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# Political Mythologies of the Twentieth Century in the Perspective of Hermann Heller, Ernst Cassirer, and Karl Löwith

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**POLITICAL MYTHOLOGIES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IN  
THE PERSPECTIVE OF HERMANN HELLER, ERNST CASSIRER,  
AND KARL LÖWITH**

Beginning in the late 19th century, politics became a particularly problematic topic of philosophical inquiry in Europe. The problematic character of politics continued to deepen with the radicalization of political tendencies in Germany and in Europe during 1920s and 1930s, and it has not ceased to haunt philosophical inquiry, even beyond the reorientation of Europe following World War II.

The problematic status of politics after the late 19th century became particularly evident in Germany. In late 19th century Germany the ideological implications of this problem took on a particularly radical form, leading to the catastrophic consequences of Nazi rule in the ensuing decades. The “problem” raised in this context for philosophical reflection is that of politics stripped of all traditional ideals and conceived as a function of the sheer power of the State. Let us examine more closely the implications for political philosophy of this concept of State power, of the *Machtstaat*, unburdened by traditional constraints or by ethical norms or other universal claims posited by philosophy since its origins in Antiquity.

As a means of undertaking this examination, I will investigate a crucial issue which arose in the early decades of this century: the precise implications of the radicalization of the notion of the *Machtstaat* for the concept of the political as such. My analysis branches out in two directions. I first examine the three main attempts to theoretically comprehend this radicalization and the emergence of fascism. These three divergent approaches were developed by the philosopher of law Hermann Heller, and by the philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Karl Löwith. Discussion of these three approaches will provide the conceptual groundwork needed for a more general theoretical inquiry, which is the subject of the second part of this paper. In this part I will succinctly examine the problem of twentieth century politics in relation to one of its primary features: the fictionalization of the political.

## **I. Fiction, Myth, Ideology: Hermann Heller, Ernst Cassirer, Karl Löwith**

Hermann Heller, Ernst Cassirer, Karl Löwith: three authors who shared the same determination to challenge the ideological underpinnings of the *Machtstaat* as formulated by the apologists of fascism.<sup>1</sup> Well before they were forced to emigrate, each of these authors proposed a critique of fascism: Heller's philosophy of law – the theoretical backbone of social democracy in the Weimar Republic – Ernst Cassirer's neo-Kantian liberalism, and the political orientation of Karl Löwith, whose skepticism as regards any system makes him difficult to classify in the traditional categories. Each of these thinkers produced a different (even divergent) approach to the radicalization of the politics of the *Machtstaat*, conceived as both a mystification specific to the twentieth century and as an outgrowth of tendencies deeply rooted in the European political tradition. The primary reason for selecting these three approaches, justifying their examination in common for purposes of broader theorization, lies in the critique each formulated of the instrumentalization of politics as means of legitimating the *Machtstaat*. Each of these philosophers considered that such instrumentalization, while deeply rooted in a long Western tradition, reflects strategies of legitimization and manipulation which, given their extremism, accounts for the unprecedented nature of fascism (above all of nazism) in Europe, when compared with earlier political traditions. It is the unprecedented nature of this radicalization of the *Machtstaat* which each of these authors considered to deliberately break with earlier assumptions concerning the existence of an autonomous political “reality” capable of imposing limitations on the quest for total power. This is what Hermann Heller analyzes in terms of the “fictionalization of politics”; what Cassirer views in terms of “political myths of the twentieth century” and what Löwith conceives under the heading of the “ideology of facticity”. A brief overview of these three concepts will lead to examination of the key issue concerning what I take to be the “problem” of politics in the 20th century.

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<sup>1</sup> The preliminaries to this inquiry can be found in an article on the political philosophy of Karl Löwith, entitled “The Sense of History: on the Political Implications of Karl Löwith's Interpretation of Secularization”, in *History and Theory*, n. 1, vol. 37, 1998, p.69-82) and in two unpublished articles devoted to Hermann Heller (“Hermann Heller and the Juridical-political criticism of fascism in the context of the Weimar Republic”) and Ernst Cassirer (“The Theory of myth in Ernst Cassirer: the ethico-political stakes of the debate between Cassirer and Martin Heidegger” to appear in *Ernst Cassirer: Symbol, Science and Culture*.)

