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## Chapter 4

## Identities of the West

### *Reason, Myths, Limits of Tolerance*

BARBARA HENRY

In recent debates, notions of identity are predominantly seen as coined within the framework of modernity and subsequently criticised by postmodern thought. This chapter will explore the relation of these two modes of thinking with regard to the term identity. Attention will be focused on the controversial question of the relation of myth to the identities of the West (e.g. individual, group and national identity), and the objective will be to explore how this relation can become a philosophical testing ground for a notion of political identity that is far removed from any hegemonic claims over the various *Lebenswelten*, and above all over a-rational concepts; *in primis*, myth.

Subsequently, I will examine the main charges made by postmodern thinkers against Western universalism, and more specifically against the category of 'identity' which sustains the claims advanced by universalism. Although certain objections will be taken into account, I intend to rehabilitate several interpretations of the concept of identity: numerical identity, qualitative identity, and group identity. I will suggest that these concepts are still usable to shape a political identity that can be characterised as 'multiple' and modular (but not polyphrenic!). Furthermore, I will argue that this kind of identity is the only one that can be considered adequate for the present age. Currently the implosion of political forms and consolidated socioeconomic equilibria (democratic nation-state, market economy *and* welfare state) goes hand in hand with the resurgence of allegiances and collective constraints that are no longer aligned with national borders. The emergence of 'new' identities is a phenomenon sustained by mythographic experiments which take shape at the level of collective narration and gradually supplant the older nationalistic myths. *both below and above the nation-state*. The new displaces the old. For-

saking the heroic epic tales of the past, which, at least as far as Europe is concerned, did not erect discriminatory barriers against other collective subjects on a purely ethnic basis. I will then dwell on the characters of structural affinity between the national myths of former times and the ongoing mythographic experiments of the present day (above all in Europe). The task at hand is to infuse significance and vitality into the notion of political identity. To this end I will offer an in-depth analysis of the three meanings of myth that are most significant for the present investigation.

A further objective of this comparative investigation is to assess whether some of the categories traditionally used to describe aspects and problems of individual identities may be helpful in understanding conflicts that arise in the sphere of old and new group identities. I will thus consider links between the concept of *tolerance* and the *numerical* significance of identity. The latter indicates that beyond a certain limit no entity can accept within itself differences or demands that are incompatible with its own true structure and internal balance, under pain of dissolution into the surrounding environment. For *tolerance* (rather than *toleration*) is first and foremost the relative capacity to withstand the impact of an unfavourable external (environmental) factor, and only secondarily an attitude of indulgence towards beliefs and practices different from, or in conflict with, one's own. *Toleration*, on the other hand, implies, among other things, the specific policy of a government which refrains from banning forms of worship or belief that are not officially established or not accredited among the majority of the population.

### 1. Identity Summoned to Testify

From the 1960s onwards, dire accusations have been raised, within the very heart of the West, against the project of modernity and the principle of rationality that sustains it. The violence of modern reason is claimed to have reached its apex at the very moment in which reason, overcoming all barriers (territorial, cultural, ethical), has extended its own form of order and discipline over all sectors of life, homologating all living phenomena—including human beings—to criteria of efficiency and bioenergetic economy. Thus it would appear that under the motto of emancipation, Western civilisation has in effect produced violence against individuals and masses, bureaucratisation, destruction of material and environmental resources, widespread diffusion of occult power and regimentation of opinions.

The main cause of these developments, it is argued, is the fact that modern reason arose as a means to extend throughout the world the form of subjectivity that constitutes its main characteristic; for subjectivity is none other than a process of integration, carried out under the banner of equality, unity,

implements worldwide actions. A modern subject, so the argument goes, is twofold: power and action, driving principle, and system of order. Since the subject is rooted in the principle of identity, which is the only one capable of endowing the empty shell of self-awareness with ever greater permanence and stability over time and space, the modern subject therefore becomes a centre of irradiation of scientific knowledge accompanied by the resulting technical-manipulative attitude. The latter knows no limits, inasmuch as self-founding subjectivity denies the dimension of externality any right whatsoever (whether such a dimension be called nature, or matter, or life), merely tolerating its subsistence instrumentally. I will return later to the meanings of tolerance that are of relevance for identity.

For now, suffice it to say that the predominance of the principle of identity and the colonisation of the living world are considered by many contemporary authors to be conjoint phenomena, since identity is the expression of a logical-functional unity that floods uncontrollably over the multiform, but defenceless, dimensions of life. It is claimed that the abstract principle of equality of self with self, sameness,<sup>1</sup> which constitutes identity, belongs to the sphere of thought, but not to that of concrete existence. Identity is considered to be capable of denaturing all individual phenomena just as soon as it enters into contact with them, since two things are perfectly identical only in the case of logical relations between symbols, or in the abstract form of thinking subjectivity.

The path had already been traced out by representatives of the deconstructivist school, itself owing a debt to Nietzschean reflections concerning the annihilating effects of rationality and logic on life (J. Derrida, J.F. Lyotard, G. Deleuze, F. Guattari). Furthermore, identity had already been challenged by the disciples of Heidegger. Here I will also draw on the exponents of philosophical hermeneutics (H.G. Gadamer, P. Ricœur) as well as the authors of the *Theory of Political Judgment* (H. Arendt, E. Vollrath, R. Beiner), who link the final outcome of modernity to the origins of metaphysics and Western logic. Hannah Arendt was scathing in the description of the tyrannical aspects characterising the latter two systems. The principle of identity on which they—logic and metaphysics—are constructed has led to politically ruinous effects: by subordinating politics to philosophy, they have given rise to a veritable denaturing of *vita activa*. The origin of the mortal disease of the West lies in the claim of logic to be able to discover *the* one truth for *the* plurality of human beings (Arendt and Jaspers, 1985:195-7, n. 106, 25.12.1950). In Hannah Arendt's eyes, this claim leads to the imperative of freeing the world from difference, multiplicity, the contingency of finite things. The unity of the identity principle does not tolerate plurality, the latter being the phenomenon that lies at the origin of the human condition, in particular, and the condition of the world in general.

Many of the accusations formulated so far may prove to be well-founded, against the logic...

cal-formal meanings of identity. The situation changes if we take as our perspective the cultural and political past of identity—in other words, if we consider the ways in which the category has historically been described and socially objectified. From this point of view, identity is not limited to operations on external nature at a cognitive and technical-manipulative level, but instead it also gradually becomes a model of personal and social behaviour. A glance at the most representative era confirms this interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

In the pedagogical plans of the mature Enlightenment, identity was called upon to discipline instincts and inclinations in order to endow the psyche and individual character with stability, coherence and balance. The model of normality deriving therefrom excluded any tendency to imbalance or excess that might distract the subject from realisation of his/her own aims, relegating such deviant inclinations to the sphere of pathological phenomena. A.W. Schlegel noted that the Enlightenment was guided by the economic principle, and suggested that since such a principle favours criteria of usability and applicability, it determines not only the quest for truth but also a moral tension towards that which is good (Schlegel, 1964:22-85 no. 64, 63). This means distinguishing between virtues according to the degree of their predisposition toward practical applications, handling of business matters, and respect for conventions. It is emblematic, in fact, that eighteenth-century theories which can be regarded as an apology of passions *tout court* (F. Hutcheson, D. Butler, J. Mandeville) found little support in the overall framework of orthodox Enlightenment thought.

The trend was reversed only in Rousseau, at the very point which marks the beginning of the language of authenticity, that which expresses and expounds the ways in which a subject can remain faithful to himself/herself. Emotions, sensations, affections, feelings, and passions become the forms in which (personal) identity is manifested and publicly objectified, constructing the new words and phrases through which subjects make themselves intelligible and obtain (albeit reluctantly conceded) social recognition (Taylor, 1989, 1991; Pulcini, 1996:133-47). Thus the fact of belonging to the eighteenth century by no means turns Rousseau into an Enlightenment thinker—quite the contrary. His eccentricity indirectly confirms that the most widely accepted vision of the self in the period in question was that of a self directed towards optimisation of individual talents, although always within the framework of respect for civilised conventions and good manners. It can therefore justifiably be stated, on account of the cultural and political aspects highlighted here, that the Enlightenment model of identity and the forms of subjectivity corresponding to this model may not unfairly be considered as forerunners of instrumental rationality.

