

TEN CONTEMPORARY MYTHS

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Abstract. Starting with the “inseparable opposites” of Denis de Rougement (image-substance, values-facts, belief-knowledge, hedonism-stoicism, force-intelligence, politics as power-politics as program, individual-society, right-responsibility, specific difference-common gender), which assumes the search of a permanent equilibrium, the study signal the risk of the breach of this relation in the contemporary thought. When the recessive term (according to Mircea Florian) strive for supremacy going so far as suppressing the second element of the couple, the risk of myth occurs (idol in Bacon’s expression), which can endanger the rational and productive thinking.

Myth has various connotations. Let us leave aside the mythologies regarding gods’ lives and cosmic myths. Let us consider the most actual meaning, resorting to a dictionary: “*a belief or a subject of belief, whose truth or reality is uncritically accepted*”. Not all concepts acquire the rank of myth. This rank requires a large audience, it is a collective phenomenon and, as compared to its competitors, it may become prevalent. Almost all myths derive from an unbalanced dichotomy, in which a concept is trying to submit or absorb its partner.

The problem is ancient, the question being asked is what is altering man’s capacity to know and correctly act in the world. Bacon identified four erroneous manners of looking at nature. *Idola Tribus* were the inherited prejudices, *Idola Specus* were the prejudices of his own personality extracted from the unconscious, *Idola Fori* were the idols of the market, which is influencing our mind through its debates (the Forum); and *Idola Theatri* were everything that came to us through the systems of thought. I am inclined to embed the ten myths among the last two of Bacon’s idols.

1. IMAGE

If we characterized today’s people as “*children of the image*”, we would not exaggerate in any way whatsoever. There are more TV sets than refrigerators *per capita* in today’s world. The hours spent watching TV come third in terms of the time dedicated to certain activities, after the time occupied by the job and the time spent sleeping. The technical miracle creates a second world for the human being: the world in images, wars broadcasted live, news about events that range from shattering or scary incidents to catastrophes, accidents, heroes, as well as sports and arts celebrities. Our concern comes from the fact that such information

surreptitiously borrows the advertising procedures that invaded TV transmissions up to saturation. Indeed, these procedures have the self-confessed purpose of convincing the buyer to buy certain products. Not very different from that goal, news transmissions aim at convincing the audience of the veracity of certain facts and beliefs. What the audience sees are sequences that go through numerous editorial selection and censorship grids, guided by the intention to form and propagate certain opinions and beliefs. Consequently, the images we see are nothing but an apparent reality, covering and hiding the true reality. Short and fast, TV flashes will not leave to the audience any room for wondering: what is there behind the image?!

The third dimension is missing in this film-based world: depth, which should be critically and rationally reconstructed, leaving aside any emotional contents created by the shock intended by its authors.

The result is troublesome. It is a serious decrease in human beings' capacity to question themselves and to know the reality and its problems. As an illustration, we will quote the case of a minister or of a politician. We find him with a huge file on the table, with regard to a problem that needs to be addressed, in the company of an image counselor (at its right side) and of a public relations counselor (at its left side). There is a slight chance that the file at issue be still open; however, the question dominating the consultation will be: what image does one position or another create for him? No wonder that so many internal solutions are merely cosmetic, while the international ones are converted into long protraction periods, marked by long-mediated diplomatic gesticulations (counseling strategies, launch of negotiations, mediations, etc.) quite right for the evening news.

I do not know yet the disclosures that are to be revealed by the great topic regarding the way in which our brain works. However, there is no doubt that the human mind working with written texts (the Gutenberg Galaxy), which are inseparably connected with critical analysis, works otherwise than by combining hasty impressions collected from images. The knowledge of facts and one's capacity to solve his problems, be they worldwide or local, were seriously prejudiced by the preeminence and extremism of the second path.

