

THE RELEVANCE OF POLITICAL MYTHS. THE SAVIOUR MYTH FROM A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

Ariana Guga

PhD Student, "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to establish the role and relevance of political myths in the context of an efficient political analysis, but also it will explore the Saviour myth from a Romanian perspective. By accepting the fact that the political world operates with symbols it becomes clear that there is an obvious narrative structure that sets the guidelines. We will demonstrate that beyond the pragmatic political approach we all witness, there is also a mythical one. First, the paper will focus on clearing a grey area that surrounds these mechanisms, proving that the idea of a political myth is even more relevant nowadays. Then, we will build a multidisciplinary foundation that will allow us to explore the Romanian political environment, but also to examine it from the perspective of the Saviour myth. Finally, we will prove that cultural significance is key to understanding political myth and the way it shapes the ever-changing political world.

Keywords: Political myth, the Saviour myth, Romanian politics, cultural significance, multidisciplinary.

Today's political world can be summed up in one particular word: analysis. There is an ongoing battle for the most accurate and complex analysis, and there are countless ways to obtain it. A relevant opinion has a kind of silent authority that addresses not only the public, but also the political actors that stand in the limelight. This process can be seen as a methodical procedure to unravel political realities, but there is also an undeniable symbolic lair that most of the time gets swept under the rug.

When it comes to symbols, myths and meaning in general, political analysts have a rather romantic approach to it. Still, much of what is seen and perceived can be explained through myths. They create an intricate web of meanings and liaisons, and they offer a philosophical approach that is often neglected in favor of a more pragmatic perspective. In a world where political meaning is scarce, studying Romania's political scene through the myth of the Saviour is a much needed paradigm that deserves to be explored.

Myth in today's world

Despite the necessity to define or even redefine the meaning of political myth, there is also another observation that needs to be made. Despite numerous means of communication, the act itself is left unfulfilled, social media and the virtual world being a mere consolation for the lack of substance, a substitute that only deepens the frustrations that have emerged in today's world. That being said, it becomes clear that this might mark the rebirth of myths. Such is the case for political myths. "The complexity of modern societies, the rapid change that they have undergone by transcending the individual's space of experience, has rendered more acute the need for a symbolic mediation of political experience"¹.

Still, why should we be concerned with myths when the public and political space is being fragmented by issues that often exceed our power of understanding? The answer can be found in the question itself. Since we can agree that storytelling is a source of profound truths and even hope, we must see that the political world can benefit substantially from this form of human knowledge. "In other words, a successful political myth is one that provides not only an answer to 'why are we together?' but also to the question of what it is that we do when we decide to govern ourselves. For a political myth to survive, it must be able to adapt through periods of change; this is especially the case of foundational myths."²

Arguably, the political world is in dire need for meaning and legitimacy, and there is no doubt that political myths can provide both of them.³ Furthermore, it is essential to understand

¹ Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 132

² Vincent Della Sala, *Political Myth, Mythology and the European Union* in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2010 Volume 48. Number 1, p. 7

³ *Ibidem*, p. 5

that myths can be perceived as a communication system, even a message⁴, and because of this liaison, myth has its roots in semiotics.⁵ Even so, there are few who show a true interest in the matter; it is true that political myths also mean embarking on a journey that defies superficiality, and it can seem a daunting task for many, but the rewards are considerable.

If we manage to have a strong grip on what makes and breaks the basic stories on which the political world stands on, then we have the chance to build a strong political analysis and also a relevant political strategy. In order to do so we must follow a series of simple steps. First, we must acknowledge the fact that myths tell a story that revolves around identity, and that means cultural, political, even psychological identity. “if we want to identify how a society chooses to describe its origins, its reasons for being and definitions of belonging, we need to look at myths and mythologies. This is because it is myths that make events understandable to individuals and for societies. (...) Arguably, as modern and postmodern societies increasingly rely on rational modes of organization and assembling knowledge, the need for myth diminishes. However, it is precisely at times when social complexity increases that there is a greater need for societies to tell stories that make sense of what seems confusing and unconnected.”⁶

Second, we must be able to differentiate between myths and symbols, a necessary step if we truly want to build a sturdy foundation for political myths. “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.”⁷ In this case, symbols are the middle person, a means to an end, which is why we cannot perceive them as one. Furthermore, by doing so, we gain not only political understanding (through political myths), but also cultural depth.