A glance at the situation a little further back in time suggests that the eighteenth-century conception of the self, which strove towards saving and invest-

without techniques of production, communication, regulation and *social control*. As is known, Foucault (1981:246-54, 1980:39) introduced an additional category to be placed on a par with the aforementioned techniques: the technologies of the self. From the eighteenth century onwards, these technologies underwent various transformations that had an avowedly biopolitical significance, with concern for the individual becoming a duty of the state. This generated interdependence between technologies of domination over others (i.e. social control) and technologies of dominion over one's own interior. Over time, as the disciplines and procedures, both individual and collective, that incorporate these two types of technology have gradually become more consolidated, power has become more and more stably grounded within political systems, not excluding liberal democracies. Foucault criticises the forms of disciplinary regimentation which we, as individuals of Western civilisation, have been led to recognise as society, as part of a nation, and of a state.

As I have tried to show, the strategy adopted so far does not imply a divorce from modern reason, but merely the unmasking of its hegemonic claims over passions and nonrational aspirations. We must therefore exercise extreme caution whenever we wish to involve identity, the principle that informs that rationality, in a critique of modernity (see Heller, 1993: 623-38). Above all, it is essential to avoid the strategy that sees all ills as deriving from the logical meanings of this notion, for such meanings may still prove useful, at least to redefine political identity. Let us now briefly consider these meanings.

## 2. The Identities of Modernity

2.1. The core of the logical meaning is the following: identity is synonymous with equality of self with self (sameness). The latter, in turn, has two meanings:

a) The first in order of importance is *numerical identity* or *individuality*: this tells us that entities are not fungible, as they remain intact over a given space-time interval without dissolving into the surrounding environment.<sup>3</sup> This meaning is represented in sociology by *personal identity* (E. Goffman). It is an expression that indicates bureaucratic identity. The entry in the registry of births, marriages and deaths, one's passport, driving licence, income tax return, social security number and voter registration—these are all documents attesting to the fact that each of us possesses one specific identity. But sameness also has another meaning.

b) Instead of signifying the nonfungibility of two individuals, it indicates which ones among the aspects that are common to two entities can actually be considered as the same. Let us consider what happens if X and Y have identical uniforms. Then if they are examined from the point of view of what they

are wearing, one may be mistaken for the other, without affecting their individuality. However, numerical identity still remains the logical *minimum* of identity in general, and of qualitative identity in particular.

Nevertheless, it does not follow from the above statements that logical meanings are the source of all ills of modernity. Certainly, one cannot adduce the motive of structural and indissoluble constraints supposedly linking them to metaphysics, for there exist no such links: this was made clear by nominalist solutions, as early as Duns Scotus and Locke. Admittedly, it cannot be denied that identity became burdened with meanings in the ontological and theological sphere, before undergoing further metamorphoses in the field of psychology. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that the various semantic shifts—which will be addressed in detail further on—are the stages of a perverse dialectics that paves the way to the concentration camps. For a more cogent criticism of the undesired outcomes of modernity it is preferable to have recourse to philosophical anthropology, history of the cultural colloca-tions of the *self*, moral and political philosophy, rather than deconstruction of the logical forms of thought.

Even so, many still regard such forms as epitomising, in their transparent perfection, the load-bearing pillars of the political horror of the twentieth century. It is no coincidence that the 'snake's egg' is the image around which unfolds the disturbing film by Bergman on the cultural and technical-scientific premises of Nazism—a choice of symbol that was dictated by the desire to express that which, by exhibiting the form of the archetype, not only epitomises but also reveals a glimpse of its terrifying content, which is the other face of the creative power of knowledge. For the image of the snake evokes both power and science. This symbology offers a powerful model of the insinuating and threatening technological mentality, that is to say the attitude that was at one and the same time both modernist and irrationalist and which was widespread during the Weimar period (see Herf, 1984; Henry, 1993). However, it does not seem to me to represent the 'great collective narrative'<sup>4</sup> capable of reflecting the entire history of the West, in particular of the modern West.

I will now briefly illustrate some of the developmental paths of identity in the framework of the Western semantic universe, introducing along the way the various philosophical, social-psychological and political meanings. The relation between identity and the emotive and myth will be addressed when dealing with the political acceptance of this concept.

2.2. The logical meanings of identity have acquired shape and greater depth through mystical meditations on the condition of creaturehood, influencing the philosophical forms of the constitution of egoity (ipseity, *Selbstheit*). The procedure of identification translates into the first act performed on oneself by the human observer, eccentric with respect to the world and, when reflecting, with respect to one's own body as well. The reflecting nucleus assigns to the exter-

nal world its own appearance, the body, which constitutes an object for this reflecting core (Jervis, 1992:12). From medieval times to the modern age, theological meditations on subjective identity have enriched a stream of thought that was already dominant in continental philosophy, namely that which accentuates the static, nucleic and point-like characters of egoity<sup>5</sup> rather than the process-oriented, constructive and interactive aspects typical of the English philosophical model (Marquardt, 1979:353-7). But it was the latter that would later influence the social sciences.

From Schopenhauer to Kierkegaard right up to the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*, the essentialist vision can be summarised as consisting of the claim that the personality is endowed with a substantial and unobjectifiable nucleus, that which we are, which is then overlain by an accidental crust which is dedicated to externality, that which we seem. The sphere of externality gives rise to the dimension of intersubjectivity, which generally bears the negative axiological sign. For Schopenhauer, our 'existing in other people's opinion' is mere seeming, yet, on account of our superficiality, we grant it excessive consideration, despite its being inessential to our happiness. Moreover, for Heidegger, the figure expressed by the impersonal term *Man*, governed by routine and tyrannically ruled by anonymous 'others,' connotes the flight and fall of our authentic *Dasein* into inauthenticity (Schopenhauer, 1976; Heidegger, 1947:41-2, 113-14, 128, 235, 269, 297; Marquardt, 1979:348). In contrast, in the sociopsychological interpretation, to which we will turn shortly, a veritable reversal of positions *vis-à-vis* this point is found. In the meaning deriving from the pragmatist approach, our external image—or, if you will, *all* our images—gradually comes to form our permanent identity. That which we seem comes to shape that which we are.

The sociopsychological acceptance arose within the Anglo-American tradition, which began with William James, continued with George H. Mead and Erik H. Erikson, and eventually developed into the symbolic interactionists. In this tradition the *self* can be said to correspond to subjective identity, which takes on process-oriented and interactive characters. Self-conscious subjectivity is found not at the beginning but rather at the end of the process, since a person constructs the texture of his or her identity through successive syntheses, and this endeavour may actually fail. For one can in fact speak of acquiring or losing identity. James further distinguishes *self* from *social self*. It is the latter concept that expresses the set of recognitions each individual receives from the other members of society. However, as early as James, the innermost portion of the *self* is explained as a chain of progressive appropriations of external situations, which are then internalised and placed in relation with previous situations. Mead offers an in-depth investigation of this second aspect, that is to say, of the idea that the process of edification of the *self* does not occur in a situation of isolation but in a condition of linguistic-symbolic interchange. He does not yet talk of *ego-identity*, as Erikson would do subse-

quently, but nevertheless legitimates the association of this concept with the *self*. It can well be said that for Mead the point of origin of identity is not in the single conscience, just as it was not for James, but rather in the dimension of sociality. Each person internalises the expectations which those social figures who are relevant for him/her—the ‘significant others’—display towards him/her. By progressive adjustments all individuals construct an identity for themselves, i.e. a detailed and composite structure of themselves that is adequate to respond to such expectations.

