

# THE MEANING OF POLITICAL MYTH IN ERNST CASSIRER

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**Abstract:** *In the following paper I present the conditions of possibility of political myths of the 20-th century according to Ernst Cassirer. This type of myth can be understood only in relation with Cassirer's general thought. Therefore my text is structured in three parts: in the first part I discuss about the specific character of Cassirer's early functionalism. In the second part I present the way in which this functionalism develops in a philosophy of symbolic forms. Myth, in general, is according to Cassirer one of the symbolic forms. Starting from this signification of myth, in the third part I present the "manifold" that is synthesized by the symbolic form of the political myth and its articulation.*

**Key words:** *synthesis, function, science, symbolic form, myth, state.*

## 1. Ernst Cassirer's understanding of the scientific knowledge

Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) may be considered, on account of the extraordinary comprising of his work, one of the last great humanists, a true *Uomo Universale*: he masters as well Einstein's physics as Hegel's philosophy, the Culture of Renaissance as Goethe's works, the history of religion as the history of science. His method is a synthesis between Kantian and (apparently, in a paradoxical manner) Hegelian philosophy, on the one side, and structural and functional thinking of the science, on the other side. Educated in the school of the Neo-Kantian H. Cohen and considered the most important student of his, Cassirer develops Cohen's ideas, being himself considered therefore a Neo-Kantian, although a special one. This Neo-Kantianism was, in other respects, also the reason why, from the beginning of the thirties, in Europe at least, Cassirer's thought remained, until recently, at the periphery of philosophical interest. The interest for his work awoke when one discovered in it anticipations of the structuralism and postmodernism.

Many of his books seem to be only historical works, presentations of writings and ideas belonging to authors of the past. Despite his immense erudition, Cassirer is not only a historian of ideas, but also an original thinker, for whom the appeal to the past is rather an opportunity to assess and acknowledge the contributions of his precursors to the development of certain ideas or disciplines. For any problem he deals with, Cassirer firstly presents its history and different approaches of it in the course of time. This way he succeeds not only to give a very accurate presentation of that problem, but also to show the manner in which other conceptions have conditioned during the history the actual form of it. We have to emphasize this particularity of his method, a particularity that corresponds to his general philosophical conception, i. e. the philosophy of symbolic forms. Cassirer himself maintains that his method is indebted to the Hegelian phenomenology, namely to a "science of the experience of the consciousness" (Hegel 1986, 596) (as it was the first title of the famous Hegelian work), which means actually to a science where are described the experiences through which consciousness (human spirit, in general) has to go through in order to reach its present stage. Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms necessarily implies this historical dimension, because only through it one can observe the progress, the materialization of a certain symbolic form.

The historicity remains therefore also for Cassirer, as for other contemporaneous thinkers of him, Heidegger for instance, a fundamental trait of the human being. But this historicity seems to be paradoxical, knowing that Ernst Cassirer is considered a Neo-Kantian philosopher, because it is not so easy to comprehend how the pre-eminence of science and logic (one of the main features of the Neo-Kantian conception) may be ranked on a same level and associated with the historicity of man.

When at Davos M. Heidegger criticizes Cassirer for his Neo-Kantianism, he explains that this philosophical stream interprets Im. Kant's Work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, as being only an epistemological treatise, namely only an attempt to found the mathematical physics. The Neo-Kantianism would consider also, according to Heidegger, that the only domain of culture which may be seen as being the true object of philosophy remains this type of science:

„One can understand the common feature of Neo-Kantianism, says Heidegger, only by reflecting on its origin. This origin is the embarrassment of philosophy when faced with the question of what is left to do for it in the total body of knowledge. All that seemed to remain was just this knowledge of science rather than of what there is. This perspective determined the entire, Back-to-Kant' movement. Kant was seen as the theoretician of a mathematico-physical epistemology.” (Hamburg 1964, 214)

On account of such an interpretation – we may further understand Heidegger's words –, all other domains of culture would be depreciated to a level of a gratuitous play of the human spirit. We would find the true knowledge only within the science, and the model of every truth would remain the scientific truth, which is a “universal” and “necessary” one, as by Kant. Cassirer's answer is very suggestive for his theoretical approach:

„The status of the mathematical sciences of nature is only a paradigm for me and not the philosophical problem in its entirety. There is one point, though, on which both Heidegger and I do agree and that is the central importance of the productive imagination for Kant. I was led to this insight by my work on the symbolic (forms). Imagination is the relation of all thought to intuition (*Anschauung*), a ‚synthesis speciosa‘. Synthesis is the basic power of all pure thought.” (Hamburg 1964, 214)

Thus, we see that for Cassirer the problem area of philosophy goes beyond the sphere of mathematical sciences of nature, even if these sciences represent a paradigm for the philosophy. But the sense in which we must understand this paradigm is given by the last sentence, which, in my opinion, expresses exactly the essence of the entire conception of Cassirer. For him, certainly, the synthesis is the fundamental power of every thought, the aim of philosophy being in this sense to explore this “basic power” of synthesis which belongs to the human spirit, in all the domains of its materialization. This program continues also the investigations of H. Cohen. Therefore, says Cassirer, „I do not look upon my own development as a defection from Cohen” (Hamburg 1964, 214), who, also for him, is not only an epistemologist. Summarizing Cohen's intention of exploring that „basic power” of the spirit, an intention that was developed by Cassirer throughout of his systematic work about symbolic forms, Cassirer said:

„The primacy of activity over possibility, of the independent-spiritual over the sensible-thinglike, should be carried through purely and completely. Any appeal to a merely given should fall aside; in place of every supposed foundation in things there should enter the pure foundations of thinking, of willing, of artistic and religious

consciousness. In this way, Cohen's logic became the logic of the origin." (Habermas 2002, 42)

Cohen has emphasized that the understanding of the activity of consciousness must not be restricted, as Kant has done, only to the mathematical sciences of nature, and the unity of consciousness, understood as a *unity of the cultural consciousness*, have to become the main research object of the philosophy (Görland 1906, 15). Cohen saw the unity of consciousness, in the Kantian meaning of it, as a *synthetic* unity, and the idea of a cultural unity of the consciousness means for him that the entire human culture is the result of the synthetic act of the consciousness and must be investigated as a materialization of it. But what means this synthetic unity of consciousness, what means the concept of "synthesis" that was considered by Cassirer as being the "basic power of all pure thought", i. e. of the spirit?

This concept comes from the Kantian philosophy, where it may be seen as an authentic cornerstone of the whole Kantian system. One knows that the Kantian philosophy distinguishes between the thing in itself and the phenomenon, and that on account of this distinction the concept of knowledge with which Kant operates is one which is valid only for the phenomena: we know the phenomena, says Kant, but not also the thing in itself. Our knowledge presupposes a matter of knowledge (the sensations) and a form of knowledge (the concepts). In the most general meaning, the conceptual activity is seen by Kant as an ordering activity, whose object is the "manifold" of intuitions. But this ordering activity presupposes a criterion, an instrument of operating which makes that the undetermined manifold of intuitions can be arranged in representations, namely it can build a *unity*; certainly, our representations do not appear chaotically in our consciousness. This composing is the result of a double activity of the human soul: a) of the productive imagination, that arranges our intuitions in different concrete relations to one another, as we see the result of this process in our current experience; and b) of the intellect, which produces the meaning of these representations. The "meaning" of our representations is the concept, and this is actually a function, i. e. the result of the activity of bringing a multitude of representation under one common representation:

„All intuitions, says Kant, being sensuous, depend on affections, concepts on functions. By this function, I therefore mean the unity of the act of arranging different representations under one common representation." (Kant 2, 1881, 60)

We may say that Kant is the philosopher which introduces the term of „function" in the philosophical tradition. But the „function" is only one of the aspects of the activity of the human spirit. The other aspect, one that is correlated with it, is the „synthesis". Kant describes as follows this pair of these activities:

„In its most general sense, I understand by synthesis the act of arranging different representations together, and of comprehending what is manifold in them under one form of knowledge. (...) We shall see hereafter that synthesis in general is the mere result of what I call the faculty of imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but the existence of which we are scarcely conscious. But to reduce this synthesis to concepts is a function that belongs to the understanding, and by which the understanding supplies us for the first time with knowledge properly so called." (Kant 2, 1881, 68-69)

Hence, the synthesis, as an activity of the (productive) imagination, combines images, builds from different representations a new one, as, for instance, from a succession of perceptions about a mountain the *unique* intuitive image of that mountain. The function of intellect makes that this manifold can be recognized and comprehended as forming a single object: the mountain. Therefore, when Kant considers human knowledge as being a continuous process of bringing a manifold of representations under a common one, i. e. as a functional unity that belongs only to the human consciousness, he believes that he has the right to consider also the human reason not only as being a pupil of nature (as we could think, if we understand the knowledge as being related only to what appears to us), but a true judge of it:

„Reason, holding in one hand its principles, according to which concordant phenomena alone can be admitted as laws of nature, and in the other hand the experiment, which it has devised according to those principles, must approach nature in order to be taught by it: but not in the character of a pupil, who agrees to everything the master likes, but as an appointed judge, who compels the witnesses to answer the questions which he himself proposes.” (Kant 1, 1881, 368)

This concept of knowledge excludes therefore the idea of a simple mirroring of nature, it excludes the understanding of knowledge as an activity of reflecting the outside of human being in his inner consciousness. The human knowledge is not a result of reflecting, but a construction. However, it is not an arbitrary construction.

