

Fasora, Lukáš; Hanuš, Jiří

## **Myth: an attempt at understanding university history**

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# MYTH: AN ATTEMPT AT UNDERSTANDING UNIVERSITY HISTORY

Given that most of the chapters in this book refer to the concept of myth, which is used by the authors as one of the keys to understanding the cultural history of universities, and indeed the history of institutions in general (state institutions, church institutions, etc.), it is worth explaining from the outset what is understood by myth here and in what sense this term is being used.

Religious studies scholars usually associate myth and its origins with cult and cult drama. *“If the task of modern drama is to ‘hold up a mirror to nature’, as Hamlet says to the actors, then the task of cult drama is to make the story present so that it becomes the here and now for those involved. Artistic drama presents what happened in the past or what according to the writer’s imagination will happen in the future; cult drama not only presents the story but replays it.”*<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this basic assessment cannot be fully applied in our case. The conception of myth as a “cult drama scenario” and the joining (making present) of myth through cult drama cannot be transferred anachronistically to the modern age, which we must deal with as a priority. After all, in the religious studies conception, myth is bound up with events involving gods, demi-gods and other superhuman beings, which man participates in by means of the cult.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, all of this is set in a time when the cultic can be regarded as the factual. This archaic conception was captured, for example, by Alois Jirásek in his *Old Czech Legends*: *“...the Lúčans’ witches [probably priestesses/oracles – author’s note] and the Czechs’ witches decided the next day’s battle in advance – it was to be lost by the Lúčans.”*<sup>3</sup> The view of modern man is different, at least in the sense that he believes his methods

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1 Heller, Jan – Mrázek, Milan: *Nástin religionistiky*. Prague 2004, p. 207.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid, p. 205.

of controlling nature to be more sophisticated and is unlikely to search for direct agents behind natural events (and yet is all the more capable of searching for “conspiracies” behind political events!) In this conception myths also have their own logic, which it is difficult for contemporary people to understand and accept. Ancient myths are not “legends” with a historical core, as one might suppose. Myths contain much that is illogical, improbable or impossible. It is not possible to insert a modernly conceived system into a myth. What belongs in a myth, as J. Heller and M. Mrázek accurately say, is the expression “so that”, rather than a mere explanation of the world: “...*so that there will be a harvest and people won't go hungry, so that death will no longer reign in the village – so that the threat of disaster will be removed.*” Cult is performed precisely with a view to this “so that”.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, it is clearly not possible to set up an absolute contradiction between the understanding of myths among our forebears and our modern view. Certainly, much has changed (the understanding of nature, the individual conception of man, the increasing adoption of an urban lifestyle as opposed to the traditional rural one, the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere etc.); on the other hand, complete discontinuity with the past is unimaginable. On the contrary, many – often unexpected – connections can be found. With some authors, these connections have a “comparative” form in the sense of total interconnectedness, analogousness and indeed equality of values.<sup>5</sup>

Before mentioning them, we would like to address one very widespread conception according to which “myth” is contrasted with “reality” and the historian's task is merely to “demolish” myths in history. There are countless examples of this conception. For example, in magazines for young people we can encounter articles in which so-called myths about the Wild West are created or destroyed. In this case the historian is the one called upon to explain that in images from the period there are few occurrences of a gunslinger with a pair of colts slung low on his hips and a repeater, and that it is not true that the criminal white men massacred the noble Indians.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the task of historians is *also* to explain that the colt of the time was extremely heavy, so it was quite enough to carry one, and in an armpit holster, and that the majority of Indians lost their lives as a result of epidemics and intertribal fighting that was genocidal in nature. (Incidentally,

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4 Ibid, p. 207.

5 This is particularly evident in the Jungian school, cf. e.g. Campbell, Joseph: *Mýty. Legendy dávných věků v našem denním životě*. Prague 1998. According to Jung, the role of myth is to link us with the realm of the unconscious. Through its images it awakens forces in us which have always been inherent to the human soul and which harbour the knowledge of the species, wisdom, which has helped man to make his way through the centuries. Cf. Campbell, *Mýty*, p. 23.