What we are dealing with here is a procedural notion of identity: in other words, we have different, but structured, series of performances. In this model, performances that have an identifying function form a complex of acquired skills, a set of synthetic, communicative and reflective capabilities that allow individuals to unify and endow their own experiences with intelligible meanings. To achieve identification with oneself means to recognise that one has at least a minimum continuity and consistency of attitudes, ways of thinking and modes of behaviour. Memory, and the narrative aspect within it, is predominant, even though instinctual moments are not absent. They are represented by the concept of ‘I’, as opposed to the ‘me’ of social interaction. For Mead, the self is composed of both aspects, which must cooperate reciprocally in the integrational synthesis, and although the latter is never definitive, it is nevertheless a whole, consistent and coherent with respect to its own evolutionary phases. The subject can be reflected in the synthesis as in its own self-sameness.

Here affinities emerge with *one* of the logical meanings of identity. It is helpful at this point to touch on the concept of *qualitative* identity, which is the second meaning of sameness. It indicates the common aspects or properties on account of which two or more single entities can be regarded as interchangeable. If we consider the formal procedures of identity construction also to be common aspects, then the *self* is a case of qualitative identity. Furthermore, this version of identity is not restricted to indicating which *model* of psychic normality is held to be the best, but has instead introduced additional and specific substantive elements, for instance the idea that imperfect application of the aforesaid model results in the subject being incapable of acting and reflectively controlling his actions. Indeed the contemporary offensive has been launched not only against the formula of the *self*, but also against its normative precepts: those ideals of normality as well as of social and political integration that until just a few years ago held undisputed sway in Western liberal democracies.

Whatever the metaphor selected—decentralisation of identity, saturated self, patchwork-identity—many scholars agree today that the self, the profile of which has been outlined in the above investigation, is no longer adequate to give a proper account of the average social self as it is found in contemporary societies. The identity they find displayed before them is an identity at risk

contingent and precarious, polycentric and polyphrenic (Luhmann, 1990:14-30; Gergen, 1991; Straub, 1991). The saturation of the social self is accomplished by means of technologies linked to the communication of images and lifestyles deriving from elsewhere, i.e. from cultures, professions and social milieus that are far removed from the self’s own background. Technical means—radio, television, telephone, fax, video-camera, video-recorder, computer, the World Wide Web—all cumulate their effects, multiplying not only the expressive potential but also the obligations and expectations that the *self* must contend with. The individual constantly enters into new contacts and relations, but is also required to satisfy ever new demands arising from expansion of his/her own receptivity towards the world. This excessive burden of commitments produces uncertainty in each individual as to the priority to be assigned to the various duties. ‘The daily agenda’ must be continually renegotiated with oneself and with others. In the severest cases, individuals lose their capacity to give themselves coherent forms of self-interpretation, and see their own life plan gradually unravel (see Gergen, 1990:48ff., 73ff.).

Some authors regard such a state of affairs as the deplorable outcome of the negative dialectics of identity, held to be incapable of facing the challenges of difference and complexity.<sup>6</sup> Others hail the fragmentation of identity as a liberating event. There are also those who highlight the possibility of refining sensitivity to differences and of learning to tolerate the incommensurable, that is to say, learning to countenance that which cannot be reduced to our commonplace ideals of truth and rational behaviour—for our own customs are just as far from universality as are the products of any other culture. In this perspective, the romantic art of self-persiflage and an ironic attitude towards one’s own culture become postmodern virtues. The deconstructivist stream of American philosophy (R. Rorty) finds its own privileged interlocutor in Lyotard (Keupp, 1988:146; Welsch, 1990:171; Rorty, 1984).

However, one can criticise the role played by the self in shaping the model of psychic and moral normality that has so far been dominant in contemporary Western democracies without necessarily having to relinquish identity (Henrich, 1979:136), in particular qualitative identity. The logical term attains in an inescapable way a lot of new specifications. In the terminology of Ernst Tugendhat, qualitative identity resides in the practical consequences each individual draws from his/her answer to two fundamental questions: ‘What kind of person am I and what kind of person do I wish to become?’ (Tugendhat, 1979:285; Straub, 1991:54-5). The relevant aspect is that individual qualitative identity is translatable into supra-individual identity. It may be called group identity, provided that it has, as its constitutive elements, the shared qualities and procedures through which such qualities are reflectively assimilated by the individual components of the aggregate. In this case one can already speak of qualitative group identity. The question may now be posed as a first personal plural query: ‘Who are we and what do we wish to become?’

### 3. Group Identity Versus Political Identity

The step towards supra-individual identity seems to have been achieved without difficulty. However, some precautionary measures are strongly advised in order to avoid falling into the trap of holism. The alternative that needs to be examined here is the one between 'collective identity' and 'group identity.' By using the group as a unit of reference, dangerous misunderstandings can be avoided: those who make reference to the group do so, in the first instance, in order to exclude compact, strong identities that are independent of individuals, unlike the concepts immediately evoked by the notion of 'collective identity' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Cerutti, 1993, 1996; Henry, 1996:176). The term group identity, second, invokes the capacity of individuals to reflect and negotiate. Rather than to the collective itself it often refers to the options and preferences such individuals have expressed as members of the aggregation (Henry, 1998).

Identity is the intersection between the subjective and objective aspect of a process of reelaboration of shared experiences, but in order to be maintained over time it needs vessels, symbols. Let us consider as an example a population of men and women, possibly starting from the mere circumstance of finding themselves gathered together by chance, who begin to interpret and express their own collective experience (including any possible conflicts) through the filter of the community, thereby laying the basis for the birth of group identity. Cultural crystallisation occurs, which in the long term is transformed into codes, into typical transmission modes. While the initial contents are modified through the intervention of subsequent generations, patterns of expression and interpretation take shape and persist in each individual cultural concretion—a sort of coinage, as it were, a symbolic seal that characterises the community (Smith, 1986). All those phenomena which, by simply being displayed (artefacts, lifestyles, activities), afford profound insight into the deepest and most characteristic meanings and values of the community are here defined as *symbols*. The forms and genres of artefacts and activities are the models and the *symbolic styles*.

We will now take a further step forward, towards the political dimension with its greater concreteness. Group identity *sub specie* of political identity describes the set of common characters to which we allude when saying 'we the members of this political community.' Political identity is more than a mere vision of the world, for it includes the description of what people think of themselves when they are active in and on behalf of the political group. Political identity includes not only the set of values, options and political features, but also the procedures activated by each individual in order to reflect on such characteristics and fully take possession of them, for as long as they con-

Further extending the concepts outlined above, 'political identity' can be taken to mean: a) the set of relations between citizens and institutions, resource allocation criteria and partitioning of costs; b) values, symbols, myths on which collective narration has been built, as well as justifications for the allocation of risks, costs, benefits; c) the reflective combination of these two components.

The second component, i.e. b), refers to phenomena that can be traced both to the realm of popular imagination (epics, stories and legends) and to narrative reelaboration (usually differing from the truth told by the historians) of shared events: flags, monuments, anniversaries, eponymous heroes, typical landscapes, selections from oral history, dramatic or literary reelaboration of historic events, the ritualising of collective traumas and victories. Let us consider for a moment a canonical example of 'political identity': the European (South-American or Asian) political *élites* endeavouring to build their respective national communities. The prototypical stage set is that the ruling classes are convinced it is their duty to teach the rudiments of nationhood to the most disparate territorial and professional groups, the majority of whom live in peripheral and illiterate areas. The first step taken in this direction consists of making nations perceivable, by seeking to breathe life into these abstract communities that extended over far-flung areas, far beyond the local village, and are therefore visible only through the imagination (Anderson, 1991). The second step is to attempt to communicate the principles that underpin the living spirit of these nations, while the third, and most difficult, step is to try to instil into general consciousness the idea that the common belonging to the new political entity implies an act of allegiance toward public institutions. But the symbols of belonging can legitimise this claim for loyalty that the political forces wish to demand from their citizens only if such claims have been filtered through reflection, accepted and reelaborated by the addressees.

