



«Politics» and «The Political»: The Mythical Superposition of Two Political States

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Abstract

The distinction between «politics» and «the political» has been placed historically within a political narrative which is often overlooked by political science and political philosophy. This narrative pertains to the realm of *myth*, and, because of this, a clear interpretation of such narrative is still missing. The reason for this is that the relationship between myth and politics is often perceived as dangerous, and closer to totalitarian rather than democratic governments. These two concepts have been understood as different stages in the description of public *affaires*: first as a stage of emergence, and then as a stage of institutionalization. But by looking at myth as the ground from which political actions and institutions spring, the distinction between politics and the political can be understood in terms, not of stages, but of super positions. Reality collapses into either one of these superposed states with the intervention of a spectator. In this sense, public events no longer need to be seen as manifestations of politics that will eventually, and inevitably, become part of the political.

Keyword: Politics; Political myth; Political narratives

For Karl Marx, labour encompasses the complex dialectical process of self-determination through which the human being changes the material conditions that determine human existence on earth. By understanding this process as the only possibility for authentic existence—an existence free from “alienation [*Entfremdung*]”—, Marx made politics into a secondary realm, or activity, whose only aim is to protect the progress made in the sphere of labour, i.e., in the sphere of economics. But is this truly the only realm in which the dialectic of self-determination can aim at setting the right conditions for authenticity and avoid alienation? There is not just one realm alone that comes first when changing all material conditions of human existence; but, as Marx saw, labour is the clearest and more evident one: the history of changes in the modes of production shows how real this dialectic is.

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between

himself and Nature. [...] By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway¹.

There is another realm, though, another way of changing the world into a more hospitable residence for human beings. This other realm is something that almost every anthropologist has tried to explain: the birth of the mythical. For people like Hans Blumenberg, the task of myth is, i.a., to *overthrow the absolutism of reality*.

What is here called the absolutism of reality is the totality of what goes with this situational leap, which is inconceivable without super-accomplishment in consequence of a sudden lack of adaptation. Part of this is the capacity for foresight,

1 Marx, Karl. “Capital: A Critique of Political Economy.” Scharf, Robert C. and Dusek, Val (Eds.). *Philosophy of Technology. The Technological Condition: An Antology*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2014. Pg. 74.

anticipation of what has not yet taken place, preparation for what is absent, beyond the horizon. It all converges on what is accomplished by concepts. Before that, though, the pure state of indefinite anticipation is «anxiety».²

This means that human beings' first way of changing the *real* conditions of their own existence is not labour; on the contrary, this first way involves participating in the development of a common language between reality and the human experience. The task of myth is to be the bridge between reality and existence, to serve as the language in which reality can become a suitable interlocutor for human beings. This is not to say, as Lessing does, that myths—understood as a primitive form of sacred texts—might be the language in which the godhead reveals its message to its creatures, and that the revelation of this message evolves in the same way human experience does. According to Lessing, God still could not give his people any other religion, any other law, than one through whose observance or non-observance it hoped or feared that it might become happy or unhappy here on earth. For its vision did not yet extend beyond this life. It knew of no immortality of the soul; it did not long for a life to come. But if God had revealed to it these things for which its reason was so little prepared, what else would this have been but the error of a vain pedagogue who prefers to push the child too far and boast of its progress instead of giving it thorough instruction? [...] My answer is this: so as to be able, in the course of time, to use individual members of this people with greater assurance as educators of all other peoples. In this people, he was educating the future educators of the human race. It was Jews who became these educators; and Jews alone, as men from a people educated in this way, were able to do so.³

