The Myth of Modern Politics
An Impossible Constitution

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Unlike in pre-modern communities, we consider our democracies to be rationally constituted. Philosopher Aukje van Rooden wonders whether the greatest myth of contemporary politics isn't our assumption that we can function without a mythological structure. Perhaps that denial is precisely what underlies the overwhelming advance of right-wing populist politicians.

There is absolutely no doubt that the stunning victories of right-wing populist politicians in countries like Italy, Austria, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands have sharpened the contours of democracy in the past few years by putting 'the people' – the *demos* – of democracy at the top of the political agenda again. The voice of the people can count on growing interest, as shown by the unflagging dedication with which European popular referendums, opinion polls or a countrywide debate in France on the *identité nationale* are being organized and followed. No matter how fruitless these initiatives at times prove to be, they nevertheless are expressions of an important quest for what democratic sovereignty still could or should be in this day and age. As a result of changing socioeconomic, cultural and political relations in Europe, we are forced to find at least a provisional answer to that most fundamental of questions: 'What is a political community?' The fact that the voice of the people – our voice – is central to its answer is not surprising. When, as the French philosopher Claude Lefort claims, the constituting of a political community in the first place requires that it represent itself, this means that in a democratic community it is we who must indeed represent ourselves. Moreover, adds Lefort, not once and for all, but each time anew, because in a democracy, self-representation must in principle always be up for discussion.[1] As far as this is concerned, we are living in an extremely interesting time and place in twenty-first-century Europe. On account of the fact that the 'European project' is simultaneously a daily reality and the subject of heated discussion, it is a work in progress in which we ourselves are both the makers and what is at stake.

Although the problems that present themselves during the constitution of a political community in today's Europe might come to the fore more clearly than ever before, they are in fact inseparably tied to each founding moment. What's more, the act of constituting a political community is strictly speaking impossible. Or at least, so claims the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in an opinion piece on the European constitution in *Le Monde*, 'L'Impossible acte constituant'.[2] According to Nancy, our contemporary communities differ from so-called primitive, pre-modern communities because we no longer can or want to consider them as the result of a particular divine or cosmological development. Modern man, as the historian Mircea Eliade says, 'knows that he himself is the maker of history and indeed wants to be'.[3] In other words, in constituting his community, modern man won't settle for a simple reference to a particular myth of origin, unquestioningly actualizing a narrative handed down from generation to generation. The founding of a community, emphasizes Nancy, must thus be seen as an imaginative deed, as the creation or invention

of what is not yet a given. *The Treaty for the Establishment of a Constitution for Europe* is illustrative of this, seeing as the difficult process through which it has come about and is still developing clearly shows that the European people are not a given, but 'a people that are in the process of constituting and creating themselves by inventing their own "idea" or "form"'. [4]

The difficult – but also the most interesting – aspect of this 'invention' is that a community must establish itself out of nothing, in a vacuum, as it were; that is to say, amid the daily chaos of opinions and interests in which it has no foundation upon which it can lean as yet. Like Baron von Munchausen, our communities thus have to pull themselves out of the swamp by their own bootstraps. Seeing as there is no external, transcendent agency that can authorize this deed, the founding process in our modern communities is always an act of self-constitution. The 'we' that undertakes the representation of the 'idea' or 'form' of a community, is not a pre-existing group, but only exists as such with that representation, with the letter and the spirit of the *Treaty* that draws the boundary line between those who are part of that 'we' and those who are not.

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We can therefore ascertain that our contemporary political communities differ from 'primitive' or 'premodern' communities because they are no longer mythological, because they no longer assume – or want to assume – a myth of origin in their founding. Although this is true to a certain extent, the opposite can also be defended, namely that our contemporary political communities are above all based on a mythological structure. Appealing to a myth – after all, doesn't that imply that you do not take a pre-given reality as your foundation, but a fiction – a self-created, unfounded idea? This contrarian perspective is offered in an important essay that not only turned the prevailing view of the modern community upside down, but in doing so also revealed its hidden working: 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' by Walter Benjamin. [5] While it is true that this essay, which is teeming with youthful bravura, is strongly tempered by its own era and here and there lacks conceptual clarity, this in no way weakens the importance of its diagnosis of our contemporary political system.

