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Concept of Myth as a Marker of Social Context: Roland Barthes and Pavel Gurevich

Abstract

Philosophers often incorporate the concept of myth in their works since it is an important part of human life. However, considering the concepts regarding such phenomenon as myth in certain philosophical works can also indicate other important issues. One of such issues is the one about the attitude to society in general as well as to its flaws and the need to deal with them, or at least to present them. The article explores Roland Barthes and Pavel Gurevich's concepts of myth as well as provides conclusions based on these theories about Western and Soviet views on society. The paper argues that both Barthes and Gurevich view myth as a society-made phenomenon that fills people's lives with illusions and manipulations. However, Barthes uses semiological approach, presenting myth as a second-order semiological system, while Gurevich insists that myth has a social origin, is closely related to the concept of ideology, and that the mythmakers are the elites that oppress the lower class. In addition, while Barthes criticizes his own society, Gurevich states that myths exist and are produced by Western society which is an antipode to his own, Soviet society. Taking into account all the above-mentioned facts, it is assumed that there was a request in Western society to analyze and identify its flaws, while Soviet society represented by the philosopher related to the dominant power

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structures used the concept of myth for ideological purpose to show the flaws of Western society and thus the advantages of Soviet society.

Key words: myth, philosophy, history of philosophy, Roland Barthes, Pavel Gurevich

Słowa kluczowe: mit, filozofia, historia filozofii, Roland Barthes, Paweł Gurewicz

Nowadays, the term “myth” as well as its use in the context of philosophical works and concepts changes rapidly in accordance with the requests of the public. The connotations of this term have changed significantly as well. Philosophers step aside not only from its traditional interpretation but what is more important – from all references to the archaic context, in which myth has been traditionally presented as a form of the worldview related to the stories about gods and heroes. All these processes became rather expeditious in the second half of the 20th century, due to the post-war changes in the social and cultural background of Western society, which in its turn led to significant changes in the areas of philosophy. In this paper, the works of Roland Barthes and Pavel Gurevich will be discussed since these two philosophers in their works both addressed the term myth giving it a completely new meaning. Both philosophers take the traditional meaning of myth out of the term “myth”, filling it, on the contrary, with new senses strongly bound to the negative connotations that this term has in modern society as to something that has false notion.

Both Barthes and Gurevich consider myth as a phenomenon that emerges due to the social context Western society exists in. Moreover, both philosophers get rid of the original meaning of the term myth as a story about gods and heroes. In other words, they eliminate the original context of this term completely. For Barthes and Gurevich, myth is a phenomenon that subdues human lives in Western society, filling them with new meanings and transforming them, making society become the way it is.

At the same time, the approaches of Barthes and Gurevich differ completely from one another. Barthes chooses semiotics as a starting point, focusing mainly on the technical aspects of the phenomenon of myth. In other words, Barthes’ main aim is to identify the rules of myth’s functioning in the context of society as well as the ways and extent myth influence people who consume it. Gurevich, on the contrary, focuses mainly on the social, cultural, and even political areas of myth’s functioning, emphasizing the corrupt essence of myth, its corrupt power, and the consequences of consuming myth for the whole society.

This paper aims on considering Barthes and Gurevich’s concepts of myth as well as on deriving information about extent of philosophical reflection of Western and Soviet

societies regarding the flaws of the social order based on these concepts. Both personalities are important figures in the area of philosophy of the above-mentioned social systems, which means it is possible to address their works as the ones that represent philosophical reflections that are inherent in their social systems, accordingly. Thus, it is necessary to identify what is myth according to each philosopher. This term and the specifics of its use by both philosophers, in its turn, shape the extent of philosophical reflection about the specifics of the functioning of societies they present and represent.

Roland Barthes: Myth as a Semiological System

Roland Barthes is a French philosopher, also known as one of the structuralism representatives, whose main works on myth utilize Ferdinand de Saussure's concepts of communication as a semiotic system, basing his own ideas on this method. The first aspect Barthes mentions in his work "Myth today" is the definition of myth the philosopher applies. In Barthes' opinion, myth is "a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse."² Additionally, he emphasizes that in the context of myth, the message is less important than "the way in which it utters this message."³ The author stresses that myth is not a type of speech in the narrow sense, not a word or a figure of speech, but everything can be a myth since "every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society."⁴ In other words, it is possible to make every object or phenomenon a myth since everything can "serve as a support to mythical speech"⁵ Therefore, it is possible to make every phenomenon existing in the world a myth since in a broad sense everything can be presented as a semiological system and a type of speech.