### **Hermann Heller and the idea of “fictionalization of politics”**

Despite the recent reprinting by J.C.B. Mohr Publishers in Tübingen of Heller's complete works, which were out of print for many years, many of the writings of this philosopher of law are still hardly known. Notwithstanding Heller's profound influence on German legal theory and legal philosophy at the time of the Weimar Republic, these works have never been translated into English or into French. As a major theoretician of social-democracy in Germany at the time of the Weimar Republic, Hermann Heller was also one of the most eminent jurists of his time. He served as the legal representative of the social-democratic government of Prussia during the so-called *Preussenschlag* of 1932 when the Prussian provincial government challenged the decision of the German President, von Hindenburg, to resort to emergency decree as a means of replacing elected social democrats by representatives loyal to Hugenburg and to Hitler. Heller's direct adversary in this trial before the Constitutional Court of Germany was none other than Carl Schmitt who subsequently, over a period of several years, served as architect of the Nazi legal system.<sup>2</sup>

To analyze Heller's notion of the fictionalization of politics, I will briefly refer to three of his works: *Hegel und der nationale Machtstaatsgedanke in Deutschland* (*Hegel and the Idea of the Power State in Germany*), published in 1921; *Europa und der Faschismus* (*Europe and Fascism*), initially published in 1929, and then reissued in an expanded edition in 1931; and *Die Souveränität* (*Sovereignty*) published in 1927. The first of these books discusses the “instrumentalization of politics” promoted by the notion of the *Machtstaat*. In *Hegel und der nationale Machtstaatsgedanke in Deutschland*, Heller described the extension and warping of Hegel's philosophy of the State that led to the formulation of the power state ideology, as expressed at the end of the 19th century in the famous statement by Heinrich von Treitschke, the official historiographer of Germany from its creation in 1871. According to Treitschke, the essence of the State is “power, power and power once again” (*Macht, Macht, und wieder Macht*).<sup>3</sup> Precisely this attitude, as Heller immediately recognized in his later writings, was extended and radicalized in Heller's own political context. The concept of politics had been instrumentalized in conjunction with the assumption of the principle of absolute State supremacy, thus placing in question any other possible criteria of political existence.

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<sup>2</sup> See the transcript of the debate between Heller and Schmitt before the *Staatsgerichtshof* in Heller/Schmitt, *Preussen contra Reich vor dem Staatsgerichtshof*, Glashütten im Taunus, Verlag Detlev Auvermann, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> This sentence, taken from an essay by Treitschke, “Bundesstaat und Einheitsstaat,” is subjected to a penetrating analysis by Heller in *Hegel und der nationale Machtstaatsgedanke in Deutschland*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, Tübingen, Mohr, 1992, p.63 f.

The work *Europe and Fascism* pursues and deepens this theory of political instrumentalization in terms of Heller's notion of the "fictionalization of politics", which he situates at the heart of fascist theories of the State. Heller's book is the outcome of months of study in 1928, at first hand, of the Italian fascist political and legal system. Heller began his inquiry following the publication of Carl Schmitt's book *Parliamentarism and Democracy* (*Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, 1923/1926), in which Schmitt claimed that Italian fascism, and to a lesser extent Soviet Bolshevism, were more democratic than the French or English parliamentary systems. Heller's conclusions are quite different: he reports a thoroughgoing lack of democracy in Italy in conjunction with a sweeping eradication of the rule of law, resulting from what he takes to be an overall crisis of European politics of which fascism is the most obvious symptom. His concept of fictionalization is set within the framework of these analyses.