For us, Lessing's enlightened mistake lies in the presupposition of a message, a fixed meaning for humans as well as reality's existence. In light of this, myths cannot be conceived as an encoded message, but as the original *saying* [language] that makes all saying, as well as all *coding*, possible. This is not a new perspective, although it is traditionally to be found in reflections on art rather than myth—in particular in those centered poetry and music.⁴ A consequence of this perspective would be to say that it is impossible to have language without first having myth. Nietzsche, for instance, had already considered language as a forgotten metaphor, of truth in language as *the army of*

metaphors:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations that have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, translated, and embellished, and that after long use strike a people as fixed, canonical, and binding: truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors that have become worn-out and deprived of their sensuous force, coins that have lost their imprint and are now no longer seen as coins but as metal. We still don't know where the drive to truth comes from, for we have hitherto heard only of the obligation to be truthful, which society imposes in order to exist—that is, the obligation to use the customary metaphors, hence, morally expressed, the obligation to lie in accordance with a fixed convention, to lie in droves in a style binding for all. Man forgets, of course, that this is how things are; he therefore lies in this way unconsciously and according to centuries-old habits—and precisely by means of this unconsciousness, precisely by means of this forgetting, he arrives at the feeling of truth.⁵

Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, claims that the work of art is a *happening* of truth, but not the only, or the essential way in which truth happens or establishes itself.

One essential way in which truth establishes itself in the beings it has opened up is its setting-itself-into-the-work. *Another way in which truth comes to presence is through the act which founds a state.* Again, another way in which truth comes to shine is the proximity of that which is not simply a being but rather the being which is most in being. Yet another way in which truth grounds itself is the essential sacrifice. A still further way in which truth comes to be is in the thinker's questioning, which, as the thinking of being, names being in its question-worthiness [*Frag-würdigkeit*].⁶

But, as I have shown elsewhere⁷, this establishing of the truth in the work of art, or in *the action that founds a State*, is not unmediated; it can only happen on the basis of an already existing language, an original or primordial saying: *myth*. «For the Greeks, words like μῦθος [...] are now that according to which Being is assigned to man himself, so that he can preserve it, in his own essence, as that which is assigned to him, and might be able to find and to hold back his

2 Blumenberg, Hans. *The Work on Myth*. Ed. M. Wallace Robert (transl.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pgs. 4-5

3 Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. "The Education of the Human Race." Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim Translated by H. B. Nisbet. *Philosophical and Theological Writings*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pg. 221

4 Cfr. Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." Heidegger, Martin, Translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

5 Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense." Nietzsche, Friedrich. Translated by Taylor Carman. *On Truth and Untruth. Selected Writings*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010. Pgs. 29-30

6 Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." Heidegger, Martin, Julian Young and Kenneth (Transl.) aynes. *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pg. 37. Italics are mine.

7 Cfr. Yedra, Juan F. "The Forgetfulness of Being as Oblivion of Politics." *Revista de Filosofía Universidad Iberoamericana* 148(2020): 108-146.

own essence as human being in virtue of such preservation»⁸.

Therefore, myth should be regarded as the original metaphor or the primordial happening of the truth, as the fundamental condition for inhabiting the world, as well as the condition that determines a variety of realms in which human beings can find themselves *at home*. This last expression, “at home”, is particularly relevant in the context of historical changes that make it impossible for people to make sense of their surrounding conditions, and is naturally an expression we find in authors that in their work deal with these adverse and terrifying circumstances⁹. The fact that we still find such common use of expressions like this in our contemporary world, sheds light onto a fact that is easily overlooked by what remains from the Enlightenment in our own perspective: myth is not something that happened only at the dawn of civilizations, it is still with us, and remains the condition of possibility for inhabiting the world.

Going back to Marx’s views, this would mean that politics should be understood as an artifact created to protect the worldview that arises from myth. But this would be too much of a reductionist view on the relationship between myth and politics since, as I will subsequently justify, a clear understanding of the distinction between «*politics*» and «*the political*» is necessary for any fruitful articulation of that relationship.

It is now common to understand *Politics* as something different from *The Political*; the works of Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt are insightful enough to see how this difference is important. According to Schmitt, «The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political» while «[the] specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.»¹⁰ One of the crucial points in this line of thought is that reducing the political to *affaires* pertaining to the State is equivocal and wrong since there cannot be a State without first political actions and motives giving rise to it. The second one is that public institutions, like the State, are political in a secondary

8 Heidegger, Martin, *Parmenides*. Fráncfort: Vitorio Klostermann, 1992: 115 [My translation], «*Im Griechentum ist nun aber das Wort als μῦθος [...] dasjenige, worin das Sein sich dem Menschen zuweist, damit er es als das ihm Zugewiesene in seinem eigenen Wesen bewahre und aus solcher Bewahrung seinerseits erst sein eigenes Wesen als Mensch finde und behalte*».