The above-mentioned aspect of the essence of the myth is the core element of Barthes' theory, and his further conclusions are based on it. Further interpretation of myth presents it as a "second-order semiological system"⁶. The original concept of the semiological system has been constructed by Ferdinand de Saussure and included such elements as signifier, signified, and sign. In this system, there is a concept (signifier) and its acoustic image (signified), and the result of their interplay is a sign. In Barthes' work, the philosopher uses the above-mentioned concept as a base for his own system, in which the

² Roland Barthes, "Myth today", In *A Barthes' Reader*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 93.

³ Barthes, "Myth today", 94.

⁴ Barthes, "Myth today", 94.

⁵ Barthes, "Myth today", 94.

⁶ Barthes, "Myth today", 99.

sign in the first-order system becomes only a signifier in the second-order system, i.e. myth. Thus, instead of the interplay of two independent phenomena, the signifier is now something that was defined already and has certain connotations, i.e. the sign of the first-order semiological system. In the context of the second-order semiological system, Barthes uses the term “form” to define the signifier, and “concept” to define the signified, and the result of these phenomena' interplay is now called “signification.”⁷ Thus, instead of the principles of the first-order semiological system based on language, myth incorporates not real objects but rather the signs of the objects, aimed at creating new ideologies.

Myth, as Barthes presents it, is some kind of a game, in which rules are imposed on its consumers, since now the primary meaning “becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains.”⁸ At the same time, myth never destroys or eliminates the meaning. What it does is simplification and distortion of meaning such as eliminating the context, remaining only certain aspects of it. As Barthes claims, “the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal.”⁹ Another important aspect of the myth is that it is not general but also targeted at a specific group of people. In this context, Barthes contradicts many of his predecessors who claimed that myths are universal and can be utilized by all groups of people throughout the time of humankind's existence. Barthes, on the contrary, insists that myth is targeted only at a specific group of people in a specific situation, while other groups would not even understand what it is about. He writes that “It [myth] is turned toward me, I am subjected to its intentional force, it summons me to receive its expansive ambiguity.”¹⁰ Thus, Barthes contradicts the concept of the universal essence of myth, insisting on the pluralism of myth that are spread through the whole Western society.

Another significant aspect of myth according to Barthes is its capacity of “giving a historical intention natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal.”¹¹ In other words, myth presents as something natural a phenomenon that is, in fact, artificial. Myth “abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible.”¹² In other words, what myth promotes is a simplified mechanism of social or ideological reactions, a pattern that exists in the context of a certain situation or behavior. All complex elements are

⁷ Barthes, “Myth today”, 102.

⁸ Barthes, “Myth today”, 103.

⁹ Barthes, “Myth today”, 103.

¹⁰ Barthes, “Myth today”, 110.

¹¹ Barthes, “Myth today”, 130-131.

¹² Barthes, “Myth today”, 132.

eliminated from this pattern and its simplicity and irreplaceability makes it comprehensible, widespread, and popular among people. Therefore, myths become incorporated into human lives and due to the deformation of the complex and contextual reality filled with various meanings, they promote certain behavioral patterns that are rather simple and comprehensible for everyone.

In his work *Mythologies*, Barthes gives various examples of the newly created myths that influence human lives nowadays by imposing certain behavioral patterns. For instance, he uses toys as an example of such myth, stating that “French toys always mean something, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life: the Army, Broadcasting, the Post Office, Medicine ..., School, Hair-Styling ..., the Air Force ..., Transport ..., the Air Force ..., Transport ..., Science.”¹³ In other words, using simple patterns toys impose on children some core behavioral principles using simplified models of certain aspects of human life. According to Barthes, there are plenty of myths like this in contemporary society, and they are everywhere, from photos and cinema to newspapers and famous personalities. The whole society is completely mythologized, which means simplification of people’s deliberation. In addition, thanks to myths, people now are guided by the latter and as a result, some behavioral patterns are imposed and people’s actions become more controllable.