Up to now, we have considered the political symbol, casting only dim light on its relationship to myth. We must now turn to an important issue that should not be neglected, namely whether contemporary political identity should or should not resort to the authority of *mythic* reelaborations of the most noble and widely shared features of its past and present. Symbols are indispensable in order to achieve *political identity*, and it can be suggested that myths are a symbolic vehicle within everybody's reach, capable of endowing cold juridical statements with an emotional depth.

With regard to the second component of political identity, we need now inquire whether, and to what extent, dramatic or literary reelaborations of important events and the ritualisation of collective traumas or victories can legitimately be turned into myths. Let us assume that there is a consensus about who and what to mythicise or not to mythicise. Having said this, the more severe the economic, political or military crisis in which a community

(whatever its extension) finds itself, the greater the danger of a warped use of myths. In such cases of generalised distress, there might arise a desire to suspend critical thinking in order to stress the mythic aspect linked to imagination and emotional fulfilment. If common sense is really, as Vico taught, 'knowledge without reflection' and if this faculty has been predominant throughout the pagan eras of humanity—the most mythopoetic era of history—then a (groundless but) extremely dangerous contrast between myth (useful for life) and reflection (damaging for life) could begin to take shape in Western politics.

In the following sections we will seek to ascertain how this risk can be averted. We will thus enquire into the kind of myth—which would need to have an antiholistic and open character—that could instead be contemplated in support of a political identity. Such an identity, in as far as it corresponds to normative expectations, will not exert hegemony over mythopoetic aspirations, but neither will it be impotent when faced with the dark side of the power of mythic expression and action. From here onwards we will explore the various meanings of the term 'myth'.

#### 4. Myth and Identity: Some Definitions

Without any claim to exhaustiveness in this regard, let us consider three configurations of myth in politics, which will be outlined in this fourth section and examined in reference to the modular notion of political identity in the fifth section.

**FIRST DEFINITION.** This is a common sense definition: for citizens of the West, myths are imaginary or legendary stories, whose protagonists are heroes and heroines (historical characters, in many cases). These stories release a strong liberating force and often rest on a nucleus of truth. The satisfying effect leads one to believe that the source of these tales is reliable and this increases the belief in the pragmatic 'goodness' of the stories capturing the greatest attention among the public. We will investigate this further later on.

**SECOND DEFINITION.** This is a theoretical definition, but it is linked to the first one: myths are the main patterns of narration, universal in meaning and following typical models in their structure, which lie at the basis of the imaginary and legendary stories recounted by different peoples and cultures (Eliade, 1978; Frazer, 1978; Coupe, 1997). We may call them mythologems.

**THIRD DEFINITION.** Myth is the expression of collective emotions and desires; it has two variants: the first has a negative axiological sign, as it has been tainted by the most outrageous manifestations of intolerance and political violence by totalitarian regimes. The second, however, could well contribute to the birth of a political identity compatible with the proposals

#### 4.1 Myth as a history of heroes and heroines

At present, it is the first meaning that is predominant in the West: myths are imaginary or legendary stories of heroes and heroines bursting with emotional strength and having a liberating effect.

These are myths which, at least in their common representation, have overcome the dialectics between sacred and profane (Altizer, 1966), as the ritual of return into chaos and the primeval celebrations to reconcile the cosmos and society have now 'fallen into disuse.' The myths of Western men and women of today belong to the historical dimension. Even though such tales are studded with unusual or unlikely events and do not exclude cyclical time patterns, common sense myths do not correspond to an archetypal notion of 'mythic narration' that has a value in itself.<sup>7</sup> There is a need for—real or fictitious—human beings who are willing to bear witness to their validity as true examples. Such exemplary nature reduces the common sense myth to its minimum nucleus.

Essentially, myths describe heroic real or imaginary figures that have maintained their persuasive powers over time, as they have represented, above and beyond moral and territorial boundaries, the characteristic features of a given period, of a cultural stage, of a mentality that is felt to have some bearing on modern Europe. The cradle of such myths has been the old continent, from the Renaissance up to the present day. They are not merely figures that can be recognised within a given lapse of time, but also emblematic characters, above all repositories of new certainties and a new sense of disquiet that contrasts with the mythical universe of ancient times and the Middle Ages.

One may object that all modern myths, whether they are tales or characters, are the heritage of the Western world. In fact, almost all of them carry the hallmark of the European symbolic universe. Here are some famous and non-controversial examples: Hamlet, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Dracula, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, Faust, Turandot, among the partly or wholly literary myths, and Luther, Cagliostro, Elisabeth I, Mary Stuart, Catherine the Great, Byron, Napoleon, Mozart, among the historical ones. In all cases, even chronologically premodern characters—one need only think of William Tell or Joan of Arc—can be considered as belonging to modernity due to the very extensive transformations they have undergone in numerous media and genres (literature, essays, music, theatre, painting) during a process of readaptation and response to the need for symbolic satisfaction in the modern age. We may return here to an example that is already familiar: massive reelaborations of preexisting storytelling or historical material are but the replicas of heroic epics, made to measure by intellectuals of the Romantic age for the rising nations.

These epic cycles, exploited by individual nations to fulfil their own needs, are not generally considered to contain values that are comparable or could be shared at a European level. But the influence and mutual contact

between myths is not restricted by political or strategic-military boundaries, in spite of attempts made even in modern times to anchor some of them in ethnic-genealogical pedigrees. The contrast between 'particularising' and all-pervasive trends cannot be eliminated. This all-persuasiveness is part of the peculiar nature of the myths of modern Europe, the cradle of industrial society and of print-capitalism, alias the publishing industry and the gradual canonisation of the vernacular languages into more standardised and translatable forms than the various local idioms and *patois* (Anderson, 1991). Luther can be considered as one of the prime figures masterminding this extended change and, as such, one of the European myths: the very fact of translating the Holy Scriptures into the vernacular and spreading the Good News through the printed word became emblematic of a radical change in customs, evaluative attitudes, and the whole political-institutional setup on the European continent, which from that time onwards right up to the First World War was coextensive with the West.

At present, despite geopolitical revolutions and cultural upheavals, we continue to belong to modernity, at least under one aspect: it is not only information, but the myths themselves, whether they be tales or characters, that satisfy our need for perfection and individual fulfilment by the mere fact of circulating through means of communication that are easily accessible to all. They can be used for social and political purposes, as already happened (not only in the West, but on the model of the West) in the classical *nation-building* era, because myths are simultaneously the products and the means of giving birth to a new form of civilisation, whereby imagination becomes a public instrument, a channel to form and inform increasingly extended human groups.

As regards the political role of imagination and the myths it conveys, I am referring here to the ideas of those who have studied the birth of nations as a typically modern phenomenon (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1991:9-11). These scholars have highlighted the role played by the nineteenth-century *élites* in institutional and socioeconomic stabilisation of what was, at that time, the newborn nation state. The 'good health' of the nation-state in Europe, South America, and partially Asia depended on the diffusion of literacy, the cultural mobilisation of the masses by means of publishing technology, and capitalist means of production and distribution. At the hands of the publishing industry, whose tentacles stretched in all directions to produce the massive distribution of daily newspapers, homogenous time frameworks were created together with a public space. This development coincided with the birth of nations, but not so much in the sense of concretely perceived communities as, rather, in the form of something that appears familiar to the imagination. Similarly, through uniformed time and public space the sense of alienation and bewilderment produced by the collapse of the traditional types of society and faiths has been overcome. What was accomplished by the most ancient absolute beliefs (of myths and religions), i.e. the relativisation of secular experiences and traumas.

including death, is made possible again by national communities. Through stories and symbols, these incorporate the short and otherwise futile life of the individual into chains of stories and fates of whole communities, of similar exploits and memories, thus rendering individual death tolerable.