As defined by Heller in *Europe and Fascism*, political fiction constitutes the ultimate expression of political instrumentalization. The instrumentalization of values in function either of the quest for political takeover or of the maintenance of power disregards all consideration of the "truth" or intrinsic worth of these values. The problem of truth is entirely subordinated to the quest for power. In this context so typical of politics in the twentieth century, a well-constructed fiction or myth capable of galvanizing the beliefs of the masses serves as a formidable political tool through which "truth" is equated with efficacy, even where what is asserted to be true has lost all plausibility. Hermann Heller argues that fictionalization as a political instrument, by shifting the focus away from the problem of factual plausibility, accounts for the ease by which fiction embodied in political myths can be tailored to a wide variety of political aims. This applies to Georges Sorel's idea of "myth" which, once stripped of its initial objective of the general strike, played a major ideological role among proponents of the extreme right.<sup>4</sup> It corresponds to the purely strategic and "fictional" role played by religious belief for Charles Maurras,<sup>5</sup> as well as by the "myth of the nation" in the writings of Mussolini. By

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding the reception of Sorel see Schlomo Sand, *L'illusion du politique*, Paris, Editions de la Découverte, 1985 and Zeev Sternhell, "Georges Sorel, le syndicalisme révolutionnaire et la droite radicale au début du siècle" in J. Julliard, S. Sand, eds., *Georges Sorel et son temps*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Heller quotes Maurras' famous slogan "I am an atheist, but I am Catholic", *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II, p. 488-89. Maurras also wrote "The silence of religious thought could not lead me away from the more or less clear, more or less high idea, still strong, of profound Catholic goodness." Charles Maurras, *L'action française et la religion catholique*, Paris, Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1978, pp.73 f.

transforming the content of Sorel's myth, while maintaining its indifference to factual reality, or even to plausibility, Maurras, like Mussolini, adapted fictionalization to the needs of a particular political agenda. Heller considered one telling example to be particularly relevant: Mussolini's statement that it is not at all necessary for the "myth of the nation" as a central belief in the fascist ideology, to "correspond to a reality."<sup>6</sup>

It would reach beyond the purpose of the present paper to provide a detailed analysis of the role of fiction in the movement towards political instrumentalization in the 20th century. Of particular importance for our current investigation, however, is to set in relief the role of fiction as a novel feature in the formulation of the politics of mass manipulation. Clearly, the principle of instrumentalization promoted by such politics is of itself by no means new; it is, indeed, as old as political tradition itself. Beginning from the assumption that all supposedly fundamental "truth" does nothing more than express a given interest or, in the language of the 20th century, a hidden "will to power", instrumentalization traditionally tended to reduce all political values to mere weapons in combat. The classic formulation of this idea in the 20th century, which attracted Heller's close attention, was elaborated by Carl Schmitt in his work *The Concept of the Political*. In this book Schmitt postulated that any values, even what are taken to be humanitarian ones, are nothing more than interests that come to concrete expression in the definition of the relationship between friend and foe.<sup>7</sup> The new feature grafted onto this formulation in the context of the 20th century is the deliberately fictitious use of myth as the founding principle of the ideology of the *Machtstaat* – nationalism that has become a "religion applied to domination of the flock."<sup>8</sup> This is the new feature I seek to elucidate on the basis of Hermann Heller's analyses.

Heller's investigations clearly illustrate the obligation for political philosophy, in light of the problem raised by the "fictionalization of politics", to revise its fundamental categories. Several years before the publication of *Europa und der Fascismus*, this is what prompted Heller, in his book *Die Souveränität* (1927), to initiate a novel reformulation of the theoretical foundations of the State based on the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*), and of democratic pluralism, in reaction to those who sought to reduce these fundamental elements to mere weapons among other supposedly equally valid weapons in the ideological struggle. In *Europa und der*

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<sup>6</sup> Hermann Heller, *Europa und der Fascismus, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II, p. 505.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, Berlin, Duncker und Humblodt, 1963, p.55; Hermann Heller, "Politische Demokratie und soziale Homogenität", *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II, p.423-433.

<sup>8</sup> Hermann Heller, "Rechtsstaat oder Diktatur?" *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II, p.453.