Without any doubt, in the discourse of the *Critique of Pure Reason* the mathematical science of nature occupies a privileged place. This thing has its good reasons. Comparing the metaphysics with other disciplines which pretends to offer a knowledge of the reality, Kant observes that in metaphysics we have to do with a disagreement between the authors, while in the sciences, on the contrary, we encounter an agreement of researchers who work in that sciences. Being himself a great admirer of metaphysics, Kant's intention is actually to discover what makes possible this agreement in the science, in order to apply subsequently that condition of possibility also for the case of the metaphysics. This agreement means that all scientific sentences are “universal” (i. e. they are admitted by all the members of the scientific community) and “necessary” (i. e. their admission as being true is the result of a rational constraint, which nobody can elude). The Kantian construction starts therefore indeed from the *fact* of the Newtonian science, associated, of course, with the mathematics and logic that have encountered no major transformations along their history. According to Kant knowledge becomes true knowledge only when it succeeds “to enter on the secure path of a science” (Kant 1, 1881, 369). But such disciplines were in his time only the Newtonian physics, the mathematics and the logic. Their scientific character consisted in their deductive character. This deductive character is explained by Kant as being grounded in a transcendental structure of the intellect (pure intuitions and categories). These are applied in those disciplines, determining from the beginning their object and drawing thus the horizon in which this object must be investigated. The fact that the logic has not encountered any major modifications from the antiquity on made Kant believe that the supreme functions of the intellect – functions which were identified by him with the categories – are given by the types of judgements that were discovered already by Aristotle. The reason for this is that in these judgements we have to do with a synthesis of several representations under a common one. Kant affirms that there is an unchanging structure of knowledge, a pure and universal reason, which is present in all human beings. The self-knowledge of this reason is accomplished not directly, but through its activity: the reason discovers itself in its true identity on the one hand on

account of its errors, and on the other hand on account of the sciences that are developed by it during the history. Only by reflecting on these sciences the reason understands about itself that it is an a priori faculty, which possesses certain “innate” principles. These principles permit to the reason to unite (to synthesize) all contents that comes from outside, all that is given through the sensibility. Only because there exists such “innate” or a priori principles, which determine the synthesis of the manifold of intuition, can we explain, affirms Kant, the possibility of the scientific predictions: these predictions are in fact exactly the recognizing of the synthesis which is permanently operated by the intellect and imagination, only on an unconscious level. All scientific judgements express explicitly the (earlier) unknown (i. e. unconscious) operations of the human spirit. And the discovery of „the secure path of a science”, namely of these operations of the human spirit, is accomplished in the course of the history, i. e. by means of attempts, successes and failures, as it happens with all human actions. The historicity of man is in this sense an important component of the Kantian philosophy.

For Cassirer too, as we have seen, the idea of the Kantian synthesis, as well as the idea of the (intellectual) function remains fundamental terms. Actually, these two notions, due to the fact that they represent different aspects of the same act, are often used, even by Kant, as interchangeable concepts. For Cassirer too, the knowledge has a functional character, it means namely the act of bringing a manifold of representation under a common one. Unlike the case of Kant, this activity no longer expresses the unconscious operations of the human spirit, but it is rather an activity by which the object itself is created. In his work *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*, Cassirer introduces a distinction which shall become a fundamental one for the entire XX century. The major theme of this writing is the way of building of our concepts: as well the building of the scientific concepts as of our common concepts. Cassirer starts his investigation by describing the Aristotle’s manner to explain this building: our concepts reflect for Aristotle the true resemblance that exists between things. That is the reason why we speak about a correspondence between these concepts and the real things.

„For Aristotle, at least, says Cassirer, the concept is no mere subjective schema in which we collect the common elements of an arbitrary group of things. The selection of what is common remains an empty play of ideas if it is not assumed that what is thus gained is, at the same time, the real *Form* which guarantees the causal and teleological connection of particular things. The real and ultimate similarities of things are also the creative forces from which they spring and according to which they are formed. The process of comparing things and of grouping them together according to similar properties, as it is expressed first of all in language, does not lead to what is indefinite, but if rightly conducted, ends in the discovery of the real essences of things. Thought only isolates the specific type; this latter is contained as an active factor in the individual concrete reality and gives the general pattern to the manifold special forms. The biological species signifies both the end toward which the living individual strives and the immanent force by which its evolution is guided. The logical doctrine of the construction of the concept and of definition can only be built up with reference to these fundamental relations of the real. The determination of the concept according to its next higher genus and its specific difference reproduces the process by which the real substance successively unfolds itself in its special forms of being. Thus it is this basic conception of *substance* to which the purely logical theories of Aristotle constantly have reference. The complete system of scientific definitions would also be a complete expression of the substantial forces which control reality.” (Cassirer 1923, 7-8)

Hence, for Aristotle, whose ontological conception has dominated the western thought until the end of the Middle Ages, our concepts reflect the real substances, those substances which are effectively *in re*. Between knowledge and reality there is no insurmountable wall as in the case of Kant. This understanding of knowledge has made that the ancient and medieval science had mainly a qualitative character, unlike the modern science, which had a quantitative one. The ancient and medieval science tends to grasp the inherent substance of the things, and not the relations between them. Even more, mathematics, for us the science of these relations, was considered by Aristotle an obstacle on the way of this grasping. Nevertheless, states Cassirer, in mathematics and geometry we deal with a different type of concept building. The mathematical concepts do not reflect outer realities, the numbers and the geometric forms cannot be considered to be such reflections. On the contrary, in mathematics we encounter a real *Setzung*, a creation of concepts. And the same thing happens in the entire modern science of nature. This science which separates itself only with difficulty from the substantial conception, namely from a self-understanding as a knowledge of the real substances, finds its theoretical undertaking by certain conceptual constructions, by means of which it can investigate the reality afterwards. On account of these fundamental concepts elaborated by the scientists, one makes a *selection* in the multitude of the aspects of the reality. We find such a selection in every science, says Cassirer. Also, this selection takes place even on the level of our common perception. Hence, we encounter the reality only while starting from a previous concept about the thing that we shall encounter. This is the new functional model of understanding the knowledge that is supported by Cassirer, a model in which the reality is given to us according to the concepts which are already possessed by us:

„Without a process of arranging in series, without running through the different instances, the consciousness of their generic connection – and consequently of the abstract object – could never arise. This transition from member to member, however manifestly presupposes a *principle* according to which it takes place, and by which the form of dependence between each member and the succeeding one, is determined. Thus from this point of view also it appears that all construction of concepts is connected with some definite form of construction of series.” (Cassirer 1923, 15)

„The connection of the members is in every case produced by some general law of arrangement through which a thoroughgoing rule of succession is established. That which binds the elements of the series a, b, c, . . . , together is not itself a new element, that was factually blended with them, but it is the rule of progression, which remains the same, no matter in which member it is represented. The function  $F(a, b)$ ,  $F(b, c)$ , . . . , which determines the sort of dependence between the successive members, is obviously not to be pointed out as itself a member of the series, which exists and develops according to it.” (Cassirer 1923, 17)

And finally:

“Every mathematical function represents a universal law, which, by virtue of the successive values which the variable can assume, contains within itself all the particular cases for which it holds. If, however, this is once recognized, a completely new field of investigation is opened for logic. In opposition to the logic of the generic concept, which, as we saw, represents the point of view and influence of the concept of substance, there now appears logic of the mathematical concept of function. However, the field of application of this form of logic is not confined to mathematics alone. On the contrary, it

extends over into the field of the knowledge of nature; for the concept of function constitutes the general schema and model according to which the modern concept of nature has been molded in its progressive historical development.” (Cassirer 1923, 21)

The transformation of the concept of function in Cassirer’s thought in comparison with Kant’s concept of function consists in the fact that the function means at him no more the conceptual recognition of the “unconscious” activity of the soul, but it is a process which is treated for itself and not in relation to a background that is external to the knowledge. If we relate the Kantian conception to Aristotle’s substantialist conception, we may say that Kant interiorizes the substantialism of Aristotle, that the “substances”, although they do not exist anymore *in re*, but only *in mente*, are seen as existing to a some degree separated from the knowledge, namely in the sphere of the unconscious acts of soul. Therefore, Kant can give a new definition for truth as correspondence, in the sense of bringing in correspondence our knowledge with the unconscious acts of the soul:

„We do not know of things anything *a priori*, except what we ourselves put into them.” (Kant, 1, 1881, 372)

But what we put into them are the general conditions of the experience, those conditions that make possible our relationship with the objects:

„We say that the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the experience themselves, and thus possess objective validity in a synthetical judgment *a priori*.” (Kant 2, 1881, 139-140).