The search for the meaning of individual existence and the overall picture of what was once called 'Nature' and 'History' is today, more than ever before, a task for those political communities that are able to maintain over time a firm narrative link between generations: a solid political identity based on the inter-generational link between memories and projects. To date, this task has been performed by political identities grounded on the concepts of a people and national sovereignty—the most typical concepts of modernity. What remains to be seen is whether the mythopoetic experiments undertaken by the *élites* of the past possess links with symbologies and mythologems characterised by broader scope and meaning, notwithstanding the strenuous intentions of the ruling classes who were striving instead to underline the specificity and exclusivity of their own nation. For in the prospect of constituting a national political community, the type of political identity to be devised was at once numerical and qualitative; the declared—or avowed!—nonfungibility of the nation was based on the requirement of qualitative homogeneity, in a historical-cultural sense. A citizen was one who formed part of the people, of the collective subject characterised by specific shared properties: origins, territorial links, traditions, language, culture, history. Only rarely did racial purity play a major role, such as in Spain and the Spanish overseas territories, and even in this case it did so on the basis of 'myths of origin' that were constructed and later counterposed to myths of the opposite axiological sign. The *Reconquista* and *Al-Andalus* offer examples of the alternative and allow us to pass on to the second definition of myth.

#### 4.2. *Myth as a basic structure of narration (mythologem)*

We have seen that the belief in shared mythical stories is one of the reasons why a group endowed with a political identity is ready to take on risks, responsibilities and sometimes even heavy costs. Myths connected to a particular land, the tales of its origins and the creation myths of the population inhabiting that territory, the stories of ruling kings and eponymous heroes, the stories of wandering populations abandoning their original land that had fallen into decay and their wondrous return to a homeland that is once more rising to glory—these are all examples of stories that strongly captivate our consciousness, and they all have a similar narrative structure, despite the different, and at times radically, divergent contents.

Let us now elaborate on the Spanish example, in order to bring to light three elements that are common to two rival myths, *Reconquista* and *Al-Andalus*: their nature as an artefact, their status as instrumental to the ideal of social-political integration (even if axiologically opposed), and their basic narrative structure.



While the ideological aspect is preponderant in any political history, it is nevertheless possible—even in such extreme cases—to trace an outline, albeit somewhat bare, of the essential historical events on the basis of which the two rival myths were forged, at a distance of well over a millennium, the one from the other.

In the year 711, armed units of Arabs and Berbers approached the Rock of Gibraltar and conquered the greater part of the Iberian peninsula. The resident populations put up only the most feeble resistance. Only in a few wild and virtually inaccessible mountainous regions of the North did a few stray groups of 'natives' elude the invading military forces. One hundred and fifty years later, the overall situation had been stabilised; the land once called 'Hispania' by the Romans now bore the new name of *Al-Andalus*. But in the North, new kingdoms had taken shape, characterised by a marked anti-Muslim political identity. From a certain point of time onwards, the Christian kings embarked on a military expansionist policy, which continued for many centuries right up to the conquest of Granada, i.e. the last Arab stronghold in the peninsula, by Isabelle of Castille and Alfonso of Aragon in the fateful year of our Lord of 1492. So far, so good: these are the salient events. Let us now look at the mythographic construction.

The myth of the *Reconquista* arose in the 9th century to justify the Christian kings' southward military expansion, and it achieved immense acclaim in later centuries because it served to construct the political identity of the centralised and unitary state as it now appears to us in the shape of the Spain of modern times. The church devised a very effective translation of the symbolic language of Christianity into a (preexisting) mythic narrative scheme capable of justifying a war against the neighbouring kingdom. The Arab invasion, it was implied, had been an act of divine punishment for man's sins (in particular those committed by the inhabitants of the peninsula); therefore the latter were morally obliged and indeed perfectly justified in fighting vigorously against the Muslims, until the Christians had achieved what would be the final victory for true believers, an outcome that was already preordained in heaven.

If we disregard the aberrations to which this type of justification can lead, one can recognise in the Christianised myth of the *Reconquista*, in which terms such as 'sin,' 'atonement,' 'providence' are embedded in a table of values that is strongly affected by Christian concepts, a much more ancient and all-embracing narrative structure. For if attention is not restricted to merely scanning the phenomena, one perceives a beginning, a development, an end: in other words, an original condition of bliss and virtue, the loss of this condition, and finally its painful reacquisition. The great Christian story is but a variation on a theme whose origins go back much deeper into antiquity. A glance at the mythographic tradition of the West soon uncovers a common structure connecting a heroic name—individual or collective—to a noble, remote and lost

origin, and, in the second instance, to a (grievously distressing) path towards regeneration that must be followed in order to return to that origin.

We will now turn to the rival myth, that of the *Convivencia*, forged and disseminated (over a thousand years later) by the democratic militants in exile, following the victory of Franco's forces in the Spanish civil war. In contrast to the repression of the Jews carried out by the Visigoth kings, the Arabs are depicted as not only tolerating both Jews and Christians, but also allowing active practice of their respective forms of worship, while maintaining the prohibition against proselytising and public ceremonies. A climate of tolerance of this kind, so the story runs, spread its beneficial effects to the lands governed by Christian kings, leading to a special form of cultural coexistence in the Iberian peninsula.

In this latter version, it is startlingly clear that *Al-Andalus* itself represents the original condition of bliss and virtue, and likewise the sociopolitical model towards which aspirations are directed. Furthermore, it is precisely the intolerant and authoritarian regime ushered in by the aggressive policy of the Christian kings, from the 9th to the 15th century and beyond, that constitutes the phase of decadence as compared to the origin, a decadence that reached its peak under the Franco dictatorship.

Thus the *Convivencia* is, in turn, revealed as a form of myth. And in fact, despite the considerable truth of the assertion of peaceful coexistence among the different religious communities, the territory renominated *Al-Andalus* was subjected to a fairly pronounced process of Arabisation, if not also, in some periods, to out-and-out Islamicisation. Arabic became the official language and culture—for the Christians as well! The only subjects who actively sustained *Al-Andalus* economically, because they were obliged to pay the tax levies—were the 'infidels' (i.e. Jews and Christians).<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is evident that no undue pressure was required to persuade many of them to convert. Furthermore, each community had a free hand in judging and persecuting heretics and apostates within its own group, using whatever means they deemed to be most appropriate.

In effect, rather than of tolerance (and toleration) in the modern sense, it would be more plausible to speak of a regime of moderate noninterference among theocracies. What I mean here by *tolerance* is indulgence or even respect for different beliefs, practices or customs that conflict with one's own. 'Toleration,' on the other hand, indicates the specific *policy* of a government that consciously and enduringly avoids placing obstacles to forms of worship and belief that are not officially established or accredited among the majority of the population. This having been said, it can perhaps be suggested that the regime of noninterference among semiautarchic communities may well offer a solution not to be scorned for modern multicultural societies. But this is not the crucial point I wish to dwell on at this point (I will return to it later).

Rather, I particularly emphasise that in both cases it is myth that is acting as the driving force, and that it does so as a function of specific sociopolitical

models, the first being authoritarian and ethnically homogeneous, the second democratic and multicultural. Every time we reread the past according to a mythic construct featuring a structure that is antithetical to some other structure, we irrevocably deliver ourselves up into the grip of the totalising logic of a plot that is both complete in and of itself and refractory to all critique and revision. However, paradoxical though it may seem, the contrary axiological signs of the two myths have no effect whatsoever on the statement that the mythologem, and the justificatory effect, are analogous for both. Furthermore, while the logic of the mythic content is exclusive—all or nothing—that of the mythic narrative structure may leave some room for manoeuvring in the form of reflection and individual action.