*Fascismus* and in other writings, Heller attempted to recast political philosophy in opposition to 20th century forms of pure political instrumentalization. This attempt inspires the following theoretical argument in my own investigations, which can be introduced here in preliminary terms: if philosophical reflection on politics must assume a character which differs from that of past traditions, this is because the unprecedented propagation in our times of the “fictionalization of politics” forces philosophy to engage in a reexamination of the primordial idea of *truth* in politics. And it is precisely this issue which political myths threaten to blur when they depreciate the role of factual analysis in the domain of the political. This is the hypothesis I will attempt to develop through analysis of the orientations of Ernst Cassirer and Karl Löwith.

### **Ernst Cassirer and the “Political Myth of the Twentieth Century”**

Whereas the theory of the “fictionalization of politics” as myth in the writings of Hermann Heller is rooted in his juridico-political standpoint, Ernst Cassirer’s interest in myth draws on an anthropological orientation grounded in neo-Kantian epistemology. Heller’s theory of the fictionalization of politics deals with the use of myth made by political groups for purposes of mass manipulation. In contrast, Ernst Cassirer’s analyses of this same phenomenon is based on a broad anthropology of myth formulated over the course of several decades. Cassirer’s last book, *The Myth of the State*, which he finished in New York a few months before his death in 1945, extends analyses elaborated in his earlier work *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, published during the twenties, and particularly in the second volume of this work entitled *Mythical Thought* (1925). The study of Cassirer’s theory of myth may also be supplemented by his unpublished manuscripts located in the archives of Yale University.<sup>9</sup>

The issue which most directly concerns me in Cassirer’s writings is the relationship between the initial theory of myth in *Mythical Thought*, dealing exclusively with myth in ancient or non-western cultures, and the later theory of myth described by Cassirer in the *Myth of the State*, which deals primarily with modernity. In this final period of his life, Cassirer attempted to understand modern politics – and in particular the radical politicization of the *Machtstaat* typical of the twentieth century – in light of his general theory of myth. Beyond the question of the deliberate fabrication of myths or a “fictionalization of politics” in Heller’s sense of the word, Cassirer acknowledged the specific character of modern myth in relation to ancient or non-Western mythmaking, while at the same time identifying what he took to be a profound affinity between all forms of

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<sup>9</sup> Cassirer’s unpublished manuscripts can be found in particular at the Beinecke Rare Book Library of Yale University.

myth, linking ancient and non-Western mythmaking to its expressions in modernity. The key feature of Cassirer's theory of myth lies in his attempt to account, on the basis of his general theory of myth, for the extraordinary *efficacy* of contemporary political myth.

Cassirer acknowledged that the “myth of the twentieth century” (an expression ostensibly drawn from the title of the book by the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*) is a conscious fabrication designed, through its ability to mystify the masses, to serve as a weapon in political combat.<sup>10</sup> It is this status as a consciously fabricated tool which characterizes the uniqueness of modern myths in relation to other forms of mythmaking. Nonetheless, the “myth of the twentieth century” remains for Cassirer a myth in the true sense of the word since its efficacy derives from a more general anthropological source: its archaic foundation in the human imagination and in human emotions. Although ancient myths, as Cassirer stipulated in *Mythical Thought*, constitute a potent rudimentary form of religious belief sustained by the imagination, the strength of the twentieth century myth also derives from its status as quasi-religious belief which the imagination reinforces. For this reason, the manipulator who employs political myth in our times is, in Cassirer's words, at once “*homo magus* and *homo faber*.”<sup>11</sup>

On the basis of this affinity linking ancient and modern myths, accounting for the particular potency of myth-making as a general form of anthropological endeavor, Cassirer launched his sweeping critique of contemporary myth-making and of the tendency among certain modern philosophical orientations to fuel the recrudescence of myth in support of the *Machtstaat*. This criticism is based upon a profound conviction inspiring Cassirer's work as a whole: his belief that the truth of a doctrine is closely linked to its ethical consequences. Cassirer's challenge to modern myth – both to the myth of the twentieth century and to earlier modern theoretical forerunners – is motivated by the somber ethical consequences of political myth in the contemporary world. It is this consideration which underlies Cassirer's critical treatment of Hegel and Carlyle, Spengler and Heidegger.