2. VALUE

If a university diploma dissertation or the title of a work contains the word "value", it is considered as up-to-date according to the intellectual fashion placing "value" above other concepts. It is obvious that value cannot be separated from reason. To make a decision, we need goals that we rank according to the value we are attaching to them in the order of certain utilities measuring our degree of interest. Value is an attributable measure, a label, a ranking on a scale of values in

terms of moral (better, worse), esthetics (more beautiful and less beautiful), truth (more or less certain). Language is playing tricks on us: the value turns from adjective to noun and undergoes a reification operation. Values are only graded scales on which we are continuously moving, according to circumstances. They do not exist in an absolute state. Thought compels us to treat them as “labels” to apply on things, events, interests, a quality of everything that surrounds us.

The conversion of value into myth and absolute criterion in terms of opinions and politics is still an escape from reality, in which our age seems to excel. Here are the consequences of such conversion. The fact that science and technology generated a trend of criticism through an evil use of their results made the attack be compressed into the statement “*science dealt with facts and ignored values*”.

A seminar organized at the Stockholm Nobel Institute was entitled in the '70s: “*The Place of Values in a World of Facts*”. It is possible for technologies to be elaborated on a factual basis, notwithstanding the risks to population (excessive mechanization and chemization). However, it is one thing to reset the balance of facts/values and it is a completely different thing to proclaim the supremacy of values and to refuse to analyze facts. In our time, a seminar should treat the following topic: “*Facts in a World of Values*”. Internationally, conflicts came to be explained by arguments reduced to values: “*We are fighting for our threatened values*”, “*we have a duty to ensure the triumph of our values*”. In this situation, values became simple standards or slogans justifying violent clashes and wars.

Serious political doctrines were simplified up to the statement according to which “*Satan represents evil*”, as Satan is the opposite of the good divinity. In an absolute state, values become themselves dichotomic, opposite, in a good Manichean tradition. Universities suddenly discovered that they neglected ethics and morals and they set up new academic courses. However, the efforts to elucidate the cause for all “evil” in the world and the means for curing it were not intensified.

3. BELIEF

The Greek philosophy left us as inheritance the problem of distinguishing between “knowledge” and “opinion” (or belief). Indeed, Socrates (through Plato) requests us to make a distinction between these two concepts. In his *Theaetetus*, he places opinions on the last level of knowledge. To be knowledge, opinions must be true and accompanied by reason (argument, evidence, proof). Since that moment in time, the inexorable progress of science introduced rigorous criteria to justify and validate a scientific assertion. However, please note that science considers its own sentences as relative truths, therefore subject to amendment, and has no claim to an absolute truth. Yet, today’s contemporary ideas advance extremist statements. After suppressing the concepts of truth, objectivity and conformity to reality,

postmodernism considers that a “*scientific assertion is an opinion that meets consensus*” (we may wonder how could we recognize the quality of a theorem: by demonstration or by vote?) Philosophical debates did not cease and an entire branch of the theory of knowledge deals with them. One thing is certain: mistaking opinions for knowledge, incorporating the last ones in the category of the first ones is a step towards the myth of belief. No one denies the role of opinions in the life of the society and in the life of the individual. But allowing their being mistaken for knowledge leads to huge errors.

Do you know so or do you believe so? Do you know or do you believe that you know? These are the key-questions. The consequences of confusion are dramatic. The head of a state declares that the enemy state has mass destruction weapons. Later on, this statement proves to be false. The state’s head tries to explain himself: *I honestly believed that the other state had mass destruction weapons*. And most of the public excuses him: he honestly believed, he admits so. The prevalence of belief was so much accepted, that the participation of a country in a war based on “*I believed I knew*” is ignored.

If we take out pre-scientific ages of mankind, we can hardly find any historical periods that are so invaded by beliefs dressed in scientific clothes, from astrology to predictions, from paramedical treatment to miracles and sorcery. Even the experts are serially producing, upon request, forged reports and erroneous solutions. Since the distinction between true and false is obliterated, we are facing an increase in abuses and frauds.

4. CULTURE

For those praising culture as a noble and generous component of a society’s base, it is hard to admit that it can be a “myth”, *i.e.* a source with great authority for truths that are uncritically admitted. How can anyone touch it, when it grants identity, specificity, and personality to a community and its members, when its field encompasses language, history, values, beliefs, and habits that are incessantly transmitted over time from parents to children?

