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What is the contemporary political myth?

Myth has accompanied man since the beginning of his social history. Although, alongside rituals, myth comprised a bonding agent for primitive communities, as well as highly civilized antique cultures, in the common meaning a new tradition tended to treat myth exclusively as mistruth, or as spinning tales. Despite numerous opinions present in the literature that myth, as a symbolic form, is not subject to falsification, basing its existence mainly on the fulfilled function, continuous confirmation of the scientific nature of research of myth on the grounds of sciences is still required. Establishing a definition of a political myth within the sciences of politics and administration requires a broad reference to the concepts of myth formulated in the field of religious sciences, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, philosophy, and cultural studies. This article is intended to recall the definitions of myth representative for individual scientific disciplines dealing with this issue, as well as to indicate the fundamental functions of myth referred to in science. Against the background of the cited concepts of myth, a definition of the contemporary political myth shall be established; it will stress the aspects of myth that impact its popularity and easiness of adaptation to the present setting. The research problem shall focus on the relationship between the concepts of myth in science and of strictly political myth in order to verify whether the former contradicts the definitions elaborated so far beyond the scope of political science. Although the structure of the article does not allow for a complete presentation of the definitions presented in the literature, the realization of such an interdisciplinary review of academic standpoints, especially those directed at the social functions of myth, will contribute to further research on the importance of myth for contemporary radical political parties.

The ancient myth

The Romanian religious scholar, Mircea Eliade, wrote: "If in every European language the word 'myth' denotes a 'fiction', it is because the Greeks proclaimed it to be such twenty-

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five centuries ago" (Eliade, 1998: 147). This resulted from the tension present in Greek philosophy between the awareness of the educational and culture-forming function of myth, and the awareness of the threat posed by the extra-rational, often destructive force of mythical patterns. Despite the proclaimed idealism, Plato, standing on the grounds of political thought, was completely inclined towards a rational vision of the state. The Athenian philosopher wrote in *The Republic* that it is not the role of the founders of the state to create myths, but to know the systemic patterns in line with which myths will be formed. The critical assessment of the influence of poets on society present in Platonic philosophy did not, however, exclude the possibility of adapting those myths that would be recognized as valuable from the point of view of the interests of Greek society (Platon, 1994: 98-99). For Plato, the fundamental question was to make a distinction between two concepts of the state – the ethical concept and its mythical counterpart; in his opinion, there was no room for mythological images in the rule of law. The poets' myth-creating activity was to be strictly controlled by the authorities to eliminate undesired myths, while accepting those which, in Plato's opinion, could play a useful role in educating the youngest Greeks. These useful myths, as he believed, should be told to children by their mothers in order to convey moral and cultural models. Plato believed in the great harm of myths told about endless quarrels between the gods; according to him, when too widespread, they would stand in the way of harmony in the social and political life of the Greeks (Platon, 1994: 101). Despite the exceptions made in relation to those powerful myths, the overall objective of Plato was to eliminate myth from the public life, and especially from education, because it was an extremely immoderate and difficult thing to contain. Myth in the concept of Plato's state was to be removed from the world of people and politics once and for all (Cassirer, 2006: 92).

A prominent classical Polish philologist, Jerzy Łanowski, cites the examples of the ancient tragedy and social life of ancient Greece to emphasize the political significance of myth. In the foreword to *The Children of Heracles* created by the playwright Euripides, he wrote that: "The language of myth spoken by a Greek tragedy is sometimes a political language, the names of its heroes represent symbols that are obvious to every Greek, perfectly legible, and at critical moments perhaps even more expressive than the prose of everyday politics" (Łanowski, 1980: 20). Bearing in mind further deliberations on the definitions of the contemporary political myth, its particular power of influence at critical moments for the community will be one of its essential features. In many cases, the heroes of the tragedy, especially when it was required by the political situation in Athens, were to personify eternal opponents in the struggle for domination in Hellas in the eyes of the viewers. Therefore, the focal point should not be the literal reading of myth but rather the question which it is to be answered:

How to extract and build a history from the old symbols of myth that would uplift you, lift your spirits, justify the rationale of the poet's homeland in this war? Athena should be presented to the eyes of the audience as a fearless defender of the oppressed, harmed perhaps by the in-

gratitude of those whom they once shook hands with in misery. This is the genesis for the political morality play, present-day and propaganda art, with many advantages but also considerable faults of such creativity (Łanowski, 1980: 20).