Here my initial query reemerges. If, according to Cassirer, we must rethink the foundations of political philosophy in response to the problem posed by the “myth of the twentieth century”, what does such a rethinking entail? What precisely are the criteria that enable us to identify “truth” in politics as a means of defending the political against the enormous potency of myth in our contemporary world?

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<sup>10</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1974, p. 282.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 282.



### **Karl Löwith and the “Ideology of Facticity”**

The political thought of Karl Löwith provides a third perspective in which to place the theoretical implications of the radical problem of politics in the twentieth century. My analysis is based on Löwith's writings of the 1930s and 1940s, during which he was forced to leave Germany and emigrated to Italy, then to Japan and finally to the United States. Recently published in his *Sämtliche Schriften*, these writings include in particular “Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von Carl Schmitt” (1935) (“The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt”), *Der europäische Nihilismus. Betrachtungen zur geistigen Vorgeschichte des europäischen Krieges* (1940) (*European Nihilism. Considerations on the Spiritual Antecedents of the European War*) and *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (1949/1953) (*Meaning in History*).

Like Hermann Heller and Ernst Cassirer, Karl Löwith sought both to situate the origins of fascism in the intellectual history of Europe and to identify its unprecedented character. Where Heller in a legal and political perspective, and Cassirer from an epistemological and anthropological point of view respectively examined the deliberate fabrication of the “myth of the twentieth century”, Löwith focused on the underlying presuppositions upon which the apologists of this myth drew, of which they themselves were not apparently aware. Hence, without comprehending the implications of their efforts, the apologists of Nazism, above all those who were well-known intellectuals, participated in a movement rooted in the more general intellectual history of Europe. In an early political essay on Carl Schmitt’s “occasional decisionism” published in 1935, Löwith was less concerned with Schmitt’s praise of “myth” in the work *Political Romanticism* or with the services Schmitt later rendered to the “myth of the twentieth century”,<sup>12</sup> than with the precise way in which Schmitt, in his transformation of the intellectual heritage of the 19th century, distorted the notion of truth in politics. As interpreted by Löwith, the idea of “truth” in politics became acutely problematic when conceived, in particular by Marx, in terms of ideology. Here truth was divested of all possible autonomy: referred to its historical context of development, truth can express no more than the interest of a class and, as such, is reduced to a function of political struggle. Whereas political struggle for Marx engaged a dialectical movement leading to the overcoming of the initial terms of struggle, the political decisionism of Carl Schmitt appropriated the moment of ideological instrumentalization, while divesting it of its dialectical structure. Here the claim to “truth” in the arena of human action could be no more than the

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Löwith, “Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von Carl Schmitt”, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 8, *Heidegger : Denker in dürftiger Zeit*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1984, p. 34.

expression of a hidden underlying group will. It was thus reduced to an ideological weapon in the framework of a given friend/foe relationship.

This, then, was for Löwith the radical interpretation Schmitt presented of truth in politics: far from expressing autonomous and universal values, the norms of politics, according to Schmitt's own formulation in *Politische Theologie* (1921), arise “out of nothingness” (aus dem Nichts) – from the facticity of brute decision.<sup>13</sup> Precisely the radicalism of this deflation of any conception of normative truth beyond the pale of the brute facticity of decision (which concerns the inherent contingency of the political situation rather than faithfulness to facts [*Tatsachen*] or factual analysis) lies at the heart of a political theory positing the supremacy of the opportune. This tendency at the same time accounts for the ease with which Schmitt, following a period of marked political ambiguity during the Weimar Republic and in view of the “facticity” of the new political situation following Hitler's rise to power, became a fervent supporter of in the Nazi regime.

It would reach beyond the scope of this paper to present a more complete analysis of Löwith's critique of Schmitt, or of the analogous “ideology of facticity” which he attributes to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Since my work is primarily concerned with the reformulation of the task of political philosophy in the twentieth century, I will restrict my examination to my initial question: given the burdensome legacy of politics in the 20th century and its highly problematic character for philosophical reflection, what meaning can be accorded to the idea of “truth” in politics?