Kant interiorizes the conditions of possibility of objects, but admits the existence of a human being who has a universal transcendental structure (the totality of conditions that make possible our experience with the objects). For Cassirer such a structure exists no more. The idea of a universal human being presupposes a universal manner of concept building, namely by grasping the resemblances between them. Kant admits further that we acquire our concepts as Locke have explained it, starting with the most simple impressions and arriving through a gradual abstracting at the more general concepts:

“Such an investigation, writes Kant, of the first efforts of our faculty of knowledge, beginning with single perceptions and rising to general concepts, is no doubt very useful, and we have to thank the famous Locke for having been the first to open the way to it.” (Kant 2, 1881, 77).

Certainly, this method does not explain the objective validity of our concepts, but it explains their history, being thus only a response for a *questio facti* (Kant, 2, 1881, 77). By changing the perspective, Cassirer renounces to the Kantian assumption of the primacy of the unreflected experience, i. e. to the premise of the existence of such an experience about the objects, which must be given first to us in order that we may reflect on it and that we can build concepts about the objects that belong to it. His argument, as we have seen, is that any science, namely any true knowledge, does not proceed in this way, but, on the contrary, while it “puts”, while it builds certain concepts, it opens for itself also a certain horizon of objects, a certain plain of objects *which have not existed earlier and apart from that concept*:

„The individual thing is nothing for the physicist, but a system of physical constants; outside of these constants, he possesses no means of possibility of characterizing the particularity of an object.” (Cassirer 1923, 148)

Every science, on the ground of its fundamental principles, creates a domain of objects that will be investigated by it in the course of its development. These principles are no more, as by Kant, conditions of a universal experience, but conditions of a special experience, the particular experience (i. e. the relationship with the objects) of the concerned science, an experience that is not reducible to any other kind of experience. Thus, even the term of “phenomenon” changes: the phenomena are no more the objects which are conceptually determined by the intellect, objects that we find in all of our experiences, but every scientific domain encounter a special kind of phenomena. Using the own principles and concepts, a science creates a network which permits it to create a particular type of phenomena, i. e. the objects which it investigates are thought and described starting from those principles:

„It is only owing to the fact that science abandons the attempt to give a direct, sensuous copy of reality, that science is able to represent this reality as a necessary connection of grounds and consequents. It is only through going beyond the circle of the given, that science creates the intellectual means of representing the given according to laws. For the elements, at the basis of the order of perceptions according to law, are never found as constituent parts in the perceptions. If the significance of natural science consisted simply in reproducing the reality that is given in concrete sensations, then it would indeed be a vain and useless work; for what copy, however perfect, could equal the original in exactness and certainty? Knowledge has no need for such a duplication, which would still leave the logical form of the perceptions unchanged. Instead of imagining behind the world of perceptions a new existence built up out of the materials of sensation, it traces the universal intellectual schemata, in which the relations and connections of perceptions can be perfectly represented. Atom and ether, mass and force are nothing but examples of such schemata, and fulfil their purpose so much the better, the less they contain of direct perceptual content.” (Cassirer 1923, 164-165)

Because the science thinks every object starting from its principles and schemes, the induction, which is the fundamental procedure of science, takes place not as a paradoxical and incomprehensible generalization, it is not an extending or a generalizing of particular data (which can be observed at the beginning of our research) to the entire class of objects. Every induction, says Cassirer, is founded on a certain way of conceiving the individual case. That means that from the beginning the induction projects in the particular case a content that transcends it radically, transforming this particular case in the exponent of an ideal rule. The reality is that the process of adding through empirical observation of new cases actually confirms the rule which existed from the beginning in the mind of the researcher and not that these cases are those which conduct the researcher to discover the rule:

„The logical act of ‘integration’ which enters into in every truly inductive judgment, thus contains no paradox and no inner difficulty; the advance from the individual to the whole, involved here, is possible because the reference to the whole is from the first not excluded but retained, and only needs to be brought separately into conceptual prominence.” (Cassirer 1923, 248-249)



In this way all the objects that a certain science investigates are not only phenomena – a concept that emphasizes only the difference between the content of the knowledge (which only “appears”, so as the concept expresses it) and the reality –, but are also “symbols”, that is entities which exist only because they express a immanent rule:

„Each particular member of experience possesses a symbolic character, in so far as the law of the whole, which includes the totality of members, is posited and intended in it. The particular appears as a differential that is not fully determined and intelligible without reference to its integral.” (Cassirer 1923, 300)

Thus every science generates an own symbolic field. Moreover, the human being, on account of his entire activity and life is, as Cassirer said later, an *animal symbolicum* (Cassirer 1944/1972, 26). That means that in each domain of his activity the human being encounters the objects *only* because he thinks them by means of a certain formula, of a certain scheme of understanding, of a certain sense, because he thinks them in a certain way. Therefore, the existence of a layer of experience that could precede the thinking and its instrument, the judgement, is denied by Cassirer:

„The fact that there is no content of consciousness, which is not shaped and arranged in some manner according to certain relations, proves that the process of perception is not to be separated from that of judgment. It is by elementary acts of judgment that the particular content is grasped as a member of a certain order and is thereby first fixed in itself.” (Cassirer 1923, 341)

Arriving to the conclusion that the perception, the elemental act of the human consciousness, is pervaded by a symbolizing character, on the one hand, and to the conclusion that the different sciences have – each of them – a symbolical approach, irreducible to other factors (thus being asserted that there exists an irreducible plurality of symbolizing acts), Cassirer may now generalize this idea of a symbolic character by conceiving man in general as a symbolic being, a being which, through his entire activity, projects around him an autonomous network of meanings. Cassirer does not develop this idea in his writing *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*, but acknowledges that he discovered it while working at this book (Cassirer 1, 1977, V).

## **2. The Myth as Symbolic Form**

We find the development of the previous idea in the writing which represent the systematic work of Cassirer, the expression of his philosophical conception, namely in the volumes of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. At the beginning of the first volume, Cassirer maintains that the project he has commenced in his writing about substance and function must be developed by showing not only the way as the symbolic activity of man takes place in the sciences of nature, what he actually realized in that work, but also in other domains of the human existence. In other words, it was necessary to investigate the different modes by means of which man encounters the “world” and their articulation. Also it was necessary to present the specificity of those modes and their irreducibility to other faculties of the human spirit.

In general, says Cassirer,

„under a symbolic form should be understood every energy of mind through which a mental content of meaning is connected to a concrete, sensory sign and made to adhere internally to it.” (Cassirer 1956, 175)

The term of “symbolic form” has three meanings in Cassirer’s philosophy. Firstly, it signifies the relationship established between the symbols of a certain domain, Cassirer using in this sense terms as “symbolic concept”, “symbolic function” or the “symbolical character” (*das Symbolische*). A second meaning of this term concerns those domains of culture where these symbolic relationships are materialized: myth, art, religion, language, science. Finally, “symbolic form” means the fundamental categories of thought (space, time, cause, number, etc.), categories which acquire a specific form in each of the domains mentioned before (Hamburg 1949, 77). We have seen earlier, that the term “symbol” is conceived by Cassirer as it is used in sciences, namely as a sign which stays in a predefined relationship with a totality of signs. The symbol is not so much a sign that is related to something real which is substituted by it, as it is a sign that receives its meaning only on the ground of its intrinsic relationship with a totality of signs in that it is included. Cassirer would then subscribe to Husserl’s idea, that “to signify is not a way of being a sign in the sense of being an indication” (Husserl 1901, 23).