In principle, therefore, myth in its tragic form contains political potential, which is gaining importance especially in times of external threat or socio-economic destabilization, when it becomes an extra-rational argument motivating for commitment and sacrifice for the community.

Myth as a story

Eliade, in his 1957 essay entitled *Myth and Reality*, described the pattern of myth as follows:

> A myth tells a sacred story, that is, a truth that took place at the beginning of time, ab initio. And telling of sacral matters confers a revelation of a mystery, because the characters of myth are not human beings; they are gods or cultural heroes which is why their actions constitute a secret, a mystery play; man could not have known them if they had not been revealed to him. Therefore, myth is a story of what happened in illo tempore, the story of what gods or human beings did at the beginning of time; myth means announcing what has happened ab origine. Once told, that is, revealed, myth becomes apodictic truth; it establishes a truth that is absolute (Eliade, 1993: 109-110).

For Eliade, the principal function of myth, in the light of the above definition, is to establish patterns of rituals, ceremonies, as well as all essential human activities, with particular emphasis on the spheres such as: nutrition, sex, work and study. All these day-to-day activities present in human life, as drawing from mythical patterns, would be constantly updated within the cyclically repeating, or rather cyclically renewing, sacred time (Eliade, 1993: 112-113). In *Aspects of a Myth*, published in 1963, Eliade defined myth in the following way:

> The least imperfect, for having the broadest scope, definition would be: Myth narrates a sacred history; it tells of an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behaviour, an institution (Eliade, 1998: 11).

Comparing the views of traditional societies on myth with the Platonic concept of anamnesis later in the work, Eliade concludes that: "Myths are paradigmatic models established by the gods and the mythical ancestors" (Eliade, 1998: 125).

Myth and the totem

Throughout the 20th century, the issue of myth enjoyed exceptional interest among representatives of anthropology. The dynamic development of this scientific discipline at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, caused by establishing contacts with the so far

isolated peoples of Australia and Oceania, influenced the creation of a view of a universal character and the occurrence of myth as one of the basic forms of human spiritual activity alongside the ritual. In the classic definition of myth contained in the 1926 work *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, Bronisław Malinowski wrote that myth examined in its living form takes the shape of a narrative that revives the ancient reality. It is an indispensable feature of primitive cultures, in which it expresses and conveys beliefs, indicates moral models, guards the ritual, and contains also numerous practical life guidance. In such a shape, myth in Malinowski's approach comprises a vital element of the human civilization. Viewed in this light, mythology has become a consecrated tradition of the community, constituting a set of customs woven into culture; it lectured on the principles of religion and ritual sanctioning the social order (Malinowski, 1990).

The issue of myth was seen differently by the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who wrote in opposition to Malinowski's concept in his book *The Illusion of Totemism*, questioning popular concepts of myth and totemism, allegedly taking their sources from the observation of the natural order of the surrounding nature. Lévi-Strauss referred to much earlier research by Franz Boas, in which the American cultural anthropologist and linguist called for a departure from defining the particularity of totemism in favour of attempting to define its form. Boas, similarly to Ernst Cassirer in his later *Essay on Man*, referred to the works of Emil Durkheim, who saw in both totemism and myth forms derived from the sphere of social life, and not taken from the observation of the natural order of nature surrounding man. Durkheim's sociological concepts seem to be essential for the transfer of the concept of myth from the sphere of anthropology to that of human social life. In his opinion, myth was to be modeled on society and its institutions (Durkheim, 1990). According to Lévi-Strauss, the concept of myth has become a category of our reckoning, which is used arbitrarily to encapsulate in a single concept human attempts to explain natural phenomena, oral literary works passed down from generation to generation, philosophical concepts, or cases of linguistic processes having an impact on subjective consciousness (Lévi-Strauss, 1970: 17-18).