And yet, cultures have a property that makes them be attracted or used for doubtful and risky purposes. They can raise their passion in the defense of their own identities to high temperatures and, even, arson. In particular, two large classes of cultures, which are systems of belief (and opinions), religions and ideologies, are compatible with such a slide into intolerance. History records religious wars (inter-religions and intra-religions) and ideological wars (national and international). However, now, at the start of a new century, statistics show us that, out of approximately 30 conflicts that occur on a yearly basis, five sixths proclaim themselves to be identity-related, also invoking the other elements of

cultures: history and territory, language and beliefs, ethnical or nationalist motives. And its own incandescent values cumber the file of any bloody conflict.

Another confusion surfaces at the same time with the myth of culture, taken as an exclusivist criterion of reading history. There are more than 120 definitions of culture, but no other definition supports analysis, as that distinguishing between cultures and civilization. The criterion is simple: the (unique) products of civilization have a universality dimension. They are investigated everywhere in the world, they are completed, applied using the same measurement units, notwithstanding the cultures that generated them. Locomotives, airplanes, trucks, roads, banks, hospitals, pharmacies, factories, trading companies, all of them look alike and work in the same way anywhere in the world. Science opened the road to universality; technology and, then, market economies followed. Civilization is, thus, the main integrating factor of mankind. Cultures (in the plural) remain, through their vocation of specificity, anchored in the area where they were born. Each one is listening to its own logic and methods. In fact, they are together forever (cultures and civilization), being, according to Denis de Rougemont's well-chosen expression, "*inseparable opposites*".

The confusion between terms is old and persistent. For the French people, civilization embeds culture, for the German people, it is the other way round. An ambiguity is maintained in the English. When Huntington writes on the cover "*The Clash of Civilizations*", he begins the first chapter by saying that wars are resulting from the clash of cultures. When Toynbee undertook a classification of civilizations (counting more than 20), he based it on the cultural criterion of religions. In the German translation, it appeared as a "*theory of cultures*". Later on, in a speech held in India, Toynbee said that, although great empires had great religions and universal ambitions, they could not create a "*single human family*", but, currently, technology provides promising means to reach this ideal. In the end, Toynbee thus identified the sought integrating factor, not within cultures, but within the technical component of civilization.

This is a great lesson for extremist culturalists. Using only their tools and the language of their cultures, however penetrated by humanism could such be, the problems encountered by mankind and the search for proactive solutions for a worthy and rewarding life are side by side in the civilization they are denigrating so much.

5. HEDONISM

It is not difficult to notice that today's widely embraced doctrine is that of pleasure raised at the rank of a dominant myth, especially among the young people. Freud stated a "*principle of pleasure*" asserting that there is an instinct for avoiding pain and for seeking pleasure. We cannot dismiss it when speaking of the human nature. History brings a major correction. The periods of upsurge and

growth are connected with a philosophy that sets ahead of pleasure the effort and the striving, the action and the will to take the action. The dominant doctrine of wise emperors was stoicism, preaching austerity and indifference to pleasure. The death of Seneca at Nero's order in 65 is the death of a stoic. We could take the preeminence of pleasure as the certain sense of decadence. It is true that, after periods of tension and war, the taste of pleasure was refreshing, restoring (The Crazy Twenties). However, it is not less true that, if it follows a period of sober construction, it is the certain herald of dissolution and decadence.

Contemporary hedonism comes after a period of economic upsurge and sustained effort. It may be taken as a sign for fatigue and saturation and, in any case, it encourages *per se* the flight from effort and sustained work. Society's life becomes a perpetual life of feasts, anniversaries, commemorations and celebrations, considered as image-creating "events" creating image and being the favorite topic of mass media. Thus is inaugurated a climate noxious to the formation of youth, the first victim of hedonism. What is excessively imposed is the short-term "*carpe diem*". Life as a pursuit of long-term ideals is abhorred by young generations.