6 Cf. e.g. Visingr, Lukáš: *Sedm statečných mýtů o Divokém západě: Jak to (možná) bylo doopravdy*. In: *Bobří stopa* 3/2017 (autumn), pp. 3–5.

historians would probably lose out on work if they refused to get involved in this “search for how it really was”!)

Nevertheless, it seems to us that myths cannot be understood merely as “the opposite of reality”, with our only task being to “overturn” myths. Instead, we will concern ourselves with a) possible sources of inspiration for understanding myth across epochs on the basis of new findings about the function of myth and findings from other disciplines and b) the use of these findings to formulate these findings for our purposes – i.e. processing some aspects of cultural university history.

First the question of inspiration. The first thing to mention is deliberations on the basic content of the human psyche. In this connection there is sometimes reference to basic thought patterns which are not only lexical but also pictorial (eidetic) in nature. In this regard one of the basic terms is “archetype”, which refers to a Jungian concept. What is important for our purposes is that, according to C. G. Jung and other authors, “particular archetypal images surface from the unconscious into the conscious of individuals and *entire collectives*, often in the form of myths or myth-like phenomena of the modern age – or, to be more exact, particular mythologems, which is a term for their smallest constituent part not further divisible in a meaningful way.”<sup>7</sup> Stanislav Komárek accurately points out that “...according to Jung, the goal of human life is the so-called integration of archetypes, i.e. consciously grasping them and incorporating them into one’s own psyche, which thus becomes more linked-up and coherent and (...) contributes to the understanding of one’s own identity (salvation is essentially conscious self-identity), one’s place in society and the world, and the increased creativity and meaningfulness of the individual destiny.”<sup>8</sup> This fact is, of course, significant mainly for describing the development of an individual (for example, the inadequacy of the fundamental personal “metamorphosis” in modern humans), but also for collective perception – whether it relates to the perception of the living world or the cultural world. In this connection it is worth quoting another one of Komárek’s observations: “*Innate patterns of feeling and behaviour affect virtually every sphere of a person’s activities, and it is remarkable to see, for example, man’s inherent sense of ceremony and strict observance of rituals as it is reflected in particular areas of human activity (strict rules for religious ceremonies, magical procedures, scientific experiments and the bureaucratic or military ‘liturgy’ must always be stringently and strictly observed; otherwise the system ‘does not work’ or ‘has no effect’). It can be said that the vast majority of what people have created in their cultural/civilizational efforts is a kind of rationalization and ma-*

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7 Here we proceed from the Jungian interpretation of Stanislav Komárek, whose numerous essays are often an exploration of “hidden” connections and parallels.

8 Komárek, Stanislav: *Příroda a kultura. Svět jevů a svět interpretací*. Prague 2000, p. 12.

*terialization of vaguely archetypal ideas on these subjects and it is not as 'fundamentally alien' to people as is sometimes claimed."*<sup>9</sup>

On the basis of these quotations, it is possible to question the total discontinuity between pre-modern and modern history and, on the contrary, point out anthropological connections "inherent to man" in connection with the history of institutions like schools and universities. Within this area of history, this inherent conception can primarily be linked with the world of "symbols", so typical of the education system. This is clearly not just about an understanding of the symbol as a "sign" (anchor equals hope), but also about something that operates nonverbally (or in an intersection of verbal and nonverbal expression) in an exceptionally powerful way – i.e. not just in the sphere of rationality but also emotionality. In this connection it is enough to recall a whole range of phenomena which occur in the university setting (the symbols of individual faculties and the symbols of the university placed above them, the rituals of graduation ceremonies and student initiation rites, the respecting of hierarchies and discussions about their importance, the social role and status (and mask) of the teacher, the casting of aspersions on colleagues and co-workers, the problem of the team competitor/rival and so on and so forth) and it is more than likely that inspiration in the spirit of Jungian "archetypes" is worth considering.<sup>10</sup>