In addition, one of the most important parts of Barthes’ exploration of mythologies is “African dictionary”, in which Barthes considers the mythologizing of the language that the French government uses regarding its colonized territories. For instance, Barthes notes that the term “band” in the context of the governmental discourse signifies that “the disparagement of the vocabulary here serves in a precise way to deny the state of war, which permits annihilating the notion of an interlocutor” and that “the moralization of language thus permits referring the problem of peace to an arbitrary change of vocabulary.”¹⁴ This is not the only example Barthes uses. Some more are “destiny” which utilizes the concept of the unbreakable bond between colonizer and the colony, or “war” that one must “deny” or “name it as little as possible.”¹⁵ In other words, in this part of his work, Barthes demonstrates how mythologizing language changes the meanings and promotes a simplified variant of the perception of the world, which, at the same time, is far from reality but the elites benefit from it. Thus, Barthes emphasizes mythologizing the society in which he lives and giving

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 53.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower, and other mythologies*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 103.

¹⁵ Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower*, 105.

examples of political myths explores the connection between imposing certain ideas and mythologizing terms that are used to express such ideas.

Pavel Gurevich and the Mythologizing of Western Society

Now it is necessary to explore Gurevich's concept of myth, which is in a certain way similar to Barthes' since it fills myth with mostly negative connotations and states the impact of myth on the people who live in Western society. In his work *Social mythology*, Gurevich explores the ideas of Western philosophers on the concept of ideology and the functioning of the Western bourgeoisie society. He presents myth as a "form of consciousness that differs a lot from the scientific understanding of reality. The peculiarity of this type of consciousness is in its rather wholesome, but illusive, fictive, and hallucinating perception of life."¹⁶ Unlike Barthes who rather states the significance of myth for Western society rather than criticizes it, Gurevich emphasizes that myth is something hostile to people, and that it is completely false, unlike Barthes' concept of simplification of reality.

According to Gurevich, Western society is filled with various myths that affect people's lives negatively. The author uses the myths of "bourgeoisie progress," "prosperity," "equality," and "common welfare"¹⁷ as examples of such myths. The complexity of such myths constitutes so-called social mythology, which is a phenomenon of Western society aimed at the manipulation and submission of citizens of this society to its rules. The philosopher points out the relation between myths and such phenomena as fabrication and irrationality¹⁸, emphasizing that TV, mass media, newspapers, and so on usually use to spread myths over society. Moreover, Gurevich accuses Western society of irrationalism¹⁹ and mysticism²⁰ presenting these phenomena as the core ones in the context of the creation of myths.

For Gurevich, the issue of myth is closely connected with the issue of ideology since it is the essence of myth. Myth is always ideological and has a political subtext. Producing myths is also the result of class struggle because the elites are the mythmakers who create myths that bring them benefits, but at the same time are harmful to the lower class. Social myths, as Gurevich states, justify "an actual inequality of people in a capitalistic society" and

¹⁶ Pavel Gurevich, *Socialnaya mifologiya*, (Moskva: Misl, 1983), 6.

¹⁷ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 6.

¹⁸ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 7.

¹⁹ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 7.

²⁰ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 9.

present it “as a norm of human relations.”²¹ Unlike Barthes who says that everyone can create new myths and presents myth as a social and cultural phenomenon, Gurevich insists on the political subtext of myth and promotes the idea that political elites create myths.

Myth, as Gurevich presents it, is always illusory to some extent, and creates illusions within the society aimed at stabilizing the relations between people. As the philosopher says “myths promoted by bourgeoisie ideology are not only the fantastic subjectivist fiction but also an attempt to direct the social demands of the masses in a certain direction, smooth out contradictions.”²² In other words, he refers to the idea that only one class, the elites, benefits from myths, and myths in their turn are nothing more than an attempt to make the society comfortable for its elites.

Gurevich focuses on criticizing Western society and tries to demonstrate that myth promotes by the elites are deeply ideological and false. He uses the myth of the American dream as an example, stressing that “many of the bourgeoisie researchers use this myth as an argument that emphasizes the supposed existing ideological unity of the American nation, the kinship of its spirit,”²³ stating, in fact, that there is no such thing as unity of the American nation. He emphasizes that myth is a tool aims at “manipulating human consciousness.”²⁴ Thus, as Gurevich states, Western society is deeply mythologized in its essence and this changes the consciousness of its people, making them more vulnerable to various manipulations and imposing ideas – from eliminating dissent to imposing certain ideas related to national identity.