Hence, the sign has no existence through itself, but it is produced by a law of generation, by a principle of generation, which produces that totality of signs where each particular symbol is included. This principle of generation, which is precisely the “symbolic form”, founds the great domains of culture. But each domain has a specific symbolic form, an own law of generation (Cassirer 1, 1977, 12). Only from a formal point of view can we talk about a universality of the symbolic form, namely only because all domains of culture presuppose the existence of a certain act of relating their contents, but the act of relating that belongs to a domain is completely different from the act of relating that belongs to another domain, what makes that these domains are all irreducible one to another. The language, as symbolic form, is not reducible to a simple transformation in a linguistic sound of an emotional reaction caused by the reality. Even if the linguistic sound is also such a reaction, the fact that the human being, in this primal stages of his development, has different emotional reactions before different aspects of the reality, proves the existence of a selecting activity regarding the contents of the reality, a selection which, for Cassirer, is possible only on the ground of a certain function. In the same way, the contents of myth are not reducible neither to the language (as have believed a certain direction of myth interpretation), nor to other faculties of the human spirit. The myth is the result of an autonomous symbolic activity. Thus, says Cassirer, the philosophy of symbolic forms does not search the categories of the consciousness of objects only in the intellect, but goes from the assumption that such categories must act everywhere, in general, where from a chaos of impressions a cosmos, a characteristic and typical “image of world” shall be built. Each of such images of the world is possible only by means of specific acts of objectification, i. e. of transformation of the simple “impressions” in representations which are determined and well articulated in themselves (Cassirer 2, 1977, 39).

The relation of a concrete symbol (of a certain symbolic content) to the reality is thus mediated always by the principle of generation specific to the domain where that symbol belongs, a principle that realizes the synthesis of all of our “impressions”. The “indication” of the real thing is possible only on the ground of that mediation. Therefore the indicated real thing is from the beginning an exponent of the symbolic function and not an autonomous existence.

As we have seen, the myth is also a “symbolic form”. Thus, the mythical thought cannot be a simple “distorted” reflection of a reality that exists in itself, it cannot be the expression of man’s fear before the reality or the expression of a rationality that does not possess yet adequate means – these are only two of the modes in which one has explained the origin of myth. Such interpretations would reduce the myth to others

faculties of man, depriving it from its specificity. Cassirer considers that his theory is not an anthropological interpretation of the myth, but a “philosophical theory” of it (Cassirer 1974, 4). Starting from the Kantian distinction between *questio juri* and *questio facti*, we may say that for Cassirer the philosophical theory of myth explains its *truth content*, while the anthropological interpretation tries to describe the way in which the different representations – evolving from a general structure of man’s faculties – have appeared. Such interpretations presuppose that there is a permanent nature of man throughout the history.

The symbolic dimension indicates not only the building of a functional unity of meanings, but it is also a process of objectification. The term of “objectification” comes from the era of German Idealism. We find it at Goethe, at Fichte, but most of all at Hegel. Here we meet the idea of the objectification of the Absolute Spirit. This Spirit has an existence that objectifies itself by means of its creations, that is by means of its activity. In Cassirer’s philosophy, where the assumption of such a universal Spirit does not exist, the objectification means only that a certain content of the consciousness becomes an object of it. The fact that an emotion objectifies itself means that it becomes an object of the consciousness, this emotion being now given to the consciousness as an object and the consciousness being able to apprehend and to know it. But the objectified content is not identical with the supposed content that would exist before the objectification.

„The expression of a feeling, says Cassirer, is not the feeling itself – it is emotion turned into an image. This very fact implies a radical change. What hitherto was dimly and vaguely felt assumes a definite shape; what was a passive state becomes an active process.” (Cassirer 1974, 43)

Thus, the perception, when it is objectified into the language, acquires a different kind of reality, it becomes an object, is given to the consciousness as an object. On account of this objectification, the perception is no more what it was in a supposed pre-linguistic state. But the objectification, as transformation in an object, materializes itself according to the functional laws of the domains where it takes place. The appearing object builds itself not spontaneously, in absence of every kind of conditioning, but it builds itself starting from the conditions that make in general possible (i. e. intelligible) an object in the concerned domain.

„In language we objectify our sense perceptions. In the very act of linguistic expression our perceptions assume a new form. They are no longer isolated data; they give up their individual character; they are brought under class-concepts which are designated by general ‚names‘. The act of ‚naming‘ does not simply add a mere conventional sign to a readymade thing – to an object known before. It is rather a prerequisite of the very conception of objects; of the idea of an objective empirical reality.” (Cassirer 1974, 45)

We may extend this description of the linguistic objectification to all sorts of symbolic forms. Each of them, in the very moment in which they take over a certain content and objectify it, subordinate this content to its specific concept of object, and thus confer it a meaning that has not existed before, removing its individual, particular character. By becoming an “object”, that content can be now known better and better, its features can be articulated more and more in the course of the experience with it. Thus, for instance, starting from the investigations of Usener, Cassirer affirms that the divinities of the developed pantheons have evolved from original deities that were undetermined and appeared instantly as „momentary deities” (Cassirer 1953, 15). They

were, in Cassirer's opinion, rather a kind of peculiar emotional states that were later described as divine presences. The determination and assignation of more and more complex qualities to these primal divinities takes place by means of experience, implies also the historicity of the human being. Actually, „the momentary deities” are grounded in a layer of the mythological thought which is earlier as the structured religion, i. e. earlier to a personalization of the divinity, being grounded in the representation of *mana*. This representation is a category of the mythical and religious thought, namely that “form” (Cassirer 2, 1977, 96) which allows the realization of a unique type of human experience as religious experience. As primal representation of the mythical thought, the *mana* representation means a “wondering” (Cassirer 2, 1977, p. 99), indicates that a certain thing is extraordinary, draws suddenly the attention to the primitive man. But unlike the animal, this qualitative prominence of the thing leads not only to fear or curiosity about it, but represents at the same time the threshold of a new spirituality (Cassirer 2, 1977, p. 99). Thus the *mana* representation builds the core of the category of „holy”, the fundamental category of religion. During the development of the religious life of man, the world divided in two spheres: the one of the Holy and the other of the Profane (of those objects which do not provoke an intensive emotion). The object which is at first perceived as *mana* acquires thus gradually a number of features that build later a more and more articulated representation of a deity or another. Between the building of a religious pantheon and the constitution of the empirical world of objects there is an incontestable analogy. In both of them, says Cassirer, we can observe the transcending of the stage of isolation of the immediate given thing, we can observe that man understands all individual existence as being integrated in a network that forms a totality (Cassirer 2, 1977, 100-101). On account of this integration, the different perceptions do not remain on the stage of an “aggregate” (of a disorganized mass), but advance gradually to the condition of a „system” (of a multitude, that has an inner organization) (Cassirer 2, 1977, 101). Hence, objectification means for Cassirer the act of integrating in a determined form (in science, in a “conceptual” form) of an undetermined impression. This integration in a form is not accidental, but it is realized according to the specific logic of the respective domain. Thus any of the symbolic forms may not be seen neither as a true copy of the reality, nor as an arbitrary creation of the mind. Such a symbolic form has an internal logic, it materializes itself according to an “order of foundation” (*Fundierungsordnung*, as Max Scheler says), namely according to a synchronic but also to a diachronic determination of the meanings. All contents that are once objectified affect *all* the future experience of the individual human being and of mankind in general (Cassirer 2, 1977, 235).

The myth, as all the symbolic forms, is thus the result of a *sui generis* way of man's relating towards the reality. We may only describe this relating, the way as it develops itself in its own horizon, but we cannot discover also the “causes” of its apparition. The myth is an autonomous world, and as in the case of Kant every attempt to determine the origin of the world leads us to a dialectics of reason, i. e. to a theoretical impasse, so all the attempts to explain the myth by means of other capacities of the soul annihilate it and make incomprehensible the ubiquitous presence of one of the most important spiritual realities of the human history. Only by recognizing its specific character as symbolic form may the myth be seen as staying in continuity with the other manifestation of man and may contribute to a better understanding of him. A reductive understanding (in this sense) of the myth is unable to explain its return on the political scene in the XX century. If the myth is understood only as an expression of the original fear of man before the nature or only as a primitive form of rationality, grounded on images, then the recourse to the means belonging to the mythical thought (as are the rituals, the magic language etc.) in the XX century, i. e. in an era of a science, which is

one of the most important results of the evolution of the human rationality, becomes absolutely incomprehensible.