9 Joseph Roth is a perfect example of such a writer: «Have German writers of Jewish extraction—or for that matter German writers— ever felt at home in the German Reich? There is a justifiable sense that German authors, of Jewish or non-Jewish origins, have at all times been strangers in Germany, immigrants on home ground, consumed with longing for their real fatherland even when they were within its borders.» (Roth, Joseph. *What I saw. Reports from Berlin 1920-1933*. Ed. Michael Hofmann. New York: W.W. Northon & Company, 2003. Pgs.)

10 Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political (Expanded edition)*. Transl. Schwab, George. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007: 19 & 26

sense:

the general definitions of the political which contain nothing more than additional references to the state are understandable and to that extent also intellectually justifiable for as long as the state is truly a clear and unequivocal eminent entity confronting nonpolitical groups and affairs—in other words, for as long as the state possesses the monopoly on politics. [...] The equation state = politics becomes erroneous and deceptive at exactly the moment when state and society penetrate each other¹¹.

From this, one can notice that Schmitt is talking about the political in two senses. First, the political is used to talk about actions that take place within the State; these can be either State actions or individuals’ or social groups’ actions. Here, a distinction is necessary; «politics» may be used to describe such actions, while «the political» could be used to describe public institutions and procedures in the hands of the State. This is not enough to support this distinction, though. Along with Schmitt’s use of «political» as pertaining to actions, and «the political» as the appropriation of such actions by the State, is Hannah Arendt’s use of the concept of «politics». As Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, The organization of the *polis*, physically secured by its laws [...] is a kind of organized remembrance. It assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men, who outside the *polis* could attend only the short duration of the performance¹².

Actions and speech are here the fundamental tenets of the public life of the *polis*, i.e., of *politics*. On the other hand we have the perpetuation of these performances that are in need of a *space of appearance* that «comes to being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.»¹³ This is precisely what I refer to when I distinguish *politics* from *the political*: politics is the *army of actions* that gives rise to institutions and procedures, that is, to *the political*. Indeed, the concept of «politics» is characterized by action—in the form of speech or deeds—while «the political» refers to institutionalized procedures. Following Walter Benjamin distinction between “law-making violence [*rechtsetzende Gewalt*]” and “law-protecting violence [*rechtserhaltende Gewalt*]”¹⁴, we can distinguish between politics and the

11 *Ibidem*, pp: 22

12 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998: 198

13 *Eadem*, pp: 199

14 Benjamin, Walter, *Critique of Violence*. Benjamin, Walter. Translated by

political. For Benjamin, the State—the legal system—recognizes violence for its function, which is, at the same time, the reason the State fears violence. Violence can create, destroy, or protect laws; this is why the State only sanctions violence as legal [legitimate], when it is an instance of «law-protecting violence». In the same sense, *the political*—and here this means the State—fears *politics*, for these can create a new order of the political.

As I understand the words of Hermann Heller, “Politics is established wherever the cooperation of the respective social actions is no longer understood «in itself»”¹⁵, politics is not something that has to do with public institutions, it is something that happens in the public realm, and at once gives rise to new determinations in the political –i.e., public institutions. If this is the case, then we have to pay close attention to the warnings Benjamin made regarding the way in which violence is acknowledged by the standpoint of the law. For Benjamin, violence is always the creator of laws, and laws maintain themselves through violence; this is the reason for maintaining a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence. Violence can create a new system of laws, this is why the reigning system is self-stated as the only source of violence: violence protects what violence created in order to get rid of violence. But this might be similar in the case of politics and the political. Politics is the army of actions that arises wherever people no longer feel at home with each other, while the political is the institutionalization of those actions; but just as in the case of violence, the political protects itself against politics arising again: limiting the emergence of politics is the condition for the preservation of the political.