Last but not least, we should put political myths into perspective. By that we do not mean focusing on the past or the future; simply put, we should follow the power of example, and in this particular case we should keep in mind that the European Union is built on political myths.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mitologii*, Iași: Institutul European, 1997, p. 235

⁵ Ibidem, p. 237

⁶ Vincent Della Sala, *Political Myth, Mythology and the European Union* in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2010 Volume 48. Number 1, p. 4

⁷ Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 4

“Primary myths, such as the story that the EU was responsible for peace, prosperity and democracy in Europe, tell us who we are and why we are together.”⁸

This is an appropriate example mainly because it forces us to remember that myths are built on the bases of historic and scientific data⁹, but also because we can associate myth with ideology¹⁰. The result is that we cannot ignore the connection between myth and power; after all there is nothing more powerful than the spoken word.

The Saviour Myth: A Romanian perspective

Before we dive in the subject matter, we must first understand how much political myths weigh. Although it may seem like a futile exercise, it will bring to surface a series of key elements with which we can better explore the myth of the Saviour and the way it is seen from Romania’s political stage.

The connection between the political world and communication is usually represented as a profitable circle of power and information, but there is a shared connection that most people ignore. Journalism and myth are bound by a functional and cognitive liaison, which ultimately leads to a basic need: storytelling and the desire to bring meaning to the things that surround us¹¹. Once we understand this facet we can have a better grasp on the power of political myths and the reason they exist in the first place.

“Political actors need to feel that not only are they the subject of political myth, but its creators and agents as well. Political communities are part of a myth-making process before they are part of one that makes history.”¹² This translates not only into the desire to leave a mark on society, but also into the desire to be part of the making process of that mark. Ultimately, political myths are both a question and an answer, as they derive from a nation’s identity. There is a struggle to explain the growth of a society through symbols and myths, the most powerful narrative there is. Still, when it comes to political myths, things get more complicated simply

⁸ Vincent Della Sala, *Political Myth, Mythology and the European Union* in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2010 Volume 48. Number 1, p.6

⁹ Roger Caillois, *Mitul și omul*, București: Nemira, 2000, p. 15

¹⁰ Mihai Coman, *Mass media, mit și ritual. O perspectivă antropologică*, Iași: Polirom, 2003, p. 101-102

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 99

¹² Vincent Della Sala, *Political Myth, Mythology and the European Union* in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2010 Volume 48. Number 1, p. 8

because they tell a story about power, and also a story about the greater good that people wish to see in those who achieve elements of political power.

As suggested in a previous paragraph, political myths give structure and meaning, and yet they are extremely difficult to define, mainly because they do not belong to a singular organism of interpretation, they are rooted in the essence of society, communication and evolution. “I argue that a political myth is best defined as the work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group (or society), so to speak, make significance of their experience and deeds. In this sense, political myths are a normal component of modern political life, together with ideology and utopias, with which they sometimes overlap but from which, however, they must be kept distinct.”¹³ This is the best logic through which we can understand political myths, but we must also keep in mind that they are an evolving force, they are not set in stone, as opposed to political rituals, and that is the key to their meaning and survival: “political rituals must be kept unchanged to be effective, whereas political myth, insofar as it provides significance within perpetually changing circumstances, must remain open to the possibility of being renegotiated according to new experiences and needs. To put it plainly, a political myth expresses itself through variants, the political ritual through fixed rules.”¹⁴