The second source of inspiration comes from philosophy. It is based on the distinction between *poiesis*, *praxis* and *theória* known from as far back as the Platonic period. While *poiesis* is creating and producing and *praxis* is the sphere of negotiation (politics), *theória* is "viewing the truth for its own sake", i.e. science. The university in its ideal, platonic form is therefore a community of people who dedicate themselves for a limited time (students) or their whole lives (teachers/scientists) to discovering, mediating and acquiring many fragments of a universe of methodically discovered truths. Moreover, this idea comes to the fore in two old names for the university: *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* and *universitas litterarum*.<sup>11</sup> However, in this connection there is still something of fundamental importance to be added. In the European historical context, this basic idea of the university (as a community of people who search for and are "committed" to the whole of the truth) has led to universities being regarded as a "third power" in society (along with the state and church), a power that has its own virtues:

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9 Ibid, p. 13.

10 Jungianism is also characterized by excellent comparative observations – across cultures and civilizations. This aspect requires a degree of caution. It is not possible to examine these interesting aspects here, so we would refer the reader to publications by Stanislav Komárek, quoted above, who deals with these issues within a wide range of cultural and natural phenomena.

11 Cf. Lobkowicz, Nikolaus: Die Idee der Universität. *Vereinszeitung des A. G. V. München*, LIX (1980), pp. 2–5.

thoughtfulness, readiness to listen to arguments in a dialogue and an appreciation of distinguishing the paths leading to the truth.

We can also call this idea of the university “platonian” in the sense that although it functions as a kind of model, it is one that is probably never achieved in practice. Mikuláš Lobkowicz put it this way: “*In reality universities had to wage a constant struggle with the state and the church, often in relation to privileges and power; it was not uncommon for universities to let themselves be abused by other powers. In addition, because they had a tradition, they were always sceptical of innovations, and indeed sometimes – as was the case at the end of the 17th century and in the 18th century – so sclerotic that creative scientists, with the help of the relevant rulers, formed their own societies, in which true scientific progress then took place. On the other hand, it was not uncommon for universities to yield to trends of the time, so they often became a haven for ideological charlatans instead of a space for thinking. Finally, universities have long been an object of ridicule because of the indiscipline of their students and the nuttiness of their professors...*”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the difference between the “idea” and “realization” has always been and still is considerable, even though it is possible to speak of those in the history of universities who came very close to this ideal (generally in connection with Oxford and Cambridge, because they stood aside from revolutions and defined the social elites themselves).

However, this is not just about the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality, because this idea (which, for that matter, we can rightly consider a myth par excellence) is not simply the past. It underlies many modern thoughts about reforming universities (take, for example, the classic case formulated by John H. Newman in his famous work *The Idea of a University*, partly applied in practice at the Catholic university in Dublin<sup>13</sup>) and is also present in the reasoning of present-day higher-education staff and (possibly) civil servants. The idea still remains in the minds of many of those involved with the standard used for measuring the often “grim reality”, the standard which raises hopes of getting closer to the ideal. This is obviously complicated by the fact that the modern age has expanded the possibilities on offer – apart from the original ideal, there are many other ideals

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12 Lobkowicz: Mikuláš: *Duše Evropy*. Prague 2001, p. 55.

13 “It is remarkable that Newman’s *Idea of a University* emerged from a project that – measured by the original intentions – actually failed. The basic aim was achieved: after several years of preparatory work, which included a lecture campaign comprising what is now the first part of the *Idea of a University*, Newman founded the Catholic University of Ireland in Dublin in 1854. He also became its first rector; however, after four years he resigned from this post and returned to England. Throughout its existence, the Catholic University of Ireland contended with a number of problems, from financing difficulties through low student numbers to the fact that it did not have the right to award officially recognized university degrees (with the exception of medical ones). The main cause of these obstacles was probably the fact that following centuries of British oppression (political, economic, linguistic and religious) Ireland lacked a sufficiently strong Catholic middle class which could give rise to a university undergraduate body.” Cf. Soukup, Daniel: *Jednota filozofie a různost věd*. Introduction to J. H. Newman’s book *Idea univerzity*. Olomouc 2014, p. 6.

that attempt to formulate the aims of this institution in the modern age. In any case, these ideas, however “platonic”, are still with us in the form of some modern-day myths, and the university setting guarantees that they are continually updated. The idea of the university is a myth which forms a permanent “backbone” for these institutions. Even though from time to time someone will forget how important the backbone is as a support for the body, the university tradition and a certain continuity within it enables new deliberations on the fulfilment of the ideal.