Life-based philosophies (Schopenhauer: life is will, will is effort, effort is pain, life is pain) are rejected in favor of existentialist philosophies. Not the same thing happens in the poor and disadvantaged regions of the world, where the daily food is the sole concern; neither does it happen in Asia's emerging economies where societies seem to be electrified with the effort of development.

6. FORCE

According to sociologists, resorting to force is only the fourth way to make an individual or an entity act or behave as the decision-maker wants, coming after persuasion, incentive and reporting to general norms. Although condemned by the Charter of the United Nations, signed by all states, resorting to force is dominant in the world policy, at the start of the century. Conceived as a multilateral authority for assuring security, UN is defied by unilateral doctrines by means of which states can decide by themselves when and where to forcefully intervene, be it preventive or preemptive. The hope to put a stop to wars at the end of the cold war was refuted by the outburst of local, ethnical, religious, identity-related wars and by the baffled attempts to stop them from the outside. The arms' race knows another refreshment, as indicated by the military budgets of the great powers. Nuclear weapons proliferated and they say that the expectation that such weapons will not be used is lower than the expectation existing during the cold war. The peaceful ways to settle conflicts, indicated in the UN Charter, prove to be incapable to extinguish old conflicts or to prevent the outburst of new conflicts. This is a bleak picture, going well with the phrase "*le siècle est mal parti*".

Force became a myth. Its ineffectiveness is more than demonstrated by history and by the ancient wisdom: whoever uses it will become its victim. There is also another more important argument against this myth, imposing itself with the power of evidence and of recent experience. The states' military strength recorded a significant increase by means of arms' technologization. When impressive levels of technical improvement were reached, it was noted that armies become inefficient, in guerilla wars or in wars based on the individual action, those in which old strategies do not work, when the land disappears, when the enemy cannot be defined or located, and when the enemy resorts to unconventional means, alien from any Clausewitzian rationality.

States continue to improve their armies with expensive armors in which death lies hidden like in Rilke's poem, in the form of an unavoidable strike. For the moment, we cannot hope that, by applying a simple economic and cost-efficient reasoning, states should give up arming. We will only point out that theoreticians demonstrated that wars are preceded by a fever of arming. Disarming, as a topic for negotiations, existed during the cold war, but was stricken out from the current agenda. The myth of Mars causes one of the most worrisome prospects of our century.

7. POLITICS

It is sufficient to watch the news dominating the public space to understand that we assist everywhere in the world to the predominance of politics. The struggles between parties took the proportion of a relentless competition, watched in the same manner as a sports match, in details, by an audience trapped by misinformation and seductive image. Why did this precious idea of the Greek philosophers to discover that politics representing the best manner to govern and manage the citadel turn into an everyday myth? This happened because of the plain fact that politics was reduced to an obsessive struggle for power. The other components of politics, such as the elaboration of efficient policies, became obsolete. Political parties rely less and less on doctrines, and reduce themselves to promises and means that do not differ significantly from one party to another. Coalitions of parties are forged almost everywhere, regardless of the vision, goals and means that had originally distinguished them. What is left out? The political man or the statesman is defined by his capacity to formulate policies that promote public interests. Instead of judging the results, the public opinion is called upon to consider the image that constitutes a politician's main concern. In the end, it is a closed way for him, when natural or human disasters, an economic crisis or blatant errors are closing his balance.

The most serious damage caused to the society by the ascent of politicking as a central theme is the decline of professionalism. Within a politicized society, the

appartenance to a political party is the factor deciding who occupies which key-roles within economy, administration and management of public services. Politicking is a factor for encouraging corruption and bureaucracy, in any society that is essentially interested in the real promotion of all interests related to welfare, economic strength, as well as technical and scientific innovation. These are interests on a long term that exceeds the limited time-horizon available to a political career. More than that, by making a dominant noise, a politician succeeds in covering the debate, the identification of solutions and the promotion of the society's real interests.

