusses the various theories of myth with the explicit intent of an introductory work, i.e., simply to draw attention to a common, but often neglected, type of political argument (Tudor 1972).

political events, and which is accepted as valid in its essential by a social group" (Flood 1996: 44, emphasis mine).

However, to define myth, in general, and political myth, in particular, in terms of its claim to "truth" means to bring it to a terrain that is not its own. As Wittgenstein pointed out many years before the publication of these works, a myth is not a scientific hypothesis about the constitution of the world: it does not aim to put forward a theory and cannot, therefore, be approached from the standpoint of its claim to truth (Wittgenstein 1979). Following Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, it may be said that to interrogate myths from the standpoint of their true or false account means to assume too limited a view of what human language and meanings are about: human beings are ceremonious animals, who, with their language, perform innumerable actions that are not based on any hypothesis about the constitution of the world (Wittgenstein 1979).

One could, perhaps, simply reject the theories of political myth of both Flood and Lincoln, on the basis of Wittgenstein's philosophical criticism towards the approach to myth that they endorse. Readers wishing to follow this route may skip the first part of this book and begin their reading at Chapter 4. This chapter first reconstructs Wittgenstein's critique of Fraser's *Golden Bough*, and shows thereby the shortcomings of an approach to myth in terms of truth; second, by discussing Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, the chapter points to an alternative view of language and meaning, one that is better suited to a theory of political myth.

The problem, however, remains that both Flood's and Lincoln's theories contain important remarks with regard to the way in which political myths work within a society: a philosophy of political myth would be enormously impoverished if it refused to engage with them. Moreover, these views also seem to reflect quite a common attitude towards myth. This comes as no surprise if one considers that what characterises the social sciences is precisely the fact that they take their objects as given, and, therefore, tend to rely on concepts as they emerge from everyday language.

Indeed, if we open the *Oxford English Dictionary* at the entry on "myth", we read: "1a A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural and historical phenomena; 1b in generalized

use, also an untrue or popular tale, a rumour. 2. A fictitious or imag-
inary person or object" (Simpson and Weiner 1989; vol. X, 177). In
both meanings 1 and 2, myth is characterised in terms of "fictitious-
ness" and "untruth", where "fictitious" – according to the *Oxford English
Dictionary* – does not simply mean "artificial", but also "counterfeit",
"arbitrarily devised", "feigned to exist", "imaginary", and "not real"
(Simpson and Weiner 1989: vol. V, 873). Thus, three features seem
to characterise the common use of the term: fictitiousness, unreality,
and untruth.

Faced with the common usage of the term, one cannot simply refer
to Wittgenstein and Blumenberg. In particular, a philosophy of polit-
ical myth situates itself between social sciences and philosophy, and
therefore, if it cannot simply ignore the former, which tend to take
their objects as given, it can have recourse to philosophy, which typi-
cally puts its objects in question. With regard to the definition of myth
in terms of its claim to truth, the approach adopted here is philosoph-
ical and consists of reconstructing the genealogy of this view of myth
(Part I), and showing why contemporary thinking has the means for
going beyond its presuppositions (Part II).

The genealogical method, as Nietzsche defined it in his *On the
Genealogy of Morality*, consists precisely in facing the problem of the
meaning of a certain formation by looking at the circumstances in
which it was created and at the values that were at stake in this process
(Nietzsche 1994: 5). In this sense, a genealogy of myth is not a recon-
struction of the history of myth, but rather a *critique* of a certain view
of myth aimed at discovering what its presuppositions are.

To this end, Chapter 1 moves from the recognition that in the Greek
Homeric culture *mythos* simply meant word and was used as a synonym
of *logos*. In contrast to the narrative of the birth of philosophy as an
exit from myth, this chapter argues that, until the fourth century BC,
no opposition between *mythos* and *logos* is attested. Even if the two
terms had begun to be separated by the time of the sophists (fifth
century BC) – *mythos* specialising in the meaning of "tale" and *logos*
in that of "discourse, calculation", they were not yet counterpoised
from the point of view of their relationship to truth. Philosophers
themselves, at least up to Plato, did not disdain to have recourse to
myth. Even if the professionalisation of philosophy brought with it
a critical stance on the part of certain philosophers towards the old