One of the important aspects of this theory is that Gurevich does not only criticize Western society but also insists that it includes all the negative characteristics which, in their turn, are derived from its mythological essence. For instance, he states that bourgeoisie ideology “is filled with fanaticism, moral aggressiveness, hatred toward people with another viewpoint.”²⁵ In other words, he presents Western society as a rather dangerous one for its citizens. It is also important to note that Gurevich refers only to the works of Western philosophers and critics of Western society and its ideology, who, unlike Gurevich, were themselves a part of Western society.

²¹ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 64.

²² Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 80.

²³ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 112.

²⁴ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 116.

²⁵ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 156.

Barthes and Gurevich as Critics of Western Society: Western View VS. Soviet View

Finally, it is possible now to discuss one of the main issues of the presented study. This aspect is derived from Barthes and Gurevich's concepts of myth in its relation to society. Both philosophers present myth as a phenomenon related to manipulations and ideology that has a great impact on the whole Western society. However, here lies the core difference between these two personalities and their theories.

Barthes, indeed, presents myth as a phenomenon that distorts reality and assures people that artificial is natural now, presenting different simplified patterns to cooperate with reality. In addition, Barthes provides examples of political mythologizing of the environment, giving some terms that emerged in the context of discussions about colonized societies. It is not likely to conclude that Barthes criticizes myth and the process of creation of myth since he rather states the current state of affairs. He focuses on the instability of Western society as well as on to what extent myths have power over it. Nevertheless, the myth as Barthes presents it, is not a solely political or ideological phenomenon, it is rather about culture than about politics. Myth, in accordance with Barthes, can be constructed by any person and can be embodied in any system, influencing all areas of human life. It is not entirely political, since for example toys or famous people can become myths as well, influencing non-politicized groups of people. Every semiological system can become a myth to a certain group of people but remain un-mythologized to the rest since the latter will not understand the context needed. Myths in Barthes' viewpoint are not imposed but rather organically exist within the society because they are the instruments for description and living in the world.

One of the most important moments is that Barthes discusses Western society, French, in particular, and says that mythologizing, indeed, flourishes in capitalist society. But it is worth mentioning that such a society – Western and capitalist – is the society Barthes belongs to. In other words, he does not only criticize and explore the society, but he does not view it as the Other, external society because it is the society he exists in. The critical nature of his work also signifies that Barthes is not satisfied with the society he exists in and wants at least to identify its main problems related to mythologizing. Despite the fact that Barthes does not present myth as a completely negative phenomenon, he focuses on some of its negative aspects such as eliminating the whole complex context and simplification the behavioral patterns.

However, in Barthes' case, considering his works dedicated to the issue of myth, one important aspect of Western philosophy, as well as the whole Western society, can be

identified. This aspect is a public request to identify and deal with the negative processes within society. As known, asking the question is the first step to finding the answer. Barthes asks what is myth and answers the question, referring to the core issues of the social and cultural processes. The existence of such works as Barthes' ones demonstrates that in Western society both public and philosophers understand the problems and, as a result, propose solutions to these problems. Therefore, Barthes is not only a critic of society but also its representative, and his criticism aims at changing his own society for the better or at least at promoting such changes.

Gurevich, on the other side, demonstrates absolutely different approach even despite some similarities with Barthes' theory. First of all, Gurevich is not a part of the society he criticizes but is a Soviet philosopher. His own social and cultural context is completely different from the one he describes in his work, and thus his work is completely theoretical. As a critic of Western society, Gurevich himself did not experience its influence. Additionally, Gurevich mainly relies on the works of Western critics rather than on his own experience, unlike Barthes.

Moreover, while Barthes is interested only in shaping and changing his own French society, Gurevich analyses Western society as something hostile and opposite to the Soviet one. He emphasizes the antagonism between the society he studies and the society he lives in. For instance, he writes that "facing the unbreakable unity and cohesion of the countries of the socialist commonwealth, growth of the national liberation movement, new ostents of the general crisis of capitalism, bourgeois politicians began developing a new course."²⁶ He notes that there are "new versions of political myths about "communist menace," "red menace," "totalitarianism" as well as accuses Western society in attacks on "socialistic lifestyle."²⁷ Thus, Gurevich presents Western society as the polar opposite of the Soviet one, without mentioning any aspect of mythologizing in Soviet society.