The third stimulus is offered by the literary/academic deliberations of Claudio Magris, expressed in his now “classic” book *The Habsburg Myth*. In the foreword Magris not only explains the meaning of the term myth, but also its application to the area of literature he is researching: “*The term myth – which in itself means that reality is modified and distorted in such a way as to extract the anticipated basic truth from it, that hypothetical metahistorical core capable of synthesizing the basic meaning of reality – takes on a special added significance in this case. The Habsburg myth is not an ordinary process of the usual poetic transfiguration of reality, but rather the total substitution of one reality (a socio-historical one) for another (a fictitious and illusory one): it is therefore the sublimation of a specific living society into the picturesque, safe and ordered world of a fairy tale.*”<sup>14</sup> What is important here is that according to Magris this “fairy tale” world was able to characterize some aspects of Habsburg society and culture, and “not without finesse and the requisite depth”. So this is not just about worshipping the old world and viewing the good old days through rose-tinted glasses. Quite the reverse. The mythicizing of the Habsburg world evokes the past, but at the same time it distorts it, mocks it and at the same time makes use of it – it becomes a tool for prudent political strategy, an attempt to find a principle of cohesion for the increasingly anachronistic and intolerable form of the state. Here the expression “fairy tale” is apposite, even though the works of the writers analysed are very far removed from classic fairy tales. Nevertheless, they attempt to express their commitment to the values of the past, draw attention to specific ideals and deflect attention from the oppressive reality. Magris added something else of fundamental importance on this subject: “*The Austrian myth acquired a distinct ability to penetrate into society, which used it to imbibe human consciousness and human sensitivity, and it eventually succeeded in almost completely transforming the contradictory Austrian reality into a peaceful and safe world.*”<sup>15</sup> The truth of this statement is, of course, debatable, but the basic idea is not – even the modern (literary) myth has a certain power to alter social reality. In this book, works of literature will not be analysed to this extent but rather mentioned in passing. However, we must bear in mind the lesson Magris teaches us: There is truth in fairy tales and they are capable of altering human consciousness.

14 Magris, Claudio: *Habsburšký mýtus v moderní rakouské literatuře*. Brno 2001, p. 17.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 18

The fourth source of inspiration is represented by anthropological and social-science deliberations about the functions of modern-day myths and methodological complexes. It is no coincidence that these conceptions are predominantly found among authors dealing with modern nationalism and the creation of modern national identities and their vitality. According to these authors, “myth” is a basic tool of what is termed cultural reproduction, a tool for creating human communities. They refer to myths, rituals and symbols as “languages” that communities use to create, self-identify, demarcate and maintain their existence.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, myth makes it possible to understand many phenomena of the 18th–20th centuries, especially modernization, social communication, cultural transfers and especially the emergence of modern nationalism. Myths also determine the strategy of communities; they are used in publicity and social control and abused by ideological propaganda. This social-science conception, which has gradually been adopted by historians too, certainly has its limits and dangers. Its advantages include aspects that have been noted in recent decades by historians of the modern age during research into the great ideologies and ideological regimes of the 19th and 20th century. These ideologies not only discovered, interpreted and exploited “ancient myths”, but also created new ones. Thus, communist or fascist regimes, for example, can be described as “myth-making”. And not only that. Modern ideologies and their power applications are like islands floating in the universal myths of the modern age, sometimes without even being aware of it. One of the most frequently mentioned is the “myth of progress”, which forms a background to modern ideologies and the modern world with its understanding of tradition, culture, authority, science and technology, and especially of man and his possibilities.