Any attempt to respond to this question in the perspective of Löwith's investigations involves a complex line of interpretation. Some of Löwith's works, such as the book *Der Europäische Nihilismus*, written at the outset of World War II, convey an image of spiritual confusion in Europe bearing little promise for the future. Nevertheless, Löwith's originality lies in his call for a “critique of historical existence” (*Kritik der geschichtlichen Existenz*), which is best described in his cardinal work *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*. Written after World War II, Löwith presents in this volume his interpretation of the distortions of political modernity leading, in particular, to the emergence of the perverse messianism of Italian and German fascism. Löwith views fascism as the final outcome of a profound mystification, rooted in an ancient legacy of historical reflection, which has continually deepened over the course of modern times. Löwith traces this mystification to the eschatological interpretation of historical time stemming from Christian philosophies of history, from St. Augustine to Joachim of Floris and Bossuet. In modern times, Hegel produced a radical

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Löwith, “Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von Carl Schmitt”, *Sämtliche Schriften*, p. 45.

secularization of Christian eschatology by relegating its development to the movement of the Spirit in this world. Hegel thus envisaged the “advent of salvation on the level of universal history.”<sup>14</sup> The critique of historical existence engaged by Löwith attempted to relate the principal modern philosophies of history from Hegel to Marx, up to the historicism of Dilthey, to the tacit secularization of a tendency originating in the Christian tradition: the “fiction” that history has ultimate “meaning.”

Löwith’s interpretation, which I examine here only in outline, presents a major challenge to modern philosophies of history. The primary significance of his challenge in light of the problematic status of politics in the twentieth century lies in Löwith’s appeal for a clear separation of political existence from all forms of philosophy of history propounding the doctrine of movement towards an end – a secularized doctrine stemming from the Christian philosophies of history.

Doubtless certain of Löwith's claims regarding the general features of modern times are subject to debate. Ernst Bloch, for example, questioned Löwith's derivation of Marxist philosophy from the history of secularized eschatology.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Hans Blumenberg criticized Löwith's interpretation of Enlightenment philosophy of history.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, in my opinion the strength of Karl Löwith's argument lies in the radical distinction he draws between political action in the framework of the human historical world and secularized eschatological belief in a sense of history leading to earthly salvation.

With this distinction in mind, it is possible to appreciate the significance of Löwith's analyses of the distortion of the schema of historical progression by those who, after having proclaimed the decline of Western tradition, rallied to the perverse messianism of fascism. In this light, the philosophies of decline typical of the twentieth century – elaborated, most notably by Carl Schmitt or Martin Heidegger – adopted in their own manner the idea that history has a “meaning”, albeit one which reverses progression in a movement toward decline. Attributing in this manner a “meaning” to history, political decision discounts a declining historical tradition as a source of normative values and rids itself of inhibitions that such a tradition might have imposed. Decision “out of nothingness” expresses nothing more clearly than this divestiture of thought of all limitations beyond the brute facticity of existence. Nothing further prevents

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Zur Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie, Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1983, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (1935), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1983.

such authors from an opportune adaptation of decision to the “facticity” of the situation presented by the new regime in Germany and to its perverse messianism, holding out the promise of secular salvation.<sup>17</sup> In the final analysis, the ideology of facticity readily lends itself to the radical instrumentalization of politics as a function of the *Machtstaat*.

## II. Truth in Politics

The identification of “fiction”, “myth” or “chimera” through which a radical instrumentalization of politics in the 20th century was able to take root presupposes the ability to unmask the mystifying feature which this fiction, myth or chimera incarnates. What criteria enable us to place such a feature in relief?

A preliminary response to this question may be proposed on the basis of the different elements of analysis offered by the theories of Hermann Heller, Ernst Cassirer and Karl Löwith. What comes to light generally speaking is that the gap between fiction, myth, or chimera and a given “factual situation” can only partially account for this mystification. Mystification in the full sense of the term insinuates itself into this gap through its pretense to homogeneity and hegemonic domination of political objectives. This pretense must be subjected to critical unmasking, since it contravenes the fundamental pluralism at the basis of a State governed by the rule of law, above all in democratic societies (Heller); since it imposes a collective will which cannot but infringe upon human freedom (Cassirer); or because it passes off illusory beliefs in the redemption of the world, with the political fanaticism that this type of belief tends to incite, as certain knowledge of the future of human history (Löwith). If there is any significance to the notion of “truth” in politics, it is that such fundamental political principles limit attempts at political instrumentalization and manipulation in human societies in general.