The second point is that in the presentation of the constructions that aim to explain social processes as two antagonistic social systems represented in a "true-false" dichotomy where truth is not a hypothetical construction but a reality in which the philosopher exists and the antagonistic system is manipulating and filled with myths, demonstrates that there was no request in Soviet society to explore its flaws. In his work, Gurevich does not indicate it but he certainly means that while capitalism and bourgeoisie manipulate people using myth and ideology, socialistic society, which means Soviet, does not demonstrate any of such aspects.

²⁶ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 167.

²⁷ Gurevich, *Socialnaya*, 168.

In fact, it is also a target of Western society's manipulations and hostility. The main trait of bourgeoisie society in Gurevich's viewpoint is capitalism and class inequality, while Soviet society presented as an antipode to the Western one, is the one in which there is no class struggle at all since everybody is equal. Which is more important, Gurevich also presents imperialism as a Western society trait and, at the same time, completely not inherent to Soviet society. In general, Gurevich insists that all the flaws related to mythmaking exist only in the paradigm of Western society but are completely absent when it comes to Soviet society.

At the same time, Soviet society, just as the current Russian society, was filled with myths. A number of the researchers²⁸²⁹ come to this conclusion making Soviet myth and their peculiarities an object of their research, stating that even Soviet Marxism-Leninism can be viewed as mythology³⁰. However, Gurevich prefers to ignore the myth-making processes in the Soviet Union, focusing only on Western society instead. Thus, there is a process of mythologizing cultural and social space along with the demand to mythologize the Other, Western society in particular. Since USSR considers the West as its ideological opponent, one of its tools to confront it, is mythologizing this society in order to demonize it in the eyes of the Soviet people. It also means that there was no request to reflect on the controversial aspects of Soviet society and point out the Soviet myth and its impact on citizens. At the same time, there was a demand to criticize Western society. One of the peculiarities of Gurevich's work is that he criticizes Western society but his target audience is Soviet people, not westerners, whose society is criticized. Unlike Barthes who just explores the current issues and manipulations within French society writing, primarily for Europeans, Gurevich aims at demonizing Western culture. However, in fact, Gurevich's criticism just reflects the issues within the USSR since all the aspects he presents as flaws of the Western society exist in his own society. Therefore, while Barthes identifies the issues of his own society, Gurevich focuses on the Other instead of exploring its own culture.

Soviet society then, just as Russian society now, needed changes and philosophical reflection over its issues and myths, especially considering its aggressive ideology and imperialism. However, Gurevich chooses the opposite direction of criticizing the West instead of identifying the myth and myth-making of Soviet society. It means that the issues

²⁸ Nina Tumarkin. "Myth and memory in soviet society". *Society* 24 (1987).

²⁹ Thomas Sherlock. *Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

³⁰ Carol Barner-Barry and Cynthia Hody. "Soviet Marxism-Leninism as Mythology". *Political Psychology* 15(4) (1994).

within Soviet society that are related to the phenomenon of myth and its ideological influence, in particular, have been ignored for a very long time. Considering the fact that western philosophers started analyzing such problems in their own society centuries ago, Soviet philosophical thought did not demonstrate similar attempts, and it is unlikely that issues regarding mythologizing and manipulation within Russian society will be resolved successfully in the near future.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that both Barthes and Gurevich presented myth as a phenomenon of Western society that files people's lives with illusions and manipulations, only Barthes' theory is relevant enough since he explores the society he belongs to. Gurevich, on the contrary, criticizes Western society as an antipode to Soviet society, which is not mythologized at all. It leads to the conclusion that while West with Barthes as its representative demonstrates that it is ready to deal with the issues of its society, Gurevich focuses mainly on the critics of West, ignoring the issues within their own society. It means that on the level of the dominant ideology, Soviet philosophers were not ready to admit the flaws of their society which also includes its mythologizing. As a result, it is unlikely that there will be any significant changes in this area in the near future.

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