It is abundantly clear that in this social conception myths (whether they are narrowly focused or more generally widespread) can also be applied to the area of university history. Here it is important to recall the relationship institutions had with the great ideologies of the time (just consider the Czech example of building *national* universities(!) and the role of these institutions in the formation of a Czech national identity). The myth of progress is directly embodied in society by the creation and further development of educational institutions. It is surely not insignificant that the 19th-century “myth of progress” has been thoroughly analysed by historians (to give just two examples, the British historian Christopher Dawson<sup>17</sup> and the Czech, later exiled, historian Bohdan Chudoba<sup>18</sup>). According to Dawson, this myth consists of the theory of evolution (Spencer, Darwin) applied

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16 Cf. Hoskins, Geoffrey – Schopflin, George (eds.): *Myths and Nationhood*. New York 1997. This publication contains excellent and at the same time digestible contributions working with the social conception of myth in research into recent decades.

17 Dawson, Christopher: *Pokrok a náboženství*. Prague 1947.

18 Chudoba, Bohdan: *O dějinách a pokroku*. Brno 1939.

to social progress, 18th-century deism and its influence on the preferences of practical philanthropy, Enlightenment philosophy emphasizing an optimistic view of human nature (Rousseau), and above all the influence of German idealism (Lessing, Hegel). Dawson states that the idea of progress reached its apotheosis in the first half of the 19th century and dominated the major trends in European thinking: rationalist liberalism, revolutionary socialism and transcendental idealism.

A similar emphasis on the intellectual history of progress and its antepositions can also be observed in the present day, in the monumental work by the historian Bedřich Loewenstein *Faith in Progress*.<sup>19</sup> Here the Czech historian not only dissected “faith in progress” as a monolithic phenomenon but pointed to its changing and yet pluralistic face in the modern age. Among other things, he dealt with the “myth of revolution” as the preferred myth of the 20th century and analysed German and Russian thinkers who not only reflected on this myth, but to some extent also created it. In the 1990s, just as in the late 1960s, both Europe and the USA were grappling with the nature of postwar development, and systemic contradictions could not help but affect the area of science and its cultivation at universities. With regard to the history of the USA, Loewenstein gives the example of James William Fulbright (1905–1995), the committed senator and advisor to J. F. Kennedy famous for creating the student exchange programme, who became involved in shaping American politics and promoted “mentoring” and “partnership” in international politics as well as in schools.<sup>20</sup>

For that matter, some German authors, for example, associate the idea of progress with the “Humboldtian myth” and the difficult-to-translate expression “*Bildung*”, i.e. education, which also implies modern rationality and the (Enlightenment) notion of possible – and sometimes sustained – progress in the education of man in all its constituent parts: rational, emotional and volitional.<sup>21</sup> Incidentally, the Humboldtian myth will be referred to many times in the book, in various connections.

Finally, the fifth source of inspiration was found with the contemporary Czech historian Jiří Štaif. He discusses his understanding of “myth” and “social rituals” in the work *Writing Biographies and Authorial Self-Reflection*, which is an exposition of his conception of a biographical book about František Palacký. Here Štaif analyses the term “symbolic communication” and explains his own approach within this context: “*I paid some attention to biographical issues specifically with regard to Palacký. What I was primarily interested in was how to explain the historical fact that his image “settled” in the modern memory of Czech national society as one of its constants.*

19 Loewenstein, Bedřich: *Víra v pokrok. Dějiny jedné evropské ideje*. Prague 2009.

20 Ibid, p. 482.

21 Mittelstraß, Jürgen: *Die unzeitgemässe Universität*. Frankfurt am Main 1994, pp. 95–104.

*What seemed key to me was the myth that saw him as the symbolic Father of the Czech nation. I originally thought that this conception of the cultural integration of national society was only typical of “late” national movements. However, in time, through the influence of Mircea Eliade, I came to realize that this kind of myth can function even in the modern age, because it makes it possible to develop the integrating role of the patriarchal father responsible for his “children”. It offers them the opportunity to seek and find in him “their own” certainty amid the uncertainties of the modern age, even after he is no longer physically alive, for as long as they believe he is their authoritative compass. As a symbolic father, Palacký is thus to assume moral responsibility not only for the birth of his children, but also for their lives, as well as the lives of their descendants. As his “offspring” they have the assurance that he is always “watching over them”.*<sup>22</sup> Of course, when it comes to the history of institutions such as colleges, universities or academies, the biographical method can only be partially employed. Nevertheless, the way our colleague from Prague approached his material seems to us extremely productive and also applicable to the history of such traditional institutions as universities.

