

## POLITICAL KITSCH AND MYTH-MAKING CONSCIOUSNESS

UDC 316.72:32 (497.11)

**Nikola Božilović**

Faculty of Philosophy, Niš, Serbia, Ćirila i Metodija 2  
bonicult@medianis.net

**Abstract.** *From the sociological and historical point of view, political consciousness has always been in close vicinity to the mythic one. Moreover, politics has often affected the process of revival and shaping of the mythic consciousness. On the other hand, myths have also had a creative role in directing the politics of particular societies and historical epochs. This coupling of politics and myth, in a context which is mostly negative, is more than actual today. The societies in transition, such as the Serbian one, are firmly gripped by politically distorted myths. Thus myths are becoming a vile weapon in the hands of an authoritarian or insufficiently democratic government. Under such circumstances, politics and political opinion become means of lies and cheap propaganda. The ruling structures abuse the tradition and myths for the sake of winning the power or their survival on the political stage at any cost. Pseudoculture and kitsch are the very foundations from which politicians, with the help of the distorted myths, can disseminate lies and empty promises. It is upon these theoretical assumptions that the author of this paper bases his commentaries about kitsch culture of the contemporary Serbian society and its historical roots.*

**Key words:** *pseudoculture, kitsch, politics, myth, totalitarianism*

### 1. POLITICS IN THE DECOR OF KITSCH

Man as a social being or *homo socius* is also a political being, that is, *homo politicus*. This essential human quality is indicated by G. Balandier, citing Aristotle in whose opinion human beings are, by their very nature, political (Balandier 1997:17). Aristotle's *zoon politicon* implies that a free citizen of the *polis* is different from the slave (who was believed to be less than human) by his participation in political decision-making. Therefore, in the political sphere as a part of the social life, two extreme characteristics of human existence express themselves, namely, freedom and unfreedom. Politics has truly been, within that context, an expression of human destiny.

Man is a political being. He is even more so today than yesterday since he is involved in politics not only when he is conscious of it but even more often when he is not. Today's man is present in politics even when he does not really need to be, when he does not want to be a political actor. He cannot prevent politics from dealing with him and penetrating his life. Hence any attempt on the part of contemporary man to evade political life is illusory. Both social practice and sociological research show that today's man cannot fully prove himself in all his human potential in his everyday and personal life if he remains entirely and consistently outside politics and the political in general. The truth is that he is not and cannot be an exclusively political being; yet he has been from times immemorial captured in the iron jaws of politics.

That politics is a destined human characteristic, therefore, cannot be disputed. This, in itself, does not necessarily mean anything bad since dealing with politics can be moral, honored and dignified. The political sphere, however, has been, from the times immemorial, characterized by gain, satisfaction, lust for dominance, interest and power. A characteristic testimony is that of R. A. Reiss's in his famous political testament from 1928 in which he writes about corruption and the struggle for power among the then Serbian politicians. In this writing he mentions "primitive drives" and "bowing before money" on the part of the Serbian intelligentsia, the "king-money" and "struggle for power" of the former politicians in Serbia. He bears witness to their selfish ambitions, shameless corruption and the "dance of minister portfolios" (compare Reiss 2006:58-59). The condition of current Serbian politics continues this dreadful tradition. Today politics is also, as a profession, lucrative, that is, profitable. The society represents a specific political arena in which individuals and groups are involved in a life-or-death struggle. To reach their goals they use even the most dishonorable means. The fanatical quasi-politicians of our political life, fast as chameleons, change their ideologies and party colors ("turncoats"). The converts exchange, as people say, their "faith for the feast" so that they can climb up, as fast as possible, to a high political position, that is, a higher and more respectable social status. This status carries with itself, quite understandably, obvious privileges as well; in addition to the Assembly Member's immunity there is a rich offer of large and secure wages, daily allowances, cheap travel abroad, purchase of villas and expensive cars. In this way, politics as an activity and a vocation turns into its opposite. It becomes opposite to all which is moral and honest; it proves itself to be an activity of dishonorable people. Our politicians, especially intellectuals, have always been characterized by excessive individualism; they have failed to understand politics as a public activity (service); rather, it functions as a chance for self-promotion. That is why, because of all this, politics has become, as R. Božović says, *a birth place of kitsch*. The separation of politics and morality in our country was also a topic, more than half a century ago, of Slobodan Jovanovic's writings. Starting from the experience of his times, he concluded that the political ambition of a "semi-intellectual" (read: man in high position, minister) was not *political* at all. "It only implies that man gets rich by politics and that he, at some high position, exerts his will to rule. He does not know about any higher or more general goals. Only when the semi-intellectual gets to the peak of the political does it become evident how morally degenerate he has become" (Jovanović 2005:52). Times do change: unlike people, they change less.

The question of how kitsch has found its most convenient nest in politics can be best answered if politics is brought into correlation with truth and lies. Truth, according to

Hanna Arendt, from the viewpoint of politics, has a despotic character so that it is most hated by tyrants. In essence, truthfulness has never been included among political virtues while lies have been, in politics, always regarded as a permissible means (Arendt 1994:69). The culmination comes at the moment when the public (people, citizens) to whom lies are addressed is forced to reject the difference between truth and lie in order to survive. It happens then that the factual truth completely disappears from the public life while lies obtain legitimacy. The paradox is reached when the lie becomes the criterion of truthfulness. The one who lies most persuasively, is most trusted.