This idea can be found in Cornelius Castoriadis’ brilliant work *The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy*. Here, what Castoriadis calls «instituting activity» is opposed to the undetermined living character of «magmas»:

Indeed, this instituting activity which we would like to liberate in our society has always been self-institution; the laws have not been given by the gods, by God, or imposed by the ‘state of the forces of production’ (these ‘productive forces’ being, in themselves, only one of the faces of the institution of society), they have been created by the Assyrians, the Jews, the Greeks, etc. In this sense, society has always been ‘autonomous in Varela’s sense’. This self-institution, however, has always been occulted, covered over by the representation, itself highly instituted, of an extra

social source of the institution (the gods, the ancestors - or ‘Reason’, ‘Nature’, etc.)¹⁶.

Indeed, we can take this *instituting activity* as being on the side of action or *politics*, while the institution itself as being on the side of *the political*. According to this, the political should be understood as the petrification of politics; but this does not mean that the anarchist’s solution of an elimination of the political is something possible, or even desirable, in light of the marxist view on the dialectic of self-determination. Just as the discovery and instrumentalization of atomic energy changed the human condition forever, politics, as an «event [Ereignis]», will inevitably change the human condition with its emergence and at once give rise to the political. This development is similar to the relationship between *earth* and *world* found in Heidegger’s essay on the work of art. There, Heidegger claims that *earth* «is that in which the arising of everything that arises is brought back—as, indeed, the very thing that it is—and sheltered. In the things that arise the earth presences as the protecting one.»¹⁷ So, the earth is that which is closed, protected, petrified; while, on the other hand, «World is that always-nonobjectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being. Wherever the essential decisions of our history are made, wherever we take them over or abandon them, wherever they go unrecognized or are brought once more into question, there the world worlds.»¹⁸ Hence, earth is the ground of every action, while the world is that which is open by that action. What Heidegger claims here is that, if we take a work of art, Marcel Duchamp’s fountain, for instance, the work of art needs a ground in order to be a happening of the truth, this ground is the state of art within a specific epoch with its own tradition; it would be impossible for an ancient greek to understand Duchamp’s porcelain urinal as a *work of art*. This would mean that once the piece emerges from a particular ground, it can be seen as a *work of art*, but, at the same time, this would mean that the state of art changes forever and incorporates that piece to its history, thus, making the work of art part of the ground from which new ways of creating art would emerge. In our own time, it would be impossible to place a porcelain urinal, once again, and claim this to be art; our ground is not the same as Duchamp’s. In terms of the relationship between earth and world, the earth is the ground that allows the world to emerge as an open realm—open to new possibilities—, but this does not mean that this realm will remain open, the world closes itself into the earth. If, by analogy, we identify the earth with the

Edmund Jephcott. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. New York: Schocken, 1986: 280-285.

15 Heller, Hermann, El sentido de la política. Heller, Hermann. *El Sentido de la Política y otros ensayos*. Valencia: Pre-textos, 1996. 57-60. (My translation from spanish). pp: 57.

16 Castoriadis, Cornelius. The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy. Castoriadis, Cronelius. *The Castoriadis Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. 290-318. Pp: 314.

17 Heidegger, Martin. The Origin of the Work of Art. *Op. cit.*, pp: 21.

18 *Ibidem*, pp. 23.

political, and the world with politics, we would be getting closer to an understanding of these two concepts.