The contrarian stance taken by this essay can be summed up in the proposition that our contemporary political orders knowingly conceal the contingency of their origins, and that this concealment assumes a mythological structure. In order to gain an understanding of the entire significance of this proposition, it is important to realize that it is inspired by Benjamin's notion that the constitution of a community not only has something contingent about it, but also – and precisely because of that – something violent. Because the 'invented' idea or form of the community could also have been a different one, its actual institutionalization implies a moment of unfounded coercion or exercise of power. According to Benjamin, this coercive moment is not only present in the original moment of founding, but also in every decision subsequently made in the name of the established order – by politicians, judges, police officers and the army. The 'critique of violence' that he proposes with this essay must therefore be seen first and foremost as a criticism of the hidden violence of a political order. In line with the double meaning of the German word *Gewalt* – which means both 'violence' and 'authority' – this is not so much the brute physical violence of oppression here, but the veiled, necessary violence of authority.

The double meaning of *Gewalt* is a perfect illustration of the ambiguity that characterizes the constitution of our modern communities – and, in a certain sense, makes that constitution impossible: namely, the ambiguity of the fact that the decision that establishes a legitimized power can itself boast of no legitimized power whatsoever, because it is taken in a void in which the distinction between legal and illegal does not yet exist. We could thus say that Benjamin's article calls attention to that non-legal void in which political authority attempts to establish itself. In the 'violent' action of this political

authority, he distinguishes two dimensions: that of law-making (*rechtsetzend*) violence and that of law-preserving (*rechtserhaltend*) violence. According to Benjamin – and this is one of the crucial elements of his diagnosis – these law-making and law-preserving violences are not two separate and mutually distinct aspects of a legal order but presuppose each other and thereby neutralize each other's violent nature. Therefore, claims Benjamin, this is a matter of a circular movement, of a cyclical logic in which foundation and preservation have an interlocking relationship, which one must call mythological. [6]

But exactly what is the reason for labelling the working of our contemporary political order 'mythological', and thereby suggesting a resemblance between our modern communities and those we usually call 'premodern'? Well, explains Benjamin in his essay, we can only conclude that the rule of law and the violence in our political orders are related to one another in a manner similar to that in pre-modern, mythological societies because both appeal to what we can call a destiny. [7] Although the original decision that lies at the foundation of our societies could also have been different, it is presented, just like in earlier eras, not as a 'chance' (*Zufall*) but as the result of a particular destiny (*Schicksal*), that is to say, as a decision that could not have come out any differently. [8] Here, the temporal structure of a myth combines with the linguistic structure of the future perfect in presenting a community as something that 'will have been so'. [9] With the suggestion of destiny, in other words, the power that is legitimized by the act of foundation gives the impression that the 'idea' or 'form' of the founded community was predestined by history and written into the course of events. To put it another way, a temporal and linguistic presentation such as this disregards the decisive moment of political constitution and encloses the 'open-endedness' that in principal constitutes democracy in a well-plotted story.

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The underlying mythological structure of destiny generally remains implicit in our political orders, however, because it is cast in the widely accepted form of instrumental rationalism. In other words, the uneasy feeling of contingency is dispelled on account of the fact that an indisputable goal has been set and that all of the measures that are to be taken are considered necessary in order to achieve that goal. Political slogans like 'clean weapons' and 'preventive war' are not only the most obvious but also the most evil expression of this. [10] Although appealing to such an instrumentalist structure is to a certain extent inevitable if one wishes to engage in politics, the thorny knot of this concealed mythological structure lies precisely in the fact that the distinction between just goals and justified means on the one hand, and unjust goals and unjustified means on the other (for example between a 'preventative war' and an unnecessary, bloody war), can only be made on the basis of the self-legitimizing order. [11] The cyclical connection of means and goals thus functions as a façade that conceals the lack of an ultimate legitimization of such a distinction.