Myth as speech

Lévi-Strauss created a structural theory of myth according to which:

> From that point of view, it should be placed in the gamut of linguistic expressions at the end opposite to that of poetry, in spite of all the claims which have been made to prove the contrary. Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions; whereas the mythical value of myth is 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 anywhere in the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells. Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at 'taking off' from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling (Lévi-Strauss, 1970: 188-189).

The cited definition by Lévi-Strauss, in spite of the fact that it was founded on the grounds of anthropology, decidedly directed the concept of myth towards speech. Structuralism also resulted in the concept of myth by Roland Barthes myth, formulated from the linguistics point of view. In his essay *Myth Today*, Barthes writes bluntly: "What is a myth, today? I shall give at the outset a first, very simple answer, which is perfectly consistent with etymology: myth is a type of speech" (Barthes, 2000: 239). That said, for a word to become a myth, certain conditions must be met, since a myth is primarily a message, a form of communication. Therefore, it is Barthes' belief that myth cannot become an object, a concept or an idea, since its form becomes its mode of meaning. Hence, myth is not determined by means of the subject of its message, but by the way of expressing it, which means that myth has formal boundaries but no substantial boundaries. This leaves one merely one step away from Barthes's statement about myth's potential omnipresence: "Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things" (Barthes, 2000: 239).

Barthes, in his search for a definition of myth, went far beyond linguistics, seeking the essence of myth on the basis of a broad science of signs related to linguistic structuralism – semiology, which aims to study linguistic forms as such, regardless of their content. The structure of myth was presented by Barthes against the background of a semiological system assuming a relationship between two elements belonging to two different orders and being equivalents to each other: a signifier element (signifiant) and a signified element (signifié). The third element of a semiological system is a sign which constitutes the associative whole of the indicated elements. While defining the basic meaning of the indicated elements, he concluded, following Ferdinand de Saussure, that the signified element (signifier) is the concept, the signifier element is the acoustic image, while the sign is the relationship between the concept and the image. In myth, Barthes perceives this three-dimensional scheme subject to the restriction that, comprising a special system, it is built as a secondary semiological system based on the system of meanings that existed before it. In this interpretation, myth becomes a specific form of metalanguage (Barthes, 2000: 245-246). Therefore, for him, myth represents speech that defines its intention more than its literal meaning, and consequently mythical speech can become both an announcement and a statement.

To Barthes: "The myth has an overbearing, offensive character: derived from a historical concept, emerging directly from contingent references [...], it is looking for me: it has turned to me, I feel its willpower, it calls me to accept its effusive ambiguity" (Barthes, 2000: 256). As a result, myth becomes a stolen word, whose last – but particularly representative of its character – element, is the motivation to use it, assuming all its ambiguity. The creator of myth has the ability to accept an empty signified element, allowing it to be filled with the form of myth in an unambiguous manner, which enables,

if only, the propaganda use of myth referred to by the author. In another approach to myth, when its signified element becomes an indissoluble whole of form and meaning, myth acquires dynamism responding to the specific objectives of its structure so that its recipient reads it as a story that is both true and irrational (Barthes, 2000: 260-261).