### **3. The Myth of the State.**

From the foregoing explanations we may understand that the title of Cassirer's last book means in no way that the state would be perhaps a myth, namely it would have only an illusory reality, as encourages us a certain utilization of the term "myth". This peculiar utilization means the understanding of the myth in the course of the history as the "Other" of Reason, the myth being considered always as a type of interpretation of the reality which is contrary to the rational interpretation of it. The first who saw in myth an infantile, naïve interpretation of the reality were the Greek philosophers of antiquity. But we must not believe that the reason appears suddenly in the history, without any proper evolution. Reason is, undoubtedly, a dimension of the human being completely different from the mythical thought, but its appearance and its imposing on the historical scene was possible only on account of the inner evolution of the mythical thought. Only because the myth has evolved from the primitive representation of *mana* to more and more complex representations about the reality, that is to say to a more and more articulated religious conception, following itself a dialectical process (in the Hegelian meaning of the term), was it possible to arrive to a certain understanding of it as being inferior to the rational interpretation of reality.

Cassirer says that in the evolution of language there are three stages: on the first stage the language is only a mimic expression of the reality, on the second stage the language is an analogical expression, and on the third stage the language becomes a symbolic expression of reality. On the first stage, the mimic one, we encounter the belief that the language and its components copy the reality or are believed to be an immediate expression of the reality. The fear that a certain object provokes, exteriorizes itself in a certain sound, a sound which is then understood as being the object itself. There exists on this level a complete identification of the word with the thing. The word is not seen as having a separate existence from the thing. On the second level, the linguistic sound, although seen as existing apart from the thing, is considered to have the power and the capacity to replace the thing. Only on the third level appears the consciousness that the linguistic sound, the word, is only a sign that we use for the thing. We observe that in the course of this evolution the critic consciousness evolves, from the entire identification of the word with the thing to the consciousness of the fact that this word is only a sign for the thing. We encounter the same evolution, says Cassirer, also in the domain of the myth and mythical thought. If at the beginning every mythical creation was considered as being the reality itself, gradually the mythical consciousness transforms in a religious consciousness, a consciousness in which there exists the understanding that the reality (in this case the divinity) and its representation are absolutely different, the representation being only a symbol of the divinity (Cassirer 2, 1977, 285), a symbol that expresses very vaguely the transcendent reality of the divinity that it signifies. Only by reaching this third stage of evolution of the mythical thought, the critical faculty of the human thought is sufficiently developed for understanding that the mythical images are projections of the human mind, and not expressions of the reality itself.

Cassirer's intention in his writing *The Myth of the State* is to explain how it was possible that the myth received such a great importance in the political discourse and in the political action and thought from Europe and especially from Germany in the first half of the twenty century. This phenomenon is not an accidental one, according to Cassirer. It can be understood only if we consider the history of the political thought as having the structure of a symbolic form, namely as a domain where the functional relation integrates in a unity the diversity of the reality. In this case, the synthetic

principle that permits such integration is precisely the act of conceiving the political phenomenon. At the first sight, the book *The Myth of the State* seems to contain only a history of the political thought. But we must emphasize that the historical dimension is necessary in the analysis of every symbolic form, i. e. the systematic character of its analysis presupposes the presentation of its historical unfolding. We have seen that the symbolic function gives the original sense of certain content, that integration of the manifold that opens the “inner horizon” of articulation of this sense in meanings that are more and more complex and rich. So, for instance, the myth does not remain at the undetermined representation of *mana*, but evolves in the direction of a more and more exact specification of the content of that representation, starting from the division of the reality in the spheres of Holy and Profane and continuing with the specification of the profiles of the “momentary deities”, until the last stage of religion, the monotheism. But in all this evolution the category, or the “symbolic relation”, or the “symbolic function” that was for the first time objectified in the *mana* representation maintains itself and develops itself. The symbolic function that founds the political thought is undoubtedly the conceiving of the human being as a social being, namely as a being that acquires its own way of existence only inside of the society.

Political thought is described by Cassirer as being a part of the process of rationalization that began in the Greek philosophy of the antiquity and lasted until the modernity. This process of rationalization has in its core the gradual elimination of the explanations that are grounded in the divine intervention in the natural and human order of things. Even if this process begins in antiquity, it lasts until the end of the XIX century. The beginning of this process consists in a reinterpretation of the meanings of myths. This procedure accompanies the evolution of every symbolic form, as we have seen (from the mimetic stage to the symbolic). The sophists are the first who affirm that the myths have not an immediate meaning, but they must be comprehended in an allegorical (symbolic) sense. But such an understanding gives no explanation regarding nature and human being. If the myths are only metaphorical expressions of certain truths, then it raises the question from where we have these truths and what kind of being is that which possesses such truths. The understanding of man becomes a theoretical urgency. Socrates is, according Cassirer, the first who recognises this thing and who considers that one can say nothing about the myths until there is no knowledge of man.

Socrates had yet any political conception, but he made, on account of his way of theoretical interrogation regarding the human being, that the philosophical thought be oriented towards the investigation of the social nature of man. This happens in Plato's philosophy. Plato recognizes for the first time the indissoluble connection between society – i. e. social organization – and individual soul, he recognizes that a wrong organization of the society and a dominant corruption lead to a perverting of the individual soul that belongs to this society (Cassirer 1974, 63). This is also the direction of Plato's critique regarding the mythical thought. In order to build a type of society which is able to lead to a harmonious soul which is no longer corrupted by a society that is itself corrupted and wicked, a certain conception about the divinity is necessary, a conception that we do not find in the myths, where we actually encounter only expressions of the human traits. Only the “Idea of Good”, as a new and legitimate representation of the Deity, may lead the man to a true “Republic”, where the individuals can develop harmoniously (Cassirer 1974, 66). From the point of view of the objectification theory, we may say that in Plato's dialogues the idea of an existence of a “political sphere” is for the first time objectified and that there we meet the first understanding of the power of the politics and its importance for the life of the individual. Here one notices a “functionalization” of the idea regarding the existence of a

political reality, the opening of a new horizon that shall leave its mark on the entire future evolution of the political thought. Because the opening of such a horizon means not only to set certain problems, but also to establish a certain axiomatic system inside of which all the future problems will be resolved. This political sphere presupposes as an essential condition the *responsibility* of men, a responsibility that was impossible in the epoch of the mythical thought, where the individual has no control about himself and about his thought and where he remains in a Kantian state of minority of the reason. Plato's state is built from citizens who have a homogeneous soul, a soul educated by means of such principles that are in unity one with another and which are thus able to induce a homogenous effect in man's soul. A traditional mythical conception, says Platon, is not able to build a homogeneous soul, but only a divided one, which possesses only contradictory impulses that never reach the stage of a real unity. Plato's ethical interest sustains his political conception. The happiness, which is the supreme good for the individual, cannot be attained by random, but only in a "rational" way, through a rational following of the Good. Reason is a capacity that can be developed only in the frame of a well organized society. Cassirer gives the following synthetic description of Plato's conception:

„Of all things in the world myth is the most unbridled and immoderate. It exceeds and defies all limits; it is extravagant and exorbitant in its very nature and essence. To banish this dissolute power from the human and political world was one of the principal aims of the *Republic*. Plato's logic and dialectic teach us how to classify and systematize our concepts and thought; how to make the right divisions and subdivisions. Dialectic, says Plato, is the art of dividing things by classes, according to their natural joints, and not trying to break any part after the manner of a bad carver. Ethics shows us how to rule over emotions; how to moderate them by virtue of reason and temperance. Politics is the art of unifying and organizing human actions and directing them to a common end. Thus the Platonic parallel between the individual soul and the soul of the state is by no means a mere figure of speech or a simple analogy. It is the expression of Plato's fundamental tendency: the tendency to unify the manifold, to bring the chaos of our minds, of our desires and passions, of our political and social life into a cosmos, into order and harmony.” (Cassirer 1974, 77)

During Middle Ages, states Cassirer, the Greek philosophical conception, which is one of contemplation of eternal, but impersonal truths, transforms into a Christian conception, where the fundamental interest is that of the knowledge of God, of a unique God, that no longer has an impersonal character, as in the case of the Greeks, but is himself a *person*. Therefore, for the Christian thinkers, however important are for their theoretical synthesis the philosophers of the Greek Antiquity, the Jewish Prophets remain the major source of inspiration, because in their writings one encounters a personal God. The revelation of the personal divinity (undoubtedly a mythical idea) passes in front of the rational thought and the Greek intellectualism (Cassirer 1974, 81). Thus, for instance, the platonic Forms become Ideas that belong to a divine Intellect, at whom the human intellect participates. Even if all the themes of the Greek antiquity are present in the writings of the Christians, they acquire in this way a new dimension, the religious dimension. The man is reinterpreted from the point of view of his fundamental relation to a God who revealed himself in the history and all his traits – traits that were brought into light by the culture of the antiquity – are now reinterpreted starting from this new dimension. The fundamental idea that sustained the entire medieval thought and was formulated by Augustine was that in all the domains man has access to the truth not on account of his reason (as by Greek philosophers), but immediately, on account of