The mythologem has a far more wide-reaching scope, and is certainly of extremely ancient origin. It has traversed the Greek, Hellenistic, Stoic-Roman, Christian, Renaissance, and Rosicrucian-Enlightenment civilisations. It is the narration of cyclical regeneration. The narrative schema is not original, but has long since been translated into a Western framework, for it has come down to us in the Roman version of *The Golden Bough* (Frazer, 1978), wherein human action is assigned a decisive role despite the basic cyclical model.

The story recounted in the above work takes place in the Nemi forest, which was sacred to Diana, the goddess of woods and bestower of fruits, and to her consort, Virbius. A rule stated that in the temple consecrated to these divinities any man could become a priest and king of the woods provided that he had previously torn off a bough—the golden bough—from a certain sacred tree and then killed the priest who was his predecessor. The sacred tree is an oak, the bough is mistletoe, which embodies the power of Jupiter, god of the sky and storms, whose power has become condensed in the bough through lightning. He who seeks to become the priest must tear off the bough in order to prove that he has acquired the divine energy necessary to start a new cycle, to bring renewed fertility to the land with the approval of Diana. The king then dies and is reborn, the old sovereign dying to be born again in the new form.

However, there is no certainty that this will always happen, nor that it will happen at the right moment. In the narrative structure of death and regeneration, rebirth is inalienably linked to *periodic* reintegration of the Golden Age. But everything depends on the intervention of a hero, a hero who is uncontaminated precisely because he is 'new' or a foreigner or obscure. He will reestablish order by replacing the king of the age of decadence, in most instances with the ritual sacrifice of the latter. In many cases, the two roles overlap and the 'new' hero, who sacrifices himself to guarantee regeneration, is also the one who is periodically regenerated. This basic narration pattern can be, and has been, adjusted both to the theme of the political redemption of a collective subject linked by lineage to the epic hero, but also to the theme of the rebirth of a civilisation which was once noble but has now declined which

may face extinction or can rise again by appealing to unsuspected energies hitherto concealed and therefore still full of vigour and health.

Let us search for this pattern in some national mythographic constructions. In the past, the question whether each individual myth was rooted in local traditions or not by no means constituted a discriminating factor, provided that such myths complied with a familiar structure, suitable to the needs of symbolic fulfilment among the population. But with the struggle for national independence, first, and then later with the stabilisation of the nation state, a step forward was taken as compared to previous literary reconstructions of autochthonous myths. Earlier reelaborations and transcriptions of epic poems or narrative cycles, as carried out by European scholars from the Middle Ages onwards, consistently aimed to demonstrate the heroic origins of the nation-peoples, thereby heightening their potential for moral, military and political redemption.<sup>9</sup> Debate on the literary authenticity or folk origin of a story never fails to mention the epic poems or cycles that became the symbol of redemption of the nation and its people in the 14th century. Thus the myth of the Bard Ossian,<sup>10</sup> which was raised to literary and political dignity by Macpherson in the second half of the 18th century, stands at one end of a line of development, at the opposite pole of which stands the highest degree of authenticity of sources (sagas, epics, folksongs).

The Ossianic epics are the most important, but not the only example of manipulations carried out by intellectuals on preexisting folkloristic material. Yet the knowledge of such interventions has not damaged the power to reinforce political identities, either in Scotland or in other countries, of the thus produced stories. On the contrary, a successful poetic artefact that satisfied the need for moral and political renewal in a population eventually generalised the symbolic force of similar operations, which went far beyond the intentions of the 18th- and 19th-century authors and promoters of the heroic heritage of their people. For not only the populations of Celtic origin, such as the Irish, the Scots, the Welsh, but also the peoples of Eastern Europe<sup>11</sup> have reworked the combative, individualistic, and libertarian spirit of the bards and Gaelic warriors, transforming them into a reference point for their own political ideals and future within a nationalistically oriented framework.

However, no nationalistic intellectual seriously thought, or declared publicly, that the real intention was to restore the austere and bloodthirsty ways of national heroes. Rather, such heroes were acclaimed through the printed word as models of excellence and praised for their affinity with the nation. These linkages increased faith in the presence of similar strength, dignity, honour and independent action in the collective subject descending from those ancestors, whatever evidence might be mustered to the contrary. The same mechanism could perhaps be applied to an entire civilisation (the postmodern West?) if the mythologem of the Golden Age were to be rewritten and *above all implemented* in the highly evocative terms of the *Peaceable Kingdom*.

Indeed, the rich iconographic canvas of the *Peaceable Kingdom* provides an inspiring background—richer in meaning than any textual exegesis of the circumstances surrounding its creation—for exploring several of the political themes discussed here. The ‘Kingdom’ to which allusion is made is that depicted in the painting of the same name by the Quaker Edward Hicks, created around 1834. It illustrates an event which Hicks believed to have momentous significance, one that would help to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth, in harmony with his own vision. In 1682, a peace treaty was signed in Pennsylvania between Quaker settlers (who were among the few whites to respect the agreements) and Native American tribes, allowing the colonisers to settle in the area. The artist interprets this event in an anagogic sense: it was to mark the beginning of the millennial Kingdom.

In the background, on the left, one notes the representatives of the two communities, standing out against a seascape as they display an attitude that is at once solemn and confident. In the foreground, set on the right against a lush forest, figures that evoke the symbolic context of the psalm of Isaiah rest peacefully side by side: ‘The lion lies with the lamb, into the viper’s lair the young child puts his hand.’ The reign of harmony announced by the Scriptures is already a political reality, yet not through an act of grace by Providence restoring the perfection of Eden, but thanks to the recognition and safeguarding of the equal dignity of the parties involved. This condition, essential for peace, appears to have been brought about by stipulating and implementing what amounts to a genuine ‘treaty’ among peoples. Thus we are in the realm of the rights of peoples, not of the state. In certain respects, this signals a return to the medieval type of tolerance: can the regime of non-interference among semiautarchic enclaves (even if the latter are intolerant of internal deviancy and differences) offer an honourable solution for modern multicultural societies?

If ‘tolerance’ (in the second, more common meaning—see the introduction above) is taken to mean at least an attitude of indulgence towards beliefs or practices that differ from our own, or indeed are in conflict with our views; *much more, if the mythographic construction of Al-Andalus is taken for a plausible account of what can really happen*, perhaps we may approach the model of the Muslim millets with some degree of sympathy. But there is one striking distinction to be made: in contrast to such a model, it is imperative not to preclude the possibility—in the name of a supposed excessive tolerance (first meaning) that eventually proves to be self-destructive and obliterates one’s own identity—of inducing the *addressees* (peoples sharing with us territorium and political framework) to see things from our own point of view. In the framework of the heritage of the West, this means trying to persuade those who engage in forms of collective life which exclude freedom of conscience, criticism or the individual right to choose, that they should exercise at least toleration as a policy.

Here the link between the concept of tolerance (in the first meaning of the term) and the *numerical* meaning of identity becomes clear, for the latter indicates that beyond a certain limit no entity (in particular, no organic entity) can accept within itself differences or demands that are incompatible with its own structure and internal balance. If it were to do so, it would simply dissolve into the surrounding environment. Thus *tolerance* indicates first and foremost the relative capacity to withstand an unfavourable (external) factor; only in its derivative meaning does it signify indulgence towards beliefs and practices that are different from or in conflict with one’s own. The balance between the first and second meaning of tolerance is extremely delicate, and tends to change not only with varying spatial-temporal conditions, but also with variation in social and political circumstances.