Evidently, the openness showed by myths does not represent a sign of weakness; on the contrary, it is a trademark of survival and strength. Also, it is a reminder of the fact that political myths are not a novelty in the political field. In order to have a better understanding on the matter, we should reiterate that there are “four main fundamental political myths identified in literature are Unity, the Saviour, the Conspiracy Theory and the Golden Age. Their origins have been traced back to religious myths and fiction creations. These myths remain valid, as they are independent of political ideology though they may be used by political elites and adapted to fit the needs of their respective ideologies.”¹⁵

The Saviour is emblematic for the Romanian political scene, one that has survived not only a traumatic Communist experience, but also a difficult transition toward a functional

¹³ Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 133

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 158

¹⁵ Cosmina Tanasoiu, *Post-Communist Political Symbolism: New myths-same old stories? An analysis of Romanian political mythology* in *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 5 - No 1 – 2005, p. 116

democracy. Romania's political history has created the perfect context for a Saviour, someone that flourishes in certain circumstances, that represents a social image of hope, nostalgia and faith in the future.¹⁶ Even more, what needs to be taken into account is the fact that the Saviour identifies his destiny with the faith of the nation¹⁷ and that is possibly the strongest bond that can be forged between a politician and his country.

“A nation left to the mercy of history, with its borders under threat by faceless enemies, is in great need of a Saviour. Buried deep down, there is an expectation of a new Messiah capable of delivering the country from its predicaments. The Saviour is a powerful archetype, as it carries a promise and resonates with the audience's hopes for a better future. The myth of the Saviour, which is not limited to a person, is important because of the logic that supports it. Presidential campaigns and governments' justification of their policy of pursuing EU accession have all been based upon a promise of a somewhat miraculous deliverance.”¹⁸

It is precisely the notion of “miraculous deliverance” that is at the roof of the Saviour, but it also a sign of political and social identity, as it speaks volumes about the people who demand it. There is no denying that every nation could ask for a Saviour at one point or another in its political evolution, but in Romania's case it is definitely a cultural symbol, and it also gives meaning to a very demanding transition. “In post-communism, the functions of myths are twofold: covering the ideological vacuum and facilitating transition. Post-communist societies have lost their known system of references, and traditional ideologies and political dichotomies cannot account for the world around.”¹⁹

What sets the Saviour apart from other political myths is versatility. The Saviour can be found everywhere; it does not have a well-defined identity or form, as it does not have to be impersonated by one individual.²⁰ There is also a sense of community that comes to life since it is essential to accept and understand that each nation has its Saviours²¹, but we should keep in mind that there is a type of cultural predisposition that creates patterns which ultimately allow

¹⁶ Raoul Girardet, *Mituri si mitologii politice*, Iasi: Institutul European, 1997, p. 54-55

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 60

¹⁸ Cosmina Tanasoiu, *Post-Communist Political Symbolism: New myths-same old stories? An analysis of Romanian political mythology* in *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 5 - No 1 – 2005, p. 126

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 115

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 127

²¹ Lucian Boia, *Istorie si mit in constiinta romaneasca*, Bucuresti: Humanitas, 2006, p. 383-384

the perpetuation of the Saviour. In the case of Romania, this could easily be translated into a political and social script that changes actors, as each century and each political episode had their own Saviours: “The myth of the Saviour, one of the post-communist “fantasies of salvation,” is a constant presence in the political mythology, perpetuated in time despite the change of political regimes. In twentieth-century Romania, we passed from Marshall Antonescu, through the Captain and King Michael, to the Most Beloved Leader. The omnipotent figures from which deliverance is expected achieve particular significance and are credited with quasi-divine powers. During communism, the official propaganda conferred such power on the Party Leader, the Father of the Nation, the genius of the Carpathians, the most beloved son of the nation.”²² As we can see, the pattern was created a long time ago, and it evolved with the needs and desires of a suffocated nation, one that longed for freedom and hope, but those needed an impersonator, they could not be brought to life without a human expression. In the post-communist era, this expression also changed since there was no “monopoly on the role any more: each side of the political arena has its own contender (During the 1992 presidential campaign Iliescu’s supporters chanted, “Iliescu appears and the sun rises,” while in 1990, in the University Square the anti-Iliescu demonstrators intoned, “Monarchy will save Romania”).”²³ This particular point of view sheds light on a rather uncomfortable and difficult argument, one that states that political myths are a two-faced coin. One reveals the use of myths for a better understanding of the political scene, while the other can be easily manipulated into becoming a scapegoat that ultimately leads to a plateau effect, and taking action becomes a rather daunting task.²⁴