A similar perception on the properties of myth was expressed by the American physicist and theologian, Ian G. Barbour, who for a significant part of his scientific career was researching the mutual relations between religion and science. He pointed to the achievements of the representatives of linguistic analysis describing various functions fulfilled by the language of religion. As the main functions, he mentioned: awakening and expressing commitment, presenting life patterns, declaring a specific course of action, expressing acceptance for a specific set of moral principles, forming self-awareness, and shaping a person's attitude towards his own life. Barbour recalled the opinion of researchers who draw specific attention to the importance of the non-cognitive functions of the language of religion, which despite being the opposite of the functions of the language of science, play a socially valuable role. In spite of the fact that, according to Barbour, religious beliefs are useful fictions that do not authorize the substantive assessment of the phenomena of the scientific world, they still play an important role in human social life. It follows from the above that this useful fiction is not made false, but according to him "they are neither true nor false" (Barbour, 1984: 9).

The picture is similar in the case of myth, as well is in various functions fulfilled by it, which is evident in the works of both anthropologists as well as linguists. For Barbour:

> Myth is a story expressing some aspect of cosmic order. Myths deliver means to describe and understand the experience. They make man aware of his identity and the structure of meaning, in which he participates. Archetypical events that have occurred in prehistoric or historical time provide role models for people today. Myths come alive in rituals that integrate the community on the level of a common past and joint goals. According to many interpreters, myths are neither true nor false – they are useful fictions that fulfill the aforementioned important social functions (Barbour, 1984: 9-10).

Myth as a symbol

Along with the subsequent cited definitions, approaching closer and closer to the research field inherent in politics, it is impossible to ignore the concept of myth established by the German philosopher and cultural expert, Ernst Cassirer. Cassirer described the issue of myth through the prism of the theory of symbolic forms, developed under the influence of neo-Kantianism, according to which the key to understanding man is the symbol, not only reason (Pawlik, 2016: 81-82). According to him, man does not live only in the physical world, but his activity, along with the development of culture, shifts more and more to the world of symbolic forms. As written by Cassirer in his *Essay on Man*, which represents a synthetic elaboration of his five-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, published in 1960: "Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe.

They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. All human progress in thought and experience refines and strengthens this net" (Cassirer, 1998: 69). With the on-going development of the cultural creative role of man, he has entered the world of linguistic forms, artistic images, religious and mythical symbols to such an extent that he is no longer able to understand the world around him without the mediation of this artificial means – the symbolic form. Like the aforementioned Plato, Cassirer saw a particular relationship between myth and language, as well as the poetry that emerged from it, which, entering the sphere of politics, becomes a dangerous myth-creating tool (Cassirer, 1998: 191-196).

Similar to the theory of symbolic forms described by Cassirer, its source in neo-Kantianism is the theory of myth of Hans Blumenberg, who in his critical commentary on Cassirer's work emphasized that the most essential aspect of his predecessor's theory of symbolic forms is what Cassirer has failed to express. In Blumenberg's belief, the theory of symbolic forms was excessively limited by the Enlightenment pattern of thought, which was to result from the acceptance of the historiosophical myth of inevitable progress. According to Blumenberg, unlike Cassirer's standpoint, the development of culture and science did not personify the continuous march from archaic myth towards the rational logos. Myth defined as a story was intended, not like an archaic myth, to explain the world and its origin, but to repeat it anew. According to Blumenberg, the rationality of myth stems from the effectiveness with which it leads to the most rational goal by means of an irrational form. Thus, the essence of myth is not based on its origin, but rather its function (Pawlik, 2016: 82-84). In the view of Bulmenberg: "The historical power of myth is not founded in the origins of its contents, in the zone from which it draws its materials and its stories, but rather in the fact that, in its procedures and 'form', it is no longer something else" (Blumenberg, 2009: 15-16).