Nonetheless, by limiting our thinking to the question of what is more fundamental, politics or the political, we are missing the crucial point: these are not steps or moments, these are not the two faces in the head of Janus, these are two *superposed* states¹⁹. The use of this concept implies that both, politics and the political, are different states that can only be conceived in accordance with our reality once they are *considered as events*. In other words, while we are involved in politics through action, public institutions can only be conceived as being part of the political, i.e., as something different and opposed to politics. From the perspective of the institutions, politics is always nothing more than opposition, chaos, anarchy; and can only be seen as a threat to progress and order. But the public realm, characterized by action, is not in itself a manifestation of politics or the political, these two states are superposed to action with equal reality. Every action in the public realm is political in both senses, as part of politics and part of the political. These two are mutually exclusive, but every political action participates in both superposed states until we are no longer acting but perceiving the action. As Pierre Rosanvallon states, Conflict, opposition, and even deep internal division reflect the fact that democratic and republican ideals have been taken seriously. Democratic societies have sought to bring those ideals to life, to give practical meaning to the idea that no democratic regime can exist without permanent self-scrutiny. No democratic regime is permanently defined by or fully reflected in the institutions that embody it. There is always something fundamentally indeterminate in democracy²⁰.

A popular movement can lead to a popular government, but it is only such when the people that gave rise to that popular movement stops assuming the perspective of a critical observer. The role of the observer determines whether an action collapses into politics or the political. In this example, a movement participates both in politics and the political but only resolves itself for one of these superpositions by means of the involvement of the observer, i.e., the people. Above every social or political movement

there are two superposed realities²¹.

What determines which of the two superposed states becomes integrated as part of our reality is the interaction between *myth* and *storytelling*. The work of integrating new stories into myth is what decides if a movement is an instantiation of politics or the political. This integration can be understood in terms of Arendt's view on the distinction between the American and the French revolutions²². There is a story behind the triumph of a movement, but the story must be integrated into a larger and more fundamental narrative structure which we call here *myth*. However, following Blumenberg's opinion, myth is never a creation of an individual or even a "creation". In the same way Heidegger talks about words growing from—or springing to—meanings²³, political movements grow from myths and hence reveal themselves as being part of the political or politics. Thus, the resolution of a popular movement into a popular government does not mean that the movement was not a manifestation of the political and of politics at once; it only means that the work of a collective storytelling of the movement, on the basis of an already existing myth, allowed the political superposition of the movement to overthrow that of the politics of the movement. Just as words spring to meanings, *poiesis* spring to myths.

Every appropriation, or occupation, of the public space is both a manifestation of politics and the political. Nevertheless, as soon as the *story* of this event is told—and this means the telling of a sequel of our myth—reality collapses into either one of this event's superposed states. This means that a single action in the public space cannot be said to participate in politics or the political on its own, every action in the public realm must be understood as an "entanglement [*Verschränkung*]" that collapses into politics or the political only when told as the recent story of the myth of a people. That is, the only freedom we can find in our actions, either in politics or the political, is that of *poetic licence*. Yet, this is not intended as an idealistic statement but rather as a realistic one.

The public existence of a people is nothing but the dialogue between that particular people and the world, myth is the language while politics and the political are into what reality collapses when the story of this relationship is told.

19 This requires further explanation. Schrodinger's thought experiment is now part of our social imaginary, and its implications are the subject of multiple speculations; from the principles of mathematics, through Multiverse-theories in Physics, to science fiction and its popular manifestations. It has led to the popular understanding of the term "superposed quantum states". It is not my intention here to explain Schrodinger's thought experiment, neither do I claim to be able to do so. My only interest in it is as a metaphor, as a situation which can shed light on the relationship of two states: politics and the political.

20 Rosanvallon, Pierre. *Counter-Democracy. Politics in an Age of Distrust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 169

21 These two realities have different conceptions of *legitimacy* when it comes to a movement: Legitimacy as the common good or as the common voice.

22 *Cfr.* Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

23 Words accrue to significations. But word-things are not provided with significations.' Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time. A translation of Sein und Zeit*. Ed. Joan Stambaugh. New York: State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 151

We have learned the language of politics and the political, but we need to be reminded of the fact that whatever truth we can find in it is nothing but a forgotten metaphor. We have learned Heidegger's myth, that politics turns into the political until new possibilities for political action are once again opened, but we have to be aware of the fact that there are many stories superposed to that myth, and that the self-determination of a political community lies in the *attitude* that we take while being observant of *politics* and *the political*.

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