These five examples should suffice to outline the basic assumptions of our work and explain our understanding of the crucial word “myth” as it will be used in this work. As part of the summary of the conception presented, the following should be added:

1. The conception of “myth” used in the above connotations can be a useful tool for the history of university culture even in the modern era. This is primarily because it makes it possible to reveal intentions of those involved which would otherwise be incomprehensible and to grasp long-term trends underlying university traditions and operations. It can shed light on the world of symbols and at the same time it is possible to interpret its new meanings within the framework of changing social conditions.
2. This conception obviously needs to be applied to the relevant areas of university life in its institutional and personnel sphere. For the historian there is also the necessity of not pre-empting the “language of the sources”, which always has priority, but the theoretical concept allows the segments of university culture that we consider the most significant to be discussed in isolation in individual chapters.
3. Clearly, the cultural history of university institutions cannot be exhausted using a single method, even if we consider it a pivotal one. For that reason, other approaches to social, political and cultural history will also appear in this book – it can thus be said to represent a combination of methods, taking into account the importance of biographical aspects in a work of this

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<sup>22</sup> Štaif, Jiří: Psaní biografie a autorská sebereflexe. *Dějiny – teorie – kritika* 1/2015, p. 120. Here the author explains his motivation for writing the book *František Palacký. Život, dílo, mýtus*. Prague 2009.

- type: we believe that what is critical in university life is not just “structures”, but above all the people who create and influence those structures.
4. We are aware that university culture cannot be accurately described without taking into account the political context in a comparative European (Central European) perspective. However, our comparison can only be of limited scale and applicability – it is more about taking soundings of selected institutions and countries in an attempt to capture major similarities and differences.
  5. The world of universities is not a world where teaching and research, schools and state, teachers and students coexist in harmony, but a world full of rivalry, conflicts and problems, at every conceivable level. These problems cannot be swept under the carpet; on the contrary, it is necessary and it is incumbent on the historian to uncover and duly interpret them. This is especially sensitive in connection with recent decades, a period when the witnesses of past events are still alive. A particularly sensitive approach is required by the interpretation of events linked with moments of political and ideological upheaval (in the Czech setting e.g. 1968, 1989).
  6. Universities are generally a place of social mobility and the formation of national elites, a place where the struggle for university and more generally applicable freedoms takes place, a place where new ideas (which are applicable to society and sometimes “subversive”) are formulated, but sometimes also a place of “intellectual bubbles” which the outside world occasionally fails to penetrate. Elitist tendencies manifest themselves across the university spectrum, and for the historian it is extremely interesting to observe how they take on diverse forms in diverse historical situations.
  7. The authors’ decision to write a history of university culture goes hand in hand with a conviction that “culture” is something of fundamental importance in the life of modern states and institutions. It is an element which is often rooted very deeply in national societies, mentalities and reputations, and its permanence and specificity is more important than its variability and universality. In other words: we are of the opinion that an “institutionalized” culture is not easily interchangeable and contains a certain national and intellectual “flavour”, some aspects of which may be non-transferable. Culture, made up of unique historical phenomena, can to a certain extent be regarded as “myth”, which we live off and use as a source of inspiration for creative life.

We are aware, however, that our approach and the research presented here is only a kind of introduction to the issue. It does not represent a synthetic view of the whole area of university culture – such an ambition would simply have been unreasonable. Nevertheless, we believe that the following chapters offer food for thought and for subsequent discussion, especially in the university setting, which may help to invigorate the regular course of university life.