The mimetic theory of myth by the French cultural anthropologist, philosopher, historian and literary critic, René Girard will be particularly helpful to understand the functioning of myths in both archaic and modern societies. Girard's theory focuses especially on the role of foundational violence in the formation of society. Its axis is a continuously imitated and repeated sacrificial ritual, which results in violence directed against individuals or social groups that are the source of the community's problems. This leads to the application of collective responsibility and persecution within society (Romejko, 2019: 141). According to Girard: "Basic ignorance is about violence; we associate this ignorance with religious thought. In contrast, religious phenomena contain real elements of knowledge about violence that we do not know" (Girard, 1993: 136). In the book *Violence and the Sacred*, he describes the relationship between the titular issues. Girard seeks the reasons for the constant persistence of religious phenomena in the modern world in an insufficient understanding of their essence (Girard, 1993: 136-140). In the subsequent *Scapegoat*, describing the mechanism of the sacrificial ritual, he invokes the words of Sophocles, according to which the most mythical aspect of myth is not what

stems from the literary character of it, but what derives its source from the persecutors' attitude towards their victims and the simple fact of persecution (Girard, 1991: 41).

The contemporary political myth

Although it seems to be a commonly accepted fact, the relationship between myth and politics, which has lasted since the ancient times, appears to be a kind of atavism from the contemporary perspective. And even if it were true, this use of the symbolic form of myth is not only the domain of the romantics of the late 18th and early 20th centuries or of later nationalist groups. Mythical images have influenced a number of ideologies and philosophical currents, including the philosophy of the Enlightenment. In *The Confessions*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau does not seem to hide the inspiration underlying his optimistic philosophy of man. It would seem that emotional considerations have played a significant role in shaping the philosophy of the author of *The Social Contract*.

Describing the circumstances of creating the *A Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind*, Rousseau confessed that while resting in Saint-Germain, not bothered with everyday worries, he could devote himself to forest wanderings and long meditation. In *The Confessions*, he wrote:

> The rest of the day, immersed in the forest, I searched and found a picture of the first times of mankind and traced their history. I pulled my hand down on people's little lies; I dared to reveal their nature in all nakedness, to follow the advances of times and the things that had distorted it, and by comparing the social man with the man of nature to point out in his supposed perfection the true source of his misery (Rousseau, 1978: 127).

Rousseau's assumptions that man enjoyed the greatest freedom in primitive societies collapsed in the face of later anthropological findings. Rousseau's hypothetical man was in fact inseparable from the symbolic order of his community, basing the social order on myth and the totemic system. This optimistic vision of human nature did not prevent Rousseau from categorically evaluating his contemporaries. Later on in *The Confessions*, he wrote directly about the years spent in Paris: "Having ceased to meet people, I ceased to despise them, having lost sight of the wicked, I ceased to hate them" (Rousseau, 1978: 159). Therefore, running away from people, he could optimistically assume that all human evil could only result from misery.

Georges Sorel, the creator of the concept of political myth, seemed to see man from a radically different perspective. For years, the French sociologist and engineer was close to revolutionary syndicalism. He was a strong-minded anti-democrat who, over time, shifted to positions close to French nationalism. Remaining under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, he was inclined to the pessimistic vision of man. In his main work, *Reflections on Violence*, he laid out his own concept of myth that was supposed to be a force stimulating workers to undertake a general strike. In a book entitled *The Illu-*

sions of Progress, which was a kind of anti-democratic manifesto, he questioned the existence of a universal will based on the common sense of each citizen. He believed that:

> This universal will is only possible because human thoughts in every age are dependent on certain ideas encountered in the pure state of eminently conscious individuals [...]. In the face of these ideas – which virtually no one is aware of and which are supposed to be shared by all – the real causes of human acts disappear, causes that can be at least in general terms perceived in social classes" (Sorel, 2019: 10-11).

Therefore, he reaches the conclusion that it is in democratic times that mankind is particularly influenced by "great magical words", which have replaced ideas or reason, putting in their place unjustified dogmas or views not supported by observation (Sorel, 2019: 10-11). While remaining a student of Karl Marx, he believed that the language of myth should avoid the use of overly specific formulas (Sorel, 2014: 139). The prevision of used notions was to replace the assumption that myth exists solely as a certain whole, so that its constituent parts are of value only when they emphasize the guiding idea contained in the whole structure (Sorel, 2014: 125).