God's revelation. Therefore if in the antiquity the reason, the human thought possessed the main role, in the Middle Ages this role is attributed to the faith:

„Reason left to itself, describes Cassirer the medieval conception, is blind and impotent, but when guided and illuminated by faith it proves its whole strength. If we begin with the act of faith we can confide in the power of reason, for reason has been given to us not for any independent use of its own but for an understanding or interpretation of what is taught by faith. The authority of faith must always precede the use of reason.” (Cassirer 1974, 95)

Another aspect that the medieval thought receives from the antiquity is the stoicism and its idea regarding the equality of men. This equality is founded in the reason which is present in all human being and in the capacity of man to educate himself in an ethical sense. This legacy is so important for Cassirer, that he says that the medieval theory of the state is based on two postulates: the contents of Christian revelation and the Stoic conception of the natural equality of men. (Cassirer 1974, 106)

Thus we see that the mythical vein is not abandoned in the medieval thought, it acquires only a new form. If in the case of Plato we encountered a polemic against the myth, on the one hand, but also a use of the mythical means in the philosophical discourse, on the other hand, in the medieval Christianity the myth, as expression of a faculty that was opposed to the reason (as all the Greek philosopher have seen it), is further present because religion and faith were considered as being superior to all human reason. Later, the opposition between the conception of the ideal state (City) of God and the real state was founded also in a mythical representation: the original sin. On account of this sin every political institution is condemned to be imperfect:

„Here was a definite mythical element that could not be openly attacked. To doubt the fact of the original sin was impossible for any medieval thinker. On the other hand, the dogma of the fall of man obviously defied all efforts of dialectic thought. It was impenetrable and recalcitrant to rational explanation.” (Cassirer 1974, 110)

Only in scholasticism begins the reason to free itself from the domination of the faith, and at Thomas Aquinas we find even a distinction of the two domains: the one of the grace and revelation and the other of reason and nature (Cassirer 1974, 111). This separation affects also the conception of state. The state is no longer thought of only in connection with its ideal and transcendent model, a model that the temporal organization must try to reproduce, without succeeding to attain it in the history, but also from the point of view of the concrete rationality of the political act and of this organization. The rational organization of the society is actually a proof of man's freedom. The accent is set now, as we may see, not on the impossibility of attaining the ideal model, but on the power of reason to orient itself in accordance with this model:

„Despite the Fall, therefore, writes Cassirer describing the conception of Thomas Aquinas, man has not lost the faculty of using his forces in the right way and thus of preparing for his own salvation. He plays no passive role in the great religious drama; his active contribution is required and is, indeed, indispensable. In this conception man's political life has won a new dignity. The earthly state and the City of God are no longer opposite poles; they are related to each other and complement each other.” (Cassirer 1974, 115)



With Machiavelli the rationalization of the political thought receives a new feature. The first effect of this rationalization is the break produced by it with the medieval idea of a hierarchical organization of the society (Cassirer 1974, 135). The tradition of the hierarchical social system was rooted in the cosmological conception of Aristotle. This philosopher said that the first cause of the Universe was the divinity in his quality of an "Unmoved Mover". His action propagates through the sky of "the fixed stars" over the entire world. The Middle Ages had thought of the world as being divided in a plurality of ontological planes, i. e. as being ontologically heterogeneous. This model is also applied to the state, which is considered as having a divine origin, and to the church. The leader of the state was the emperor and the leader of the church was the Pope. Machiavelli considers that the state, the "principalities", cannot have a divine origin. He observes empirically the mode of building of such principalities in his time and draws the conclusion that to attribute them a divine origin would be a blasphemy.... Machiavelli, on account of his realistic conception about the state and the "political man" (a conception based both on the observation of his epoch and of the past) represents the most important attack against the medieval conception of state and of its divine origin, in other words it is the most important attack against the religious conception of state.

The separation of the theological context that earlier framed the theoretical meditation about the state is a part of a wider process that, according to Cassirer, comprises all the domains of the culture. At the end of the Middle Ages there exists a clear "intellectual line of demarcation" (Cassirer 1974, 130) between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In science, Galileo promotes a conception that is grounded on a different base as the theological conception. The same thing is also true for Machiavelli:

„Machiavelli does not follow the usual ways of a scholastic disputation. He never argues about political doctrines or maxims. It is enough to point to ‚the nature of things‘ to destroy the hieratic and theocratic system.” (Cassirer 1974, 136)

Machiavelli had realized in the political thought what Galileo realized later in the cosmological conception: he eliminated the idea of hierarchy, of the different ontological plans. As the laws of movement are the same everywhere in the new cosmology, so is the man the same for Machiavelli, no matter if he is on the top of the hierarchy or at its base. Machiavelli presents the phenomenon of power as being deprived of its religious content, in the same way as the man of science investigates his object, because important for the examined phenomenon is not its moral or theological aspect, but the law that founds it and its structure. Machiavelli is from this point of view an exponent of the new spirit of the epoch, a spirit oriented mainly toward this world.

Despite this conception with profound rational elements regarding a universal human being, nevertheless Machiavelli uses the mythical representation of the Fortune. But unlike the medieval conception about the Fortune, where the Fortune was only an agent of the divine absolute power, Machiavelli admits that the Fortune represents only a part of the cause that leads to a certain historical result, the other part being attributed to the human will and power. In this way, also by introducing this mythical agent of Fortune, Machiavelli operates a profound secularization, because he admits that man is able to build, at a certain extent, his own destiny.

Another form of spirit that Cassirer presents further is what we may call the science of politics from the XVII century, a science that considers not only that there is a universal human nature, but also that we may work out a „mathematical” science of the political domain, a science elaborated according to the model of Galileo’s science of nature. This “science” presupposes certain metaphysical assumptions, as the assumption of a universal human nature that may be known in the same way as the scientific

principles, namely it is evident through itself and it is thought according to the canons of the mathematical science of nature, namely as a “substance” endowed with certain laws of manifestation. We see thus a new moment of the process of secularization where the theological and mythical elements are more and more removed from the philosophical discourse about the politics (Cassirer 1974, 164).

The transfer of the new science into the domain of the political theory leads to the apparition of the theory of social contract. Here the human beings are seen as being united in a state on the ground of the social contract. The state is no longer the result of a divine intervention, no longer has a divine origin, as it was considered during the Middle Ages, but it is also no longer founded in an arbitrary way, through the rational-technical methods of the Machiavellian *Prince*. Now the state is interpreted as arising according to historical and rational laws, from the way as the individuals renounces – by means of a contract – at their will, in order to impose the reality of a common will, whose expression is the state. The idea of a multitude of individuals who freely give up their will in order to create something superior to them, the state, is rooted also in the ancient stoical conception. However, Cassirer shows that in the XVII century we can observe a revival of the stoical humanist ideals of antiquity. This revival represents thus the way by means of which the stoical conception was applied also in the political theory: if all men are conceived as being equal but in the same time as having the right to act freely, we have the possibility to deduce the existence of state from their accord, i. e. from the idea of a social contract. All the characteristics of the state may now be deduced on the ground of this premise. That was made by Hobbes (Cassirer 1974, 174). The Enlightenment brought no important modification of this interpretative model. The philosophical interest was now oriented not to discover new ideas, but to materialize these political ideas. The Enlightenment is not so much interested in the political theory, but in the political life, (Cassirer 1974, 176). This thing is expressed by the fact that one of the most important thinkers of the XVIII century, Im. Kant, recognizes the priority of the practical reason in comparison with the theoretical reason.

The Romanticism criticizes the Enlightenment and especially its lack of interest for history and myth. Actually, according to Cassirer, the Enlightenment was profoundly interested in history, but its interest resided in the practical teaching that we can acquire from the study of history, the Enlightenment showing from this point of view once more its practical orientation. The Romanticism, on the other hand, is interested on history for itself, on the “superior necessity” which dominates in it. The romanticist interest for history is thus a metaphysical one. The same opposition between Enlightenment and Romanticism also exists regarding myth. If the Enlightenment considers the myth only to be a product of a past era of human spirit, a product that has no value for the present days, an expression of the superstition, the Romanticism considers myth as the major product of the human culture (Cassirer 1974, 183). The interest for myth actually expresses the interest that this era has for the poetical and “magical idealism”, an idealism that finds one of its most authentic expression in the work of Novalis *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. In this period of time we see the passing from the era of reason to the era of imagination. Fr. Schelling was the first philosopher who elaborated a philosophy of mythology, where the myth, as a true product of the spirit, finds its theoretical legitimization. Thus, with the Romanticism, myth comes back into the cultural foreground.

