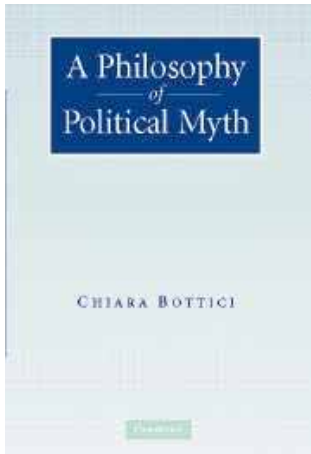


Book Review

A Philosophy of Political Myth

Chiara Bottici
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This book, *A philosophy of Political Myth*, is dedicated to a philosophical understanding of political myth. The authoress, Chiara Bottici, noticed that contemporary political philosophy «tends to depict politics as an activity involving rational individuals» (p. 1). However, the authoress thinks that people involved in this activity can adopt not only rational procedures of communication and decision but also irrational elements. In fact, «a purely rational model of society risks being a model of a world that does not exist» (p. 1). So the authoress want to show that people can act also moved by symbols and images of the world that are not taken into account by a rational image of this.

In the latest years, sociologists, historians and anthropologists have shown the role of irrational elements in the politics and they have studied some kinds of phenomena that show the importance of myths and symbols. For example, anthropologists have pointed out that in some traditional societies, politics could hardly be separated from religion.

This book wants to be a contribution to a philosophy of political myth.

The purpose of this proposition of a philosophy of political myth is not only to propose a new theory of political myth, but also to provide this theory with a philosophical framework that addresses the questions of what political myths are and why we need them. (p. 3)

Chiara Bottici says that in political philosophy there is a reluctance to use and to study the concept of political myth and that in general there isn't a vast tradition of philosophies of political myth.

This may be due to the fact it is only under the conditions of modernity that specifically political role played by myth emerged as a topic. (p. 6)

Firstly, the book begins arguing the Greek culture and the authoress recognizes that the word 'mythos' was used as synonym of 'logos' and that, until the fourth century BC, there was no difference between mythos and logos.

But when the logos became the revealed word of unique God, the plurality of ancient mythos began to be condemned. Bottici argues that the hostility to the plurality of myth «consists of an absolute claim to the truth and uniqueness that leaves no space for the recognition of the polytheistic word of myth» (p. 11).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the dialectic of Enlightenment that condemned the myth «not just as untruth, but also as imaginary and thus unreal» (p. 12).

The second part of this book starts with a chapter dedicated to myth and meaning, and most of all, is dedicated to the linguistic turn of Wittgenstein.



Then Bottici tries to delineate a possible approach to myth that escapes both the dialectic of the sacred logos and that of the Enlightenment. In contrast to the criticism raised by the logos against the plurality of myth, Chapter 5 argues, first, in favor of an interrelational approach of myth, that is, of an approach that, following Blumenberg, focuses on the work of myth; and second, in contrast to the Enlightenment's discourse about the unreality of myth, it proposes to adopt a phenomenological approach that leaves the problem of reality in parentheses. The chapter continues by pointing to four fundamental features of the work on myth: 1) myth operates with figurative means; 2) it is not limited to a particular set of contents; 3) it takes place around a narrative; 4) it provides what Blumenberg has called significance.¹

Chapter 6 is dedicated to Blumenberg's theory. Chiara Bottici shows that, among those philosophers who participated in the debate on myth that took place in Germany in 1970s, Hans Blumenberg best understood political myth as a continual process of a work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group can provide significance to their political conditions and experience.

After this, there is a chapter that prepares the analysis of role that the myth plays in politics:

In particular, to assume that, since political modernity has liberated politics from its religious anchorage, it must also have liberated it from myth means to take the point of view of the Enlightenment, which assimilates myth and religion, and thus they can be a possible means of critique. By exploring the work of one of the most powerful myths of modern political theory, the myth of the state of nature, and the way in which the work on this myth changes between different authors and contexts, the chapter concludes that myth is not, in principle, incompatible with the idea of autonomy and that, as Rousseau's uses of this myth shows, it can be an important means for critique. By doing so, this chapter advances a claim that recurs more or less explicitly in many points in the text: political myths can and should be a means for autonomy. (p. 13)

Chapter 8 is dedicated to Cassirer. Then Chiara Bottici argues that a political myth is a process that responds to a need of significance for the members of society. Then Bottici analyzes the relationships between political myth and historical narratives.

In the last part of the book the authoress examines the role that myth plays in the constitution of common identity and point out that myth is not only the product but also the producer of political identity. In the end the authoress analyzes some possible sites for the work of political myth today.

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¹ Cfr. p. 13.



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