Sorel explicitly rejected the opinion that the use of the forms of myth is effective only among primitive societies, seeing them as "the driving forces of the modern world" (Sorel, 2014: 33). He observed a particular reason for putting myth related to social relations in the place of the modern myth in the face of the decay of universal religiosity (Sorel, 2014: 33). In *Reflections on Violence*, he preached that in order to effectively apply myth in contemporary society: "Appeal must be made to collections of images which, taken together and through intuition alone, before any considered analyses are made, are capable of evoking the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society" (Sorel, 2014: 121). Sorel believed that syndicalists who focused their socialism on the dramatic vision of a general strike were well on the way to solving social issues. The general strike becomes the basic myth of Sorel's theory, which is designed to give strength to act by means of violence and revolution. Considerations about the future, in his opinion, are beyond reason; therefore, based on the past experience of mankind, one should use highly effective "constructions of an undefined future" (Sorel, 2014: 123).

Sorel realized that it would be obvious to the historians who were to follow him that the concept of a general strike was full of illusions, but he was optimistic that they would then be looking at a world that had ended. Therefore, the need for action prevents the revision of the accepted images that stimulate revolutionary action. Concluding the *Reflections on Violence*, he considered them a significant contribution to the discussion on the conditions for the development of the power of the working class, the main subject of which is to be "violence enlightened by the idea of the general strike" (Sorel, 2014: 260). The importance of Sorel's book was emphasized in the literary painting by Thomas Mann. The fragment of *Doctor Faustus* mentioned by Cassirer in *An Essay on Man* is worth a closer consideration, with particular attention to the role of myth in the con-

ditions of mass society (Cassirer, 1998: 9). The *Reflections on Violence*, which has been described as the book of the epoch, were in Mann's work a prophecy of a time when, under the influence of the masses, parliamentary discussion would become a means of no use in shaping political decisions. Fictitious myths will enter the discussion that, when communicated to citizens, release the political energy of the masses. The disturbing prophecy of this book was that: "Popular myths, or rather ones appropriate to the masses, will henceforth be the driving force of the political movement: fairy tales, insane fictions, idle inventions that may have absolutely nothing to do with truth, reason or science, and yet become a creative force conditioning life and history and thus turn out to be dynamic reality" (Mann, 1960: 481).

While Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, later presented to a wider audience in *An Essay on Man*, seems to focus on the philosophical and cultural aspects of myth, the last work *The Myth of the State* transfers reflection on myth to the ground of political science. Undoubtedly, this was impacted by the author's personal experiences. In 1933, after seizure of power by the Nazis, he first emigrated to Great Britain, and then to the United States. Cassirer warned against understating political myths. He recalled how back in the 1920s, he and his friends ridiculed the absurd – as they seemed at the time – of myths about the superiority of the Nordic race that laid the groundwork for the National Socialist movement. After a decade, Cassirer was forced to emigrate from the country, in which the initially ridiculed Nazis had seized power.

Already in *An Essay on Man*, myth was defined as a kind of primitive call and exclamation, as if on a battlefield, where a short message should be used to direct a strike in a specific direction (Cassirer, 1998: 199). That was the role myth was to play in politics as well. Cassirer emphasized that the beginning of the 20th century, and especially the interwar period, was marked by a change in political thought. He considered the emergence of a new force – the power of mythical thought – to be the most prominent feature of the development of modern political thought, an exceptionally dangerous and unpredictable quality. As he wrote: "The preponderance of mythical thought over rational thought in some of our modern systems is obvious" (Cassirer, 2006: 13). According to Cassirer, myth played a significant social role, objectifying human social experiences over individual ones (Cassirer, 2006: 61).