The Romanticism was criticized for its manner of conceiving myth as well as for its idea that the state is only a local expression of the universal Spirit, an idea that was considered to later found the totalitarianism of the XX century. But the romantic totalitarianism is not a political, but a cultural one, considers Cassirer. Moreover, even if the perspective aimed by the romantic spirit is always that of the Whole, of the totality,

for romanticism this totality does not exist independently from that what compose that totality, namely the individual existences that build the totality and that have the same right to exist as the Whole itself. The romanticists recognize the specific of every nation, a nation which is seen as a materialization of the universal Spirit. Romanticists love every such materialization of the universal Spirit and their cultural totalitarianism strives to create a authentic form of spirituality – such as was the medieval Christianity, they being already conscious of the disappearing of this Christianity.

If the German Romanticism is oriented towards myth and metaphysics – the political realities being for it rather a motive of contemplation than of action –, in Carlyle's work we find a shift of this interest from metaphysics towards action, although a great part of the cultural paradigm of the romanticism is nevertheless taken over by him. Carlyle's conception about the hero presupposes both the German romanticism, with its cult of the imagination and history, and Goethe's activism. Carlyle is contemporaneous with Goethe. He knows the German culture and is profoundly influenced by it. But to him romantic passion for history means no more than an occasion for contemplation. The pure contemplation has lost its force of attraction. Already Goethe saw this contemplation as being no more an ideal. We may consider Goethe as being one of the first thinkers who had a profound consciousness of the modern "crisis of values". He sees the absence of a true orientation of the spirit. This disorientation is very well described in his work *Faust*, where the main personage tries everything and finds no satisfaction, until when he discovers the action, the activity as being that what is able to satisfy the spirit, what can bring him an inner balance and harmony. Thus Goethe expresses in his work the new value represented by action.

Even if the hero and the genius occupies in the German romanticism a very important place, we do not observe here yet a hero worship. In the German culture, the hero, although an exceptional figure, still remains an exponent of the Absolute Spirit that is present everywhere. Because at Carlyle the divinity has only a moral dimension, it exists actually through the actions of the outstanding individuals, of heroes. For Carlyle, Absolute Spirit no longer expresses itself through the whole of nature, but only through the human nature and through history. But here also only the hero reveals the intentions of the divinity and is the real cause of the transformations of the social and political life. Therefore, the history remains further a favourite domain for Carlyle. We must emphasize that the way of interpreting the role of the hero in revealing the intentions of the divinity is not seen from the angle of the divinity, as in the metaphysical conception of the Romanticism, but from the perspective of the hero, that is in an immanent mode, from the point of view of the intensity of the hero's faith. The hero becomes at Carlyle an extraordinary man not because he is considered in relation with the divinity, as being an instrument of the realization of the will of God and as an embodiment of God, but because he is considered from the point of view of his own moral force, of his inner power to impose on society and history his own ideas and ideals. This inner force makes the hero to be worthy of worship. The religious sentiment, that was earlier oriented toward the divinity, has almost entirely vanished now, or at present it is merely a secularized religiousness. Therefore, notes Cassirer, that „perhaps no other philosophical theory has done so much to prepare the way for the modern ideals of political leadership.” (Cassirer 1974, 216)

In the XIX century, history is one of the disciplines that know a very intense development. This development leads also to a new self-consciousness of the history, to an interrogation regarding its status as a science. What can determine the recognition of history as a true science and not only as an accumulation of historical knowledge lacking all inner unity? While taking over the scientific model of a unique principle, which is self-evident and from which all the other contents of the science are deduced, Gobineau

claims that he has succeeded in identifying such a unique principle of history, namely the concept of race. In his theory about the differences between races, Gobineau affirms that this difference is a *fact* (Cassirer 1974, 225). In his opinion, this „fact” renders the explanation for the historical dynamic. Thus, in his theory Gobineau reflects the fundamental concepts of his era, the realist and scientific thought of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which searches for its theories undoubted “facts”, which can be recognized and admitted by everyone, as the scientific “facts” are.

The idea of race existence was not new; it had already appeared in the writings of Montesquieu. The novelty Gobineau brings is the worth attributed to this races, especially to the white one, that is considered the very motor of the history. All other values are subordinated to this one, the race representing the supreme worth. The consequence is that every member of a “superior” race is, on account of the simple fact of his existence, superior not only to the members of other races, but also to all creations that belong to that race. Therefore, in Cassirer’s opinion, Gobineau’s theory represents „an attempt to destroy all other values.” (Cassirer 1974, 232) By introducing this new factor, Gobineau introduces in the historical discourse actually an irrational element in order to explain the history and the state: the organization of the state, its power and durability are grounded not on logical criteria, on a rational evaluation of the political decisions and acts, but is only the expression of a *substance* that is the sole value, the unique entity that may explain and justify everything else. In this way, Gobineau reaches a true „race worship” (Cassirer 1974, 245).

During the evolution of political conceptions that precede and make possible the revival of the myth within political thought, Hegel and his philosophy occupies, according to Cassirer, a very special place. Therefore this philosophy is treated in *The Myth of the State* in the final part of the book, in an autonomous chapter that disregards the real historical order of the evolution of the political philosophy. The totalitarianism of the XX century would not be possible without the Hegelian conception. Here we shall mention only some Hegelian ideas that were also taken over by this totalitarianism. There is, Hegel says, a sense of history. This history is a dialectical process, where we always meet a conflict between opposites and their synthesis. Within history, Reason follows its own finality, independently from the intentions of human actors – we must emphasize that Reason is, according to Hegel, no more the Kantian Reason, i. e. a human capacity of thinking, but it is a „reason that lives in the historical world and organizes it.” (Cassirer 1974, 258) By making Reason the ground of reality, Hegel could claim that all what is real is also rational, this way legitimating, at the end, actually, every action in history, however absurd and violent would it seem to us. This Reason acquires in history a concrete form through the reality of the state, the different states being in a reciprocal relationship that is necessarily full of tension. In a certain epoch only one state can truly represent Reason or the universal Spirit. As an expression of the manifestation of the Idea of universal Spirit in history, the state is not an arbitrary existence, but a necessary one. At the same time, it is not, according to Hegel, the result of a social contract, but represents an organic unity where the whole precedes the parts. This whole has for Hegel, in contrast to the other romanticists, a content that is full of tension, it materializes itself through the conflicts of his parts. Hegel does not accept the utopian representation of a condition where we find any conflicts between the states or inside of a state, because this condition would lead to the death of the state itself. Thus, we see that Hegel also develops, in his political theory, the principle of his entire philosophy, according to which Divinity (Reason) always means a) a self-dividing into opposites, b) their conflict and c) their synthesis. Therefore, in spite of the “totalitarian” character of the state in the Hegelian conception (totalitarian because the metaphysical substance of the state precedes the reality of the individuals that build it), nevertheless, the

individuals possess, at the end, a true signification and value. Here the very individuals, with their passions and conflicts which result from those passions, are the ones who materialize the state, who give a concrete form to its substance within history. But they do this without knowing that they are actually only instruments of the “Cunning of Reason” in the history.

We can now summarize the notes that were developed in the sphere of political thought throughout the history, as Cassirer presents them in his book *The Myth of the State* and about which he says that they are to be found in the conception of the state and of the political action in the first half of the XX century. In this conception first there is a consciousness of the fact that the individual soul reflects the organization of the state (Plato). Then, it is also the consciousness of a sense of history (Augustine). This sense, one says, necessarily implies the apparition of the totalitarian state. Another note is that political action has an autonomous rationality (Thomas Aquinas) that may be transformed in a true technique (Machiavelli). All the effects of the political action can be calculated as in the mathematical science of nature (the philosophy of the XVII century), this action includes a practical realization of ideals representations (the Enlightenment), is supported by the recourse to the history and myth (the Romanticism) and is materialized around the hero, who is a messianic personality (the Romanticism and Carlyle). Finally, the state, from the point of view of the new Nazi myth, is a state of the superior race (Gobineau). Through the rational construction of this state the substance of this race is expressed (Hegel). We observe how, throughout all this stages, reason is interwoven in a strange mode with the myth. In his book, Cassirer shows that with each new stage of development of reason we also encounter a metamorphosis of the mythical dimension, of the religious thought. The mythical elements do not disappear in any conception, as rational as they would be. In all we also find a mythical-religious dimension. But this dimension is so closely interwoven with the reason that it appears almost as being without importance. Thus, one has the impression that reason succeeds to dominate more and more mythical thought and that the man transforms gradually in a true rational being, for whom the myth is only a bygone era of his own history. But this idea turns out to be an illusion, because the myth can always come back in the present and this in a totally unexpected way for those who, as Cassirer himself, have always believed in the ideal of the reason:

„When we first heard of the political myths, says Cassirer, we found them so absurd and incongruous, so fantastic and ludicrous that we could hardly be prevailed upon to take them seriously. By now it has become clear to all of us that this was a great mistake.” (Cassirer 1974, 296)

It is true that the myth, as a „symbolic form” is opposed to the reason, because it is the result of a different form of synthesis of the real, because it works with different mental categories. There is thus a logical opposition. But there is also the idea that this opposition, besides being only a logical one, is also a temporal opposition, in the sense that the apparition of reason in the human history implies also an abandonment of mythical thought, that the two ways of thinking cannot exist simultaneously. Even Cassirer, as we saw, acknowledges that he was a victim of this illusion.