Be this as it may, in our contemporary Western world the problem of politics has shifted. We are no longer directly threatened by an extremism which might deviate into total political domination. Since the end of World War II, a broad consensus favors democratic government and the rule of law, and the present context has witnessed the victory of political “liberalism”, granting the individual a large margin of freedom in the face of collective demands. Both political messianism (whether murderous or less “hardline”) and all-encompassing philosophy of history have widely forfeited their credibility. However, has the risk of political instrumentalization

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<sup>17</sup> A more extensive analysis of Löwith's argument can be found in my article “The Sense of History: on the Political Implications of Karl Löwith's Interpretation of Secularization”, *op. cit.*

through myth disappeared as a result of this transformation of European politics?

My current research begins with the hypothesis that the instrumentalism of politics – its use as a pure mode of manipulation – comes most powerfully to the fore in cases where the boundary between the reality of a set of attested facts and imaginary fabrication is blurred, or where such fabrication gives way to deliberate falsification as a means of manipulating beliefs and opinions. Clearly, as historians acknowledge since Croce and Collingwood, there is no exact distinction between the reality of historical events and the creative imagination, since the reconstruction of reality itself necessarily appeals to imaginative reconstitution. Nevertheless, this methodological avowal should not serve as an excuse for neglecting the basic difference between the imaginative act aimed at the reconstruction of possible ties between facts and a will to manipulate which deliberately seeks to replace attested facts by fiction. This consideration brings me to the critical perspective I will suggest in conclusion.

This critique challenges the hypothesis that representations of the past, on the basis of which political beliefs are formed, are essentially similar to literary productions. This widely-accepted hypothesis, or one of its variants, was forcefully expressed by Nietzsche in the following highly paradoxical statement:

“Only when historiography tolerates being transformed into art, and thus becoming a pure artistic creation, can it maintain or perhaps even arouse instincts. Such historiography would, however, completely contradict the analytic and inartistic traits of our time, for which such transformation would represent a falsification.”<sup>18</sup>

The broad contemporary reception of this theory generally begins from the following presupposition: factual “reality” is so variegated and so heterogeneous that, in the final analysis, what is taken to be hard “fact” is indeed nothing more than a product of imaginative construction which chooses its interpretative perspective amid the infinite range of heterogeneous possibilities. As a consequence, the consistency of reality dissipates in the face of the assumption that it is no more than the product of the imagination; on this basis the most variegated possibilities of interpretation are considered to be equally valid.<sup>19</sup> Despite the intentions

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<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben” in *Werke*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main, Ullstein, 1980, p. 252.

<sup>19</sup> On this topic see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1978, Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation. Getting the Story Crooked*, Madison, University of

of certain of its proponents, this theory has tended to serve dubious political ends.

Why, however, should political identities rely upon an attempt to faithfully reconstitute the “reality” of events rather than upon freely-imagined, fictive constructions? Why should we restrict the free rein of imagination in the constitution of human society, a “freedom” which in the fabrication of socio-historical reality – including the fictive reformulation of the historical past – finds no more inflexible limit than that encountered by technology in the free manipulation of nature?

It is precisely within the paradoxical framework of the recent past, witnessing the conjunction of a vast democratic consensus and an unprecedented potential for political manipulation, above all through technology and through the media, that a re-reexamination of the thought of philosophers such as Hermann Heller, Ernst Cassirer and Karl Löwith should prove particularly salutary. When dealing with the problem of political radicalization earlier in the 20th century, each of these thinkers set in relief the danger presented by a thoroughgoing instrumentalization of politics in the guise of fiction, myth or chimera. With the coming of the 21st century this danger has by no means disappeared.

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(Translated by the author)

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Wisconsin Press, 1989, as well as the controversy over this use in Saul Friedlander, ed. *Probing the Limits of Representation*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1992.