Of the greatest significance for the topic of the article is the last chapter of *The Myth of the State*, published after Cassirer's death, titled *The Techniques of Modern Political Myths*. Going beyond the romantic 19th-century concepts of myth, Cassirer stated that: "It took more than that to turn old political views into a strong and powerful political weapon. These views had to be adapted to the mind and comprehension of another audience. For this, a new tool was required – not only one of thought but also one of action. A new technique had to be developed" (Cassirer, 2006: 307). In the approach of Cassirer, the development of technology and mass media in the hands of the authorities was a kind of catalyst for the occurring processes. Owing to the development of me-

dia, the creation of political myths has accelerated and increased its effectiveness. The times of peace and economic stability were dominated by reason, and the democratic regime seemed undisputed. That said, the time of socio-economic destabilization was an excellent medium for myth because: "In all critical moments of human social life, rational forces, resisting the pressure of ancient myths, lose their self-confidence. In these moments, the epoch of myth returns" (Cassirer, 2006: 310). The last work by Cassirer, published posthumously in 1946, symbolically summed up his reflection on myth in the first half of the 20th century.

Reflection on the meaning of the political myth in the second half of the 20th century, due to the process of post-war stabilization, came closer to everyday life. Barthes, who has already been mentioned in the article, apart from defining myth in the field of linguistics also described its influence, ubiquitous in the modern world, on politics. In *Mythologies*, Barthes supplemented the previously mentioned semiological definition of myth, describing it as a "depoliticized speech" (Barthes, 2000: 277). He defines the role of myth as making savings, because:

> it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a worldwide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity; things appear to mean something by themselves (Barthes, 2000: 277-278).

In considering the role of myth on the political left, Barthes, unlike Sorel, believed that revolutionary language should exclude the use of myth. In the language of the revolution, he sees the "language of man as a producer" which, being a "language-object", has an advantage over metalanguage – the language of myth (Barthes, 2000: 281). Defining the left-wing opposition to bourgeois ideology, he emphasizes that: "The bourgeoisie disguises itself as the bourgeoisie and thus creates myth; the revolution reveals itself as a revolution and thus abolishes the myth" (Barthes, 2000: 281). While Barthes claims the existence of myth on the left, he considers it irrelevant unless it is based on a catalog of bourgeois myths. Considering the imprecision of the term "left", he emphasizes the rare occurrence of left-wing myths, which are always artificial, recreated, resulting in their awkwardness (Barthes, 2000: 281-284). The example provided by him was the Stalinist myth which, embodied in its exaggerated form, emphasized its depoliticization and fully revealed its structure.

Barthes believed that the right-wing political environment was favourable to myth, where, as he wrote, the most common mythical forms were revealed. He believed that, on the right side of the political scene, myth took on a special meaning since it was: "Well fed, sleek, expansive, garrulous, it invents itself ceaselessly" (Barthes, 2000: 284). He saw the reason for the disproportion in the number of left-wing and right-wing myths in the opposition of the oppressed man to the oppressor. Barthes preached that the oppressed man had only the word of his emancipation. When in turn the oppressor has

the advantage, his word seems to have exclusivity for metalanguage through the wealth of myths or its ambiguity. "The oppressed makes the world, he has only an active, transitive (political) language; the oppressor conserves it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is Myth. The language of the former aims at transforming, of the latter at eternalizing" (Barthes, 2000: 284). From this perspective, the multitude of political myths on the right seems obvious, ranging from myths about order and social hierarchy, through ones that form national identity, to myths that underpin racist and xenophobic ideologies.