It is helpful at this point to again call to mind the characteristics of group identity. There exist no supra-individual barriers between the individual and the aggregates as long as the pitfall of holism can be avoided. Group identity, as is well known, constitutes an identity that a number of individuals reflectively agree to share and hold in common. Shouldering the burden of difference to the bitter end is a virtue—indeed it is one that can be consummately put into effect in the public dimension, where its application may even be enhanced. However, any enquiry as to where one might place the limit of tolerance beyond which a community—or an individual, an organisation—must not stray will necessarily fall within the scope of empirical investigation. Here another virtue, *prudentia*, and another faculty of the mind, wisdom and good judgement, come into play. However, they can at best give indications, never solutions that will be valid once and for all.

Yet these considerations need not be taken as implying unqualified surrender to relativism or the unconstrained dominion of contingency. They do, however, strongly suggest that flights of fancy embodying intransigent universalism should be relinquished in favour of sensitivity to adequacy and a sense of appropriate measure every time it becomes necessary to apply general norms to particular situations (Günther, 1988; Henry, 1992; Loretoni, 1996). A similar suggestion arises from the very fact that the concept of tolerance pertains to the peculiar dimension of experience that stands midway between private and public, whence spring forth emotive demands and instinctual drives which gradually take on a recognisable shape and become experience that can be shared. The same holds true for myth, if understood in its third meaning.

#### 4.3. Myth as an expressive-emotive phenomenon

4.3.1. The definition has two variants: let us begin with the first by which myth is described as ‘personified collective desire.’ This corresponds to the concept of political myth elaborated by Ernst Cassirer, who made use of this conception to combat totalitarianism. The expression was coined in the first decade of the century by the French scholar Emil Douffé, and extended in the 1940s by Cas-

sirer far beyond the limits of the 'primitive' society within which it had been constrained by anthropological studies. Douffé (1909) restricted himself to claiming that in tribal society all divinities are personifications of the community's desires. Cassirer built on this motif and broadened its scope to encompass it within a far-reaching political perspective. The above-described theogonic process was regarded by Cassirer as embodying a special kind of emotive reaction, typical of a group endangered by an extraordinarily dire threat. Such a reaction results in the invocation of a protective divinity, or else in the abdication of ordinary political power in favour of the extra-ordinary witch-doctor, the magician. The latter is thought to be capable of deciphering the otherwise inscrutable designs of cosmic powers, and, more importantly, he is believed to be capable of acting upon them in order to modify their designs to the benefit of the collective. Rites and those who perform them thus come to assume symbolic meaning, producing a special form of theodicy; fear having thus been endowed with a mediated expression, the deaths and suffering of individuals, which have become necessary or indeed inevitable in order to ensure the life of the collective, are felt to be more tolerable. The part is sacrificed to the demands of the whole and this sacrifice is made tolerable for those who perform it.

The hub of Cassirer's thought is that whenever human communities find themselves in, or returning to, the mythic stage of development of symbolic conscience, they reproduce the political effects of the type of theodicy that is appropriate to the characteristics—whether expressive, pragmatic or holistic—of myth. Furthermore, inasmuch as myth is capable of combining the several wills of a plurality of individuals and directing them towards a common goal, it is collective in totalising terms in that it sacrifices critical skills and the rights of individuals to the superior needs of community. It represents a specific process of establishment of political identity, wherein fusion of the parts with the totality or with whatever entity holds power over totality is predominant. This identification allows no mediations nor does it permit criticism or revision.

Now, if this were the comprehensive and exclusive definition of the notion of myth, then the supporters of unmitigated 'demythification' of the political conscience of Europeans would be justified, since such a process would avert the temptation to slide back towards totalitarian formulations of political identity. Well-known examples of such formulations include the myth of the *Reich* and that of the *Führer*. But this is certainly not the kind of common symbolology whose absence in the West is so sorely deplored! On the other hand, there is a need to go beyond the idea that it is politically incorrect—for such a prohibition is equally imbued with mythic absolutism—to address the issue of myth. Focusing on this issue does not in itself imply evoking swastikas. Anyway, we must learn to cope with myth.

4.3.2. The point I wish to make is that in addition to its lamentable tendency to trigger the totalising temptation, myth has the precious characteristics of

unveiling symbolic experience in its playful inexhaustibility, revealing aspects that are fulfilling and liberating in comparison to the oppressive perception of the lack of meaning in individual and collective experience (Ricoeur, 1967; Blumenberg, 1979). This consideration introduces the second variant of the third definition, one with a positive axiological sign, according to which myth is an original symbolic function. Myth has a universal and universalisable aspect: it may be pregnant with symbolic meaning.

Since it is an expressive phenomenon, myth fully displays the features attributed by Goethe to the original symbolic phenomenon (as subsequently emphasised by Cassirer). A mythic symbol (similar to a historical-political event) is pregnant with symbolic meaning if it appears and is without residues, if it manifests completely and self-evidently its excess of significance. We might liken it to the hierophany mentioned by Eliade in connection with the original modes of the numinous. Sensitivity to the rich expressiveness of phenomena lies at the root of the human capacity to create symbols and remains a prerequisite of the most abstract and universal forms that such a faculty can assume. Cassirer himself reminded us that myth as a source of expression and creativity cannot be expunged—providentially—from the conscience and cultural heritage of mankind. In certain respects, Blumenberg's criticism of the Enlightenment does not touch Cassirer; on the contrary, it integrates his positions into a broader perspective.

I am referring here to the claim that the Enlightenment failed to achieve its aim of rationalising customs because it naively strove to erase not only individual myths but also the reasons, needs and deep-seated motivations that lead myth, as a phenomenon of absolute significance, to be ceaselessly regenerated at the heart of Western culture. The monstrous totalitarian deviations of the twentieth century, it is argued, arose from this fatal error.

Let us for a moment combine Cassirer with Blumenberg. Even though recent history has shown the dangers of myth, which are manifested when myth is the precursor of totalitarian modes of identification—with the community, or with its chief (Cassirer, 1946)—it is still true that to deny any legitimacy to the expressive and imaginary sources from which mythologems draw their origin, and to the derivations of such narrative patterns, means paving the way for a return of unmediated Myth (Blumenberg, 1979). This being said, and having acknowledged the historical merits of those who support a vision that emphasises the contents of myth (*first definition*, 4.1.), it would be useful to make an in-depth analysis of both the narrative pattern (*second definition*, 4.2.) and the structural notion (*third definition*, 4.3.).

If we interpret myth in the latter meaning of an expressive-emotive phenomenon and take up again our previous comments on the political identities of the modern era, we can conclude that such identities have accomplished the task that was performed by myth and religion in ancient times, namely that of providing an answer to the pressing question about meaning. But the structural

notion of myth has two variants. The first was embodied in its most quintessential form by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Perhaps there will be an equal opportunity for the second variant—the one with a positive sign—to obtain political existence as well.

### 5. A Meeting Point Between Myth and Identity?

We know that the expression 'identity' can have significance both in the sphere of psychological conscience and in social and political contexts. Being *idem* (same) indicates a coherent but dynamic structuring of the qualities one possesses and wishes to possess. Who am I and what do I wish to become? Who are we and what do we wish to become? This is a process-oriented scheme or code of reflective elaboration of contents, never a preestablished or stabilised content. Identity is something that can be acquired or lost—it is a synthesis of interactive competencies open to the future inasmuch as it is dependent on the latter for its outcome. Myth, if taken in the sense of an expressive faculty, appears as no more than one among many demands and aspirations participating in the process of identity construction. It cooperates in forging cognitive and active aspirations (of individual or collective actors) just as much as it does in constructing demands that pose resistance to the first set of aspirations, and it reveals opacity (the consolidated sociopolitical dimension, reality *sui generis* according to Schütz, Berger and Luckmann). In the former case, that is to say as an active function in the identity dimension, myth is the direction of conscience oriented to discovery and synthetic elaboration of expressive phenomena; it is sensitivity to the physiognomic characters of phenomena in general, and cultural phenomena in particular. The activation of sensitivity to expressive polyphony would be a step in the direction of restoring myth to its role of twin brother of metaphoric language (Cassirer, Usener, Langer, Ricœur).