Politicking and professionalism are trends working in reverse. We are indirectly impairing professionalism also by attacking the danger of society's "*technocratization*" or the "*specialists*"' pretenses to provide solutions. But taking science and technics out of the process is a plain tilting of the balance knowledge/belief, facts/image, reality/myth in favor of the latter.

8. THE INDIVIDUAL

Individual and society is one of those couples of different and opposite concepts, which only exist in togetherness. As almost all species, the human species achieves itself through individuals. These individuals are not physically connected like corals, but their connections of communication and cooperation, of signals and symbols, as well as of life within groups and communities are equivalent to the coral reef cement in terms of intensity. However, the emphasis may be placed on a different location. Which is the starting point of each distinction: the individual or the society? Our age knew an exacerbation of the idea of society or collectivity that is without precedent in totalitarian regimes. The name of fascism came from the *fascia* - the unyielding band of sticks, while the name of communism came from the vision of a common fate. The opposition encountered by these doctrines and their extinction gave birth, by reaction, to a blooming of individualism. This is not the first time when the balance is tilted to one side or the other. However, the danger consists in the fact that the prevalence of one side may result in the disregard of the other side. Historically speaking, this also happened at the end of the Middle Ages through the Renaissance. The following question arises: what if placing the individual in the spotlight involves an extremist passion that creates illusions and false promises? What if it brings a decrease in the public good or in the general interest, which –at the end of the day- prejudices the celebrated individual? Isn't it true that, when it turns into myth, individuality prejudices everyone and the society as a whole?

It is easy to place an individual on a pedestal and to write beneath it "*you are everything*". This is an accurate, but incomplete sentence. You must add "*you will*

never be alone from birth until death". You will be in your family, your group, your classroom, your university hall, your regiment; in terms of statistics, you will be a consumer, citizen, patient, even if statistic figures are sometimes expressed *per capita*. And, in order to have an accurate representation of yourself, do not take into consideration your bulletin photograph, but the crowd in the Vatican plaza, the people that are daily genuflecting, the people that come to meetings or on stadiums, the people reaped by hurricanes and earthquakes.

The trust, courage, creativity and dignity springing from the moment of illusions related to man's singularity, the term preferred by philosophical trends, cannot be underestimated. Yet, neither can its force of paranoid and feverish myth be underestimated, when society is dismissed.

For anarchists, to be antisocial is not a misdemeanor, but a heroic gesture. The myth of the individual is an enemy to any kind of authority. Since society is structured, it is unacceptable. However, the herd instinct favors egalitarian communities, tribes and gangs. Order should not exist, because individuals resent it. It is true that the fear of anarchy persists in the midst of developed countries. However, searching for means to control it, authors like Kaplan propose revival by means of resorting to force and by means of the over-evaluation of the power factor. In this way, they are striving to dispose of a myth by replacing it with another.

9. RIGHTS

Connected with the myth of the individual is the myth of unlimited rights that we enjoy in a complete and unencumbered freedom. In 1789, when it was conceived within the National Assembly of France, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was proposed as having the full title "of the Rights and Duties", as reported by Tom Paine, an American who attended the event. Yet, objections were raised that the title becomes too long and that it is implicit. Rights and duties are the two sides of the same coin. Well, although these represent a new couple of inseparable opposites, rights were retained, while duties were neglected, disregarded or even forgotten. Lack of responsibility is central in almost all the states that are deprofessionalized, excessively politicized and embraced by new waves of fashionable thinking, however strange their theme might be. Any right immediately gives birth to a responsibility. Seeing your life protected is conditional upon your obligation not to attempt at others' lives on numberless occasions. Exactly as in the case of one's intent not to dispose of one's own goods, exactly as in the case of respecting one's privacy, the validity of any right acknowledged to you cannot be invoked once you breach the same right of other people. This alphabet and the common sense reasoning do not work for a person who has the right to peace and quiet, but lives in the noisiest environment possible.