The mechanism of updating old myths by adapting them to current conditions, as described by Anna Siewierska-Chmaj, is of fundamental importance for contemporary political myths. The author of the book *Myth in politics. The functions and mechanisms of updating* confirms the thesis that the most important thing is not the content of myth, but the way it is politically updated (Siewierska-Chmaj, 2016: 13). In view of the specificity of the present day, the 21st century is almost the same as the 19th century in terms of the saturation of politics with myths. As written by Siewierska-Chmaj, we are currently dealing with both minor myths and great mythical narratives. We can point to contemporary "mythical heroes playing political roles", as well as old myths that appear in new functions (Siewierska-Chmaj, 2016: 263). Like in the case of Sorel, myth becomes first and foremost a tool for designing the future, because:

> A political myth almost always represents the image of a better world, of unfulfilled potential, and as such fits in with most people's desire to improve their fate. The mythological costume of political promises makes them more believable. [...] Myths create a sense of community that is lacking in an individualized world. Finally, myths reveal the meaning of human existence in the context of ontological order, an order that man needs so badly. (Siewierska-Chmaj, 2016: 263).

The role of myths in contemporary politics is similarly perceived by the Polish semiotic, Marcin Napiórkowski, who, following Lévi-Strauss, describes myth as a "logical machine for removing contradictions" (Napiórkowski, 2018: 42). According to Napiórkowski, the key to understanding myths is not the analysis of their content, but the perception of mythical logic, which is not included in the content but in the structure of myth (Napiórkowski, 2018: 112). In his book *Turbopatriotism*, he states that: "Modern politics is a mythological system in the most basic sense of the term. Similarly, as myths of the ancient Greeks known to all from school or the beliefs of the indigenous peoples of South America studied by anthropologists, politics provides its recipients with something that could be called a manual for reality" (Napiórkowski, 2019: 201).

Conclusions

The executed analysis of selected definitions of myth representative for scientific disciplines close to the question of mythology, and subsequently the most important definitions of the political myth, have permitted putting forward a variety of observations.

The first overall conclusion is that the definitions of political myth appearing in literature do not contradict those previously formulated in other disciplines organically related to the concept of myth, such as anthropology or religious studies, while shifting the emphasis to the function of designing the future. The political myth may benefit from religion or history, submitting to the process of updating for the needs of the present, which does not alter the fact that the modern myth is eager to take the place of declining religious thought or historical knowledge. A completely new myth can be equally effective if it is created according to the rules of this mythical logic, intentionally and with the use of a particular structure.

Using the interdisciplinary review of the definitions of myth formulated so far, it is possible to attempt to create a definition of a contemporary political myth. The contemporary political myth takes the form of a story, a word – a symbol, image or personal pattern. As a symbolic form, it shall not be falsified; it is neither true nor false. It derives its existence from the social function performed by it and the intention in which it is used. The contemporary political myth may stem from religion or history, but it can also be designed and created from scratch. It influences the creation of identity, a sense of community, and also explains the world and the laws that govern it. By giving models of behaviour, it shapes moral attitudes. It has the ability to unify the worldview as part of specific social groups. The contemporary political myth is involved in the process of designating social enemies, both external and internal. It has the ability to induce and direct political violence at the same time explaining the legitimacy of its use. It encourages sacrifice for professed political views. In this shape, the contemporary political myth serves as a motivation to take political action. In the conditions of the modern information society, especially in the case of socio-economic destabilization, it can exert a considerable influence on the behaviour of people who remain under its influence. Therefore, to use the aforementioned term provided by Mann, the contemporary political myth, despite its irrational nature, has an impact on society, becoming a dynamic reality (Mann, 1960: 481).

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Abstract: The article attempts to form a definition of contemporary political myth. This definition is formulated against the background of concepts that have been presented so far in sciences close to the topic of myth, such as religious studies, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, philosophy, and cultural studies. The contemporary political myth becomes an independent form which, not contradicting the definitions of myth in other scientific disciplines, is transferred, updated or created from scratch in order to liberate and direct the political energy inherent in society. The contemporary political myth becomes an unverifiable fiction which, through referring to images and symbols, often replaces a discussion or rational arguments. Despite its irrational nature, it has a distinguishable impact on the society and the political activities and behaviour undertaken within it.
Keywords: political myth, myth, philosophy of symbolic forms, reflections on violence