It is this façade, created by the cyclical logic of a myth, which impresses upon us that we can forget what lies behind it without qualms. This is what we can call 'the mythic forgetting of the moment of creation'. [12] For what a myth does is to create a new historic order for the precise purpose of elevating itself above the contingency of history and of making its own contingency be forgotten. [13] In that sense, the working of a myth resembles that of a promise. On the one hand, a promise is a way of offering a guarantee for the future, by which one indicates that the status quo of what really counts will remain the same, because the 'idea' or 'form' of the community will remain the same. But on the other hand, the necessity of a promise also indicates the fact that it is impossible to give that guarantee. After all, if it were certain ahead of time that things would indeed be as people imagine them, then a promise would be completely superfluous. [14] This is also precisely where the greatest danger of the upcoming populism lies. The implicit promise to the people in the populist message, that their will shall become law, starts from the idea

that the voice of the people forms an indisputable political basis that, if only it were heard, could be rendered permanent. Instead of a subservient implementation of what is given in history, however, this 'perpetuation' is chiefly the creation of a given, and therefore of a past and a future.

Thus the complexity of the present and the uncertainty of the future are precisely what force a political order to appeal to a mythological structure. In other words, the same non-legal void that enables the acrobatic leap of the modern self-constitution impels the modern political community to a mythological cloaking of that void. We could say that the biggest myth of our present-day politics is that it thinks it can do without such a mythological structure, assumes it can steer clear of the ultimate question of legitimacy by appealing to the making of rules, procedures and policy. The false modesty of this attitude is precisely what transforms the wondrous acrobatic manoeuvre of modern self-constitution into dangerous pride.

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Footnotes

1. See, in particular: Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) and idem, 'La question de la démocratie', in: Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (eds.), *Le retrait du politique* (Paris: Galilée, 1983), 71-88.
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'L'impossible acte constituant', *Le Monde*, 29 June 2005.
3. Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour. Archétypes et répétition* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 158.
4. Nancy, 'L'Impossible acte constituant', op. cit. (note 2).
5. Walter Benjamin, 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' (1921), *Gesammelte Schriften* II.1 (Frankfurt a / M: Suhrkamp, 1977). Originally published in *Archiv für Socialwissenschaft und Socialpolitik*.
6. Ibid., pages 181 and 202, where Benjamin speaks respectively of a *Zirkel* and an *Umauf*. From page 197 on, he uses the term 'mythic violence'. Because he most certainly is concerned about revealing the logic of political orders and it is this logic as such that is mythic, I prefer to speak here of a mythological rather than a mythic structure. For that matter, in a work published several years earlier, 'Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin: Dichtermut und Blödigkeit', Benjamin himself makes a distinction between the mythic and the mythological, whereby the pejorative meaning he ascribes to the second term corresponds to the meaning given to the term 'mythic' in 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt'.
7. For a more elaborate analysis of fate in Benjamin's 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', see also: Antonia Birnbaum, *Bonheur Justice. Walter Benjamin* (Paris: Payot, 2008).
8. Benjamin, 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', op. cit. (note 5), 199.
9. For an analysis of the linguistic structure of myths, also see: Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi. Le 'fondement mystique de l'autorité'* (Paris: Galilée, 2005 [1994]), 87-88.
10. We encounter a more implicit appeal to such a structure in the preamble to the *Treaty for the Establishment of a Constitution for Europe* (2004): 'Believing that Europe, reunited after bitter experiences, intends to continue along the path of civilisation, progress and prosperity...'
11. See Benjamin, 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', op. cit. (note 5), 181.
12. In his study on Benjamin and Schmitt, Marc de Wilde speaks of a 'mythic forgetting'. See: Marc de Wilde, *Verwantschap in extremen. Politieke theologie bij Walter Benjamin en Carl Schmitt* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008). Also see Benjamin himself, who in this connection speaks of '*schwinden* des Bewußtseins' (op. cit., 190) and Derrida, who speaks of a 'dénégation amnésiaque' (op. cit*.,* 113*, see note* 9).
13. To quote Hannah Arendt, a political order founded on myth pretends in this way 'to know the mysteries of the whole historical process, the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future – because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas'. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 469. Arendt gives a definition of 'ideology' here that explains where the troublesome aspect of a mythological politics lies.
14. The ambiguity of the promise's structure can be traced back to that of the future perfect tense in which it is stated. Jacques Derrida unravels this ambiguity in, among other places, *Psyché. Inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 190.

Tags

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