In the final pages of the book *The Myth of the State* Cassirer cites Malinowski’s interpretation, according to which the primitives appeal to the myth and to the instruments of the mythical thought only in exceptional situations, namely in such situations that deviate from the everyday logic and compared with with the usual mode of thinking is inadequate. Hence, Cassirer acknowledges that reason and mythical thought can replace each another depending on the different conditions and that they

simultaneously exist inside of the human being. He further applies this interpretation to his era, in an attempt of explaining the possibility of returning to the mythical thought by the modern man, the so-called “rational” man. Western society was, according to Cassirer, in the thirties of the XX century, in a crisis, when the “collective wish” finds no more its usual means of satisfaction and when the recourse to irrational means seems to be unavoidable. The crisis is exactly that exceptional situation that would lead to the revival of the myth. But the western man does not absolutely transform himself in a primitive man this way; the presence of history cannot be annulated in his being. Therefore, the political myth of the XX century can no longer be the myth of the primitive man, it has another content, a content that is determined by the entire history of the earlier political conception. Myth is not an aberrant form, it has its logic, it is a form of organizing experience, the product of a “classifying instinct” (Cassirer 1974, 15) specific to the human being. It is the „synthetic unity of a manifold”, a manifold that in the case of the myth of the XX century includes the whole history of political conceptions as well as the present critical situation of the man. The myth, as Cassirer shows at the beginning of this book, is the result of an intense emotional experience. It opens a horizon, a new dimension inside of which it has an evolution, an own *history*. The “barbarity” of coming back to this means of myth is not an absolute one, the modern man does not renounce at all what the history has deposited in him, does not become, in other words, effectively a “primitive”. This “barbarity” means only the pre-eminence in the modern man of another “classifying instinct” as that of reason. His whole being, conditioned by the history at which he participated, remains the same, except that it acquires a new orientation as that it had until now. The merit of Cassirer’s book is thus that it presents the components of the ideational manifold which found the political myths of the XX century, components that developed, as we saw, throughout the millenary history of European spirit. These components do not exist in a disparate way, without any internal bound; on the contrary, they determine one another, they exist inside of a “order of foundation” and condition one another. Cassirer says in this sense:

„It is, however, clear that the personification of a collective wish cannot be satisfied in the same way by a great civilized nation as by a savage tribe. Civilized man is, of course, subject to the most violent passions, and when these passions reach their culminating point he is liable to yield to the most irrational impulses. Yet even in this case he cannot entirely forget or deny the demand of rationality. In order to believe he must find some ‚reasons’ for his belief; he must form a ‚theory’ to justify his creeds. And this theory, at least, is not primitive; it is, on the contrary, highly sophisticated.” (Cassirer 1974, 280-281)

The collective wish is not immediately objectified at the modern man, as for the primitive man. Political myths do not appear spontaneously, but are very elaborated and sophisticated products, because they are founded on *knowledge*. The synthesis with history presupposes precisely the knowledge. When at the primitive man the reflection was not yet developed, the modern man is precisely the result of this reflection. Even the modern functionalism, that founds, according to Cassirer, our science, is, as we saw, the result of reflection, because one has observed that in different disciplines of knowledge, concepts do not faithfully reflect the reality, do not appear on the ground of the perceived “resemblances”, but are the results of reflective elaborations, of mental constructions. Political myths, as elaborated products, presuppose a good knowledge of man. They have the same finality as science does: manipulation. As modern sciences do not aim at “knowledge” for the sake of knowledge, but at a knowledge that permits the manipulation of the reality, the transformation of it according to the goals of men, so the

modern political myth takes advantage of this new orientation of the present spirit. Knowing that myth is a product of the emotions, the creators of the political myths appeal to such means by which the human emotions may be canalized in their interest:

„Myth has always been described as the result of an unconscious activity and as a free product of imagination. But here we find myth made according to plan. The new political myths do not grow up freely; they are not wild fruits of an exuberant imagination. They are artificial things fabricated by very skilful and cunning artisans. It has been reserved for the twentieth century, our own great technical age, to develop a new technique of myth. Henceforth myths can be manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods as any other modern weapon – as machine guns or airplanes. That is a new thing – and a thing a thing of crucial importance. It has changed the whole form of our social life.” (Cassirer 1974, 282)

Thus, myth is not a symbolic form that was surpassed by the apparition and development of rational culture. The myth founds human culture, and the Babylonian myth of Marduk, cited by Cassirer at the end of his book, is aimed to be an analogy for the fact that our entire culture is penetrated by the myth, except that in the balanced epochs of history the mythical thought is tamed and lays in unity with the other human faculties. During the era of crisis, mythical thought tends to occupy again the foreground of the consciousness and to impose itself on these faculties, or even to overthrow all the value hierarchies that the man has acquired so hardly in the course of his history. If Cassirer grants for the myth, on the one hand, its real worth, as an expression of the first form of objectification of the human spirit, myth remains nevertheless for him a primitive, undeveloped form of this objectification. Because myth is closely related with the human sensibility, myth, mythical thought and the type of imagination that is related to them represents the true elemental forces inside of the human being, forces to which we cannot directly oppose. Rather a pedagogical effort is needed, an effort of shaping human being in the sense of developing his capacity to avoid the irrational fascination pertaining to those forces by means of a true knowledge of the structures and mechanisms of mythical thought.

If earlier in his investigations, Cassirer saw the mythical thought only as being an object of scientific research, the revival of myth in the present days makes Cassirer consider this research now as being an evaluation of a true adversary:

„We should carefully study the origin, the structure, the methods, and the technique of the political myths. We should see the adversary face to face in order to know how to combat him.” (Cassirer 1974, 296)

Mythical thought can become an adversary for Cassirer only because this type of thinking annihilates the human freedom. One of the features which define the mythical thought is, according to Cassirer the identity between the subject and the object of knowledge (Cassirer 2, 1977, 51; 82-85). Here we do not find any distance between thought and its object, a distance that is so necessary to every rational thinking and that only permits the free and responsible decision. On the contrary, this identification of the subject with his object leads to an action in which the subject is lived by the object, his actions being actually extensions and projections of the object inside the subject. In the context of the new political myths, the totalitarian state is an object that imposes itself over the human subject, thus striving to determine from within all his actions and kidnapping him his freedom. The manipulation aimed by these myths actually means the

inculcation of the leader's will (who is thus identified with the state) in all the members of the society and their transformation in shades of his person.

In our opinion the title of Cassirer's book has thus several meanings. This title refers to the fact that the concept of state in the Nazi era and in the era of the totalitarian state in general, proves a revival of certain features that belongs to the mythical thought. In this sense, we may understand the title *The Myth of the State* as aiming to describe the conditions of possibility pertaining to that extremely complex myth at which the contemporaneous totalitarian state appeals to legitimate itself. But on the other hand, if we look also at the entire background of Cassirer's functionalistic thought, we may say that this book intends to prove in a polemic way the fact that the idea of a substance of state that would exist beyond the history and that would be materialized by the totalitarian state is actually only a fiction, in the negative meaning of term, namely only a "myth". Finally, *The Myth of the State* indicates the extremely real peril (that was totally ignored until now) that in the totalitarian societies the relationship between the state and its citizens may acquire a mythical character, losing thus its rational character. The state tends here, in other words, to depersonalize its citizens, to become the real subject of their subjectivity, the centre of their personality.

We must see in this last book of Ernst Cassirer the profession of faith of a great humanist, for whom reason, freedom and culture are those values that raise the human being to the condition of the true humanity.

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