The absence of an universal declaration of an individual's duties to a society that guarantees his rights is explained by the opponents to perfect symmetry and equivalence through the fact that any failure to observe one's liabilities and duties is reflected by the penalties provided by the Criminal Code, while other civil and economic codes deal with certain social or economic duties. The brief and peremptory assertions of duties are only included in the moral codes of religions, such as the Ten Commandments. In the context of international politics, duties and mutual conduct did remain ambiguous. As an example, we may take the way in which countries that have various means at their disposal may act by way of propaganda or subversion to undermine another country's government that is considered to be hostile or unwanted, without resorting to open war or military intervention, thus defying the commitments undertaken by states through the creation of a vast gray zone of unofficial and unknown action. The elaboration of certain partial confidence measures of trust was subsequently abandoned.

In general, the reaction to the abuses of totalitarian regimes turned the chapter of rights into a legitimate chapter of concerns. In particular, there are two freedoms breached: the freedom of economic enterprise and the freedom of association and expression in the social field, which -in fact- constituted such regimes' own failure and made the human rights be strongly emphasized by the international opinion. But the right to enterprise is also used for fraud purposes, while the freedom of expression is abused through the use of information for manipulation and disinformation purposes. Many people state that they are not protected against these procedures that are old, but gained higher powers today. Is it compulsory and admissible the blooming of freedoms at the cost of sacrificing the equality principle? From the two ideals that were marked together on the flag of modernization, is the last one considered today to be old-fashioned and pernicious?

10. DIFFERENCE

This is a theme excessively exploited by contemporary philosophy, which means that it is more important to deal with whatever separates people than to deal with whatever unites them. It is beyond any doubt that difference is an essential property of human thought. We cannot define anything otherwise than by establishing its proximate gender and its specific difference. Not only is their opposition obvious, but the inseparable nature of the two demarches is obvious as well. However, we cannot raise one to the rank of myth without prejudicing the other.

Within the international system, we distinguish two fundamental processes that are guiding the conducts of societies and the events involved thereby: a dissociation process and an integration process. The last one is illustrated by the formation of groups of states linked by common interests, such as regionalization,

which found a brilliant expression in the experience of the European integration. Nonetheless, the same effects of modifying the time and space perception by means of eliminating the barriers that separated economy, transports, industry and human interaction (the free movement of goods, people, capital and labor force, in Europe's case) are also present in the globalization process, the second largest trend at the start of the century.

Against globalization plead the partisans of Difference, who feel threatened by the uniformization and standardization brought by globalization. But globalization relates to civilization, and not to cultures and their specificities. Europe doesn't integrate them either. A sound civilization respects the diversity of cultures, and mature cultures favor the increase in the degree of civilization. Far from suppressing cultural differences, integrative processes allow such differences to be widely known and respected; they place such differences on the world's map; they cherish such differences as an important source for energy and innovation.

Erroneously, globalization is reduced to its functions abusively monopolized in many instances by international finances, trade and business, or in the context of illegal trade or even terrorist activities. Nonetheless, people tend to forget the essential vocation of globalization, that of forming a single human family, conscious of its common habitation of a single planet, which can be saved by means of global projects.

We are at a crossroad. The international system of states, four hundred years old, is about to turn into a global system with more numerous actors: regions, cities, professional associations, and NGOs. UN, an international organism having states as its members, opened the list of the global problems encountered by mankind: food and water supply, health care, education, environment, habitat *et alia*. Science is and has been global for a long time. It is not by accident that it constitutes a solid pillar of globalization, through its vocation of adding assertions that have a universal value. Same thing goes for technology, which moves freely and knows no borders.

The urge "*think global and act local*" has often been used. In this new global/local couple, the "local" -with its old roots- is today encouraged by way of doctrine to oppose globalization and to become the adept of continuous segregation and separation.

It is a reason for satisfaction to find out that, in the context of its activity, the Club of Rome brought an innovation in dealing with global problems. Such problems constituted the first concern of the Club of Rome through the concept of "problematics", which does not treat them in a sectorial manner, but in terms of their interdependence, tenaciously following – however – the ideal of a single mankind.