Despite this grey area, the Saviour is a symbol of hope and resurrection, and this has been proven with every presidential election. The arrival of President Emil Constantinescu was also an attempt to take a different road, but the image of President Traian Băsescu was probably emblematic for the portrayal of the Saviour. It is in moments of great social tension that the Saviour thrives, and they can only be portrayed by strong leaders. The results of the strategies

²² Cosmina Tanasoiu, *Post-Communist Political Symbolism: New myths-same old stories? An analysis of Romanian political mythology* in *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 5 - No 1 – 2005, p. 126

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 126

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 128

used during his mandate may be debatable, but it is hard to deny that he impersonates all the traits that correspond with the Saviour.

Furthermore, there is also a change in the way we perceive political myths, and that applies to the Saviour as well. The growths of technology and the numerous means of communication lack in meaning and they seem to symbolize only one thing, and that is loneliness. In a world where we talk a lot, but say very little, the political world is also in dire need of strong, significant messages. When they appear to be missing or they do not fulfill social needs, political myths are often the only reliable source of an in-depth analysis.

This is why no matter how turbulent the Romanian political scene may be, it is rather comforting to find and explore a side that is usually left behind, and by that we mean the mythical one, expressed through the image of the Saviour. Also, by accepting its existence, we may very well come to some conclusions regarding the needs, hopes, desires and even fears of the people. Simply put, a political myth can draw a very accurate sketch of a nation. Is it always efficient to return to the Saviour in order to have a better grasp on Romanian politics? No, it is not, but myths, and in this case the Saviour can be a useful political and social instrument, one that has deep cultural roots, and therefore it can establish a pattern that is connected to reactions and attitudes rather than actions, and that is why we can have even a partial view of what is the nation's psychological and political profile.

Conclusions

The quest for relevance and meaning is more present than ever, and political myths create a powerful mechanism which may offer those sought-after values to the political scene. Their relevance is impossible to deny, much like the need for storytelling and powerful content, elements coveted by each individual and community. By establishing the difference between myths and symbols, and by arguing in favor of their adaptability and versatility, we can have a clearer perspective about what they are and what functions they cannot fulfill. By choosing the myth of the Saviour and by presenting him through a Romanian perspective we were able to expand our understanding and our analysis about political myths, but also we were able to explore political, cultural and social factors that can be observed through the Saviour.

Conducting a political analysis based on political myths it is not an easy task, but it is necessary if we want to achieve a more complex perspective or even a more accurate one. This is why the Saviour is an excellent example, as it offers the parameters for a structured portrayal of a nation's identity, in this case Romania. Finally, we must understand that myths shape the world in which we live in, including the political one. It is our responsibility to understand and respect them, only by doing so we will be able to reach real content and true meaning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- 1.Barthes, Roland, *Mitologii*, Iași: Institutul European, 1997
- 2.Boia, Lucian, *Istorie si mit in constiinta romaneasca*, Bucuresti: Humanitas, 2006
- 3.Bottici Chiara, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007
- 4.Caillois, Roger, *Mitul și omul*, București: Nemira, 2000
- 5.Coman Mihai, *Mass media, mit și ritual. O perspectivă antropologică*, Iași: Polirom, 2003
- 6.Della Sala, Vincent, *Political Myth, Mythology and the European Union* in Journal of Common Market Studies, 2010 Volume 48. Number 1
- 7.Girardet, Raoul, *Mituri si mitologii politice*, Iasi: Institutul European, 1997
- 8.Tanasoiu, Cosmina, *Post-Communist Political Symbolism: New myths-same old stories? An analysis of Romanian political mythology* in Romanian Journal of Political Science, Vol 5 - No 1
— 2005