In the other dimension, that of nonidentity—opacity, remoteness, resistance to assimilation and social synthesis, but also difference and multiformity—myth represents all those passions, feelings and emotions that 'deviate' from the norm, once they are no longer relegated to an unformed latent state but have already passed on to the expressive state, and are therefore active in the social and political field. Myth as the expression of that which is not identical should be taken seriously, on account of its characteristic lability and fickleness; it must be elaborated, but this does not mean that it should also be assimilated without residue whenever it may be desirable for multiformity to endure. In any case, it must at least be filtered through the mesh of reflection, and of public discussion. In its most tangible social, cultural and political effects, myth may act as the source for new and daring forms of coexistence among manifestations of immutable diversity, but it may also become the focal point where the collective desire of any agglomeration of individuals takes on

exorbitant and maniacal proportions and spills over into the obsession for identity, seeking to suppress whatever cannot be reduced within the confines of its craving and threatens to thwart its satisfaction. Thus fantasies of omnipotence are generated precisely by the inability to recognise the barriers standing between one's own needs and the satisfaction of such needs. In certain cases—though the pathways may be tortuous—fantasies of omnipotence may take hold in the symbolic universe of the political identity of concrete cultures, historically and spatially rooted in the very heart of the supposedly-civilised West. Those falling victim to this kind of antipluralistic pathology include not only isolated individuals but also whole communities that find themselves in a minority position within a dominant culture, that is to say, communities that are numerically inferior and in an underprivileged position as compared to the overall population or certain sectors of the population, of the society in which they live.<sup>12</sup>

In this perspective, however, it should be pointed out that myth as a mouthpiece for the nonidentical cannot be reduced to a mere factor of public amplification of unbridled and destructive private passions. It may also become an interpretative tool exploited by scholars and political figures, since it provides symbolic access to several modes of reading one and the same event. Suffice it to think of the figurative representations of intolerance: the fantasy of the perfect crime, i.e. of the physical disappearance of the adversary-victim 'viscerally' perceived as unacceptable, is a recurrent motif. Thanks to the twofold link between myth and the emotional sphere, on the one hand, and myth and the historical-social sphere on the other, it is by no means impossible to decipher the hidden significance of such metaphors, even in cases where the ludic or recreational contexts divest verbal and gestural expressions of their most disturbing characteristics. Thus one often hears phrases referring to the elimination or dissolution of the adversary, from the stands of football pitches to many other places where ordinary people congregate and where it is not uncommon to hear rude comments on clandestine immigrants. The negation of the other's numerical identity (fortunately only fantasised and not actually put into practice) is the signal, perceived and communicated individually or socially, that the threshold of tolerance has been reached. Or rather, the saturation level of 'violence' (the metaphor of poison, of a virus), i.e. that specific quota of violence towards oneself that can be incorporated without harm is deemed now to have been reached, both at the individual and social level. This violence, it is argued, has been caused by the acceptance of certain aspects of the other, an attitude of forbearing benevolently put into practice right up to the critical threshold of saturation. The metaphor of the dissolution of the adversary mirrors the extreme danger that is imagined to be looming on the horizon, should one fail to be the one to act first.

I do not think there exist any ready-made antidotes to this type of uncontrolled reaction to the (not necessarily well-founded) fear of losing oneself. of

becoming blurred and blended into the surrounding environment as a result of excessive receptiveness (alias tolerance) to external unfavourable factors. Perhaps, cultivating a propensity to a sense of wonder at one's own collective imagination and that of other cultures, activating responsiveness to the infinite expressive and interpretative potential of events would bring a breath of health-giving fresh air into contemporary Western politics. Certainly, it would at least constitute a preventive action.

The risk, instead, is that the opposite scenario may come to pass: an attitude of haughtiness, suggesting that we have no need to elaborate myth (above all as far as the nonidentical is concerned) because we have moved beyond this stage. Without residues? Let us therefore also avoid the myth of the lack of a myth, that is to say absolute faith in the self-sufficiency of reason. For this is a hidden and pernicious temptation of modern thought. This is perhaps the most insidious Faustian temptation, because it creates illusions and leads us to underestimate not only the dangerous nature of myth, but also its irresistible capacity to attract and concentrate meaningfulness and gratification, expressiveness and intemperance, both for individuals and groups. In order to discern, stabilise and soundly maintain the boundaries of this pair of opposing forces, identical and nonidentical (myth is active in both members!), the first requirement is the process of construction of that identity which can embrace them both, a process from which no outcome can be excluded a priori.

## Notes

1. Ricoeur (1990) suggests that *memète* is the most appropriate term to translate the meaning of *idem*, but not that of *ipse*, which he reserves for the reflecting and agent subject.
2. All this occurred in the era before modern psychology became a scientifically accredited discipline, capable of rendering the nomenclature univocal and clear. It is therefore legitimate to use 'identity' and 'self' as synonyms in this, and similar, contexts.
3. Identification is the operation which declares that a thing is not fungible with another. It is carried out by an observer, who bears witness to the permanence of a thing in time and space. The observer may also be the individual thinking subject who performs the identification of himself, by doubling himself into both an observer and the thing observed.
4. I use this expression in the sense of Létourneau, 1992:775-85.
5. In this respect, the 15th-century *Theologia Deutsch*, by Anonymous from Frankfurt, influenced Schopenhauer.
6. Frequently, those who diagnose the crisis of the *self* in the postmodern era as inevitable and thoroughly deserved still implicitly continue to adopt the *self* as the basic conceptual reference model, using this model as a yardstick against which to evaluate deviation. See for example Lützel, 1998.
7. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the issue, similar to C. G. Jung's position, concerning the persistence of an archetypal world in the limbo of the human psyche of all times.

According to this hypothesis, archetypes are supposed to be determinate forms that are present always and everywhere, such as, for instance, the impulse towards reintegration and renewal, whose symbol is the woman-mother-destiny. Such forms are claimed to be lurking in the collective unconscious—despite the overlay of bourgeois rationalism—ready to remerge again on the surface in moments of crisis or revolution. See Bonvecchio, 1993:192-4.

8. It should be pointed out that in the period in question the—fairly tolerant—Arabic civilisation was the only light shining in the darkness of Western barbarism. The Christian kingdoms of the North showed unequivocal signs of technical, organisational, economic, and very likely also cultural backwardness. These aspects were intensified by the brutality and intransigence, matched by the ideological coherence, with which the operation of the Christian 'reconquest' of the peninsula was carried out and justified over the centuries, starting from the ninth century and continuing right up to the reign of Philip II—in the second half of the 16th century—and beyond. But any attempt to embark on this road, which justifies the predominance of one civilisation (the Arab civilisation, in this case) over another in the name of a greater degree of progress in technical development, the arts and legal structures, eventually presents the same pitfalls as the path taken by the Enlightenment and modernist thinkers of a later age, and by today's liberals.
9. Let me just mention the Breton legends of King Arthur and the Round Table, the Ulster cycle with the Celtic (Irish) hero Cuchulain, the Finnish Kalevala, the Scottish Ossianic chants.
10. Ossian is a legendary bard and Scottish prince, the son of Fingal, whom the Medieval Gaelic (Irish and Scottish) tradition regarded as the author of a cycle of epic chants, now known to derive from ancient folklore. In 1762-63, James Macpherson published two chants, *Fingal* and *Temora*, and erroneously attributed them to Ossian. They were parts of the Ossianic chants with some interpolations by Macpherson. They achieved great success and marked the beginning of Ossianic fame in Europe.
11. The fervent literary and political activity of Hungarian poet-patriots like Sándor Petöfi (1823-49) and János Arany (1817-82) for example, cannot be understood without taking into account the influence of Irish and Scottish poets and intellectuals.
12. On the fundamental role that the 'collective dimension of difference' plays with respect to the issue of tolerance, see Galeotti, 1994.

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