It is through politics that the correlation between kitsch and totalitarianism has become confirmed, that is, between commonplace populism and autocratic rule, servitude and political omnipower. Not only here, not only now. A long time ago kitsch moved to the centre of political life. For Božović, the political stereotype represents kitsch in its purest form. The common trait shared by political rituals finds its true expression in kitsch rhetoric and kitsch scenography. The hierarchical structure of government appears as a demagogical performance. In it the behavior of the ruler is almost unimaginable without the kitschy imitation of the voice of reason and the imitation of supremacy (Božović 1999:35).

The main protagonists in the Serbian political theater are actors of dubious values, most of all, moral ones. No one seems to have (at least recently) made a shorter and yet more compact sketch of the political profile of the local actors on the political stage than our writer Vidosav Stevanović. In a newspaper interview, speaking about these people as an elite of the (post)Milošević times he has said the following, "They are mainly involved in the affairs for which they are not competent; they are in places where they do not fit at all; they say things they should otherwise keep silent about; they keep silent about the things they should speak about. They are haughty, eager for money and cheap popularity, adamant to be in power, at any cost, and do things of which they are ignorant. Their only criterion is how to get rich and, as something not so uncommon among the parvenus, to show off with their luxury and enjoy publicly their lack of taste. They are successful only as *fairground demagogues*, they arouse the lowest passions of their electors."

The essential kitsch relation in the sociology of (pseudo)art is formed through a triad: kitsch-ideology-politics. It prods its way from the dualism of style and tendency in art while some aestheticians are inclined to pronounce the tendency-in-art *a priori* as kitsch or, as Broch would say, "the representation of evil" (for instance, subordination of medieval art to religion, Lessing's moralizing poetry or Russian films). As a reactionary phenomenon, kitsch is, according to Broch, related not only to art but is also suitable for all the manifestations of human (social) life, from fashion to politics which is obviously inevitable when it comes to the kitsch ambiance.

The words of the writer Milan Kundera prove that kitsch has found a stable foundation in politics; he says that kitsch is an aesthetic ideal of all the politicians, all the parties and movements. Contemporary politicians and party leaders are either ignorant of or they tend to forget a well-known saying by Albert Camus that beauty cannot serve any party and that it serves, for a longer or shorter term, human suffering or freedom. The most dangerous in all this is the fact that political movements elude rational reasoning being largely given over to emotions. On the other hand, the identity of kitsch, writes Kundera, is not given by political strategy but by images, metaphors, vocabulary. Starting from an excessive involvement of the irrational, of emotions and fantasies, one can easily reach the

conclusion that political movements do not rest upon rational premises but upon representations, images and archetypes which together form some kind of *political kitsch*. The writer, in this context, constructs the phrase *inquisition of kitsch*. In his opinion, it can, in one way or another, be avoided in the societies in which different movements oppose each other. In such societies the individual can still preserve his individuality while the artist can create unexpected works (See: Kundera 1990:298-310).

In addition to its general ontological and anthropological characteristics, kitsch also comprises certain cultural characteristics of a particular ambiance and the country in which it arises. When it comes to politics and, then, to societies such as ours and the times of the autocratic government of Slobodan Milošević, many things were really specific. Serbia was, at that time, in many aspects a peculiar social laboratory. The peculiarities, of course, stemmed from contemporary concrete-historical and social circumstances, no less than from the traditional folkloric-cultural syndrome. When we add to all this an unfounded tradition of democratic life and behavior, then everything begins to look tasteless, awkward or even funny. There is a multitude of examples to prove this, while one of the more persuasive ones is related to the general outlook of our political party posters. It is on these posters that we can see, for example, Easter eggs, a round bread cut into two with a small coin peeping from it,<sup>1</sup> a plum divided into two, idyllic scenes of human happiness and kindness, urban and rural landscapes "made clean" and many laughing faces with their mouths full of glittering teeth. For particular groups or so-called target groups, special posters are printed with typically folkloric motives, icons of patron saints and genre-scenes from the presumed Serbian way of life. These are party posters made in "our way" or pre-election photos with the political message saying "made in Serbia." Not only the posters but also other election campaign machinations represent a genuine party masked ball at which the "pearls" from a rich hoard of national bijouterie are promoted.

All this springs from the so-called cultural milieu. But, when it comes to culture.... Why has nowadays the word "culture" become a meaningless phrase in the jargon of quasi-political nonsense? Is it because it is used to sweep away all the fogs of political vagabondage and nonsensicality while pink-painting the gray reality? Is it used to, maybe, cover up the utopian horizons of the virtual reality and identify the key places of the supposingly bright future which is here, almost knocking at our doors? Culture as an alibi, excuse, empty promise, escapist adventure. In the diction of the Serbian quasi-politicians this word, which is otherwise imbued with meaning, becomes meaningless and used as "worn-out shoes." Culture has become a common appendage, coating, glaze on a cake or an artificial heart-shaped gift. All this for the purpose of daily political propaganda, rosy-cheeked deception and groundless optimism. The climax of all this comes in the form of the utterly nonsensical propaganda slogan, "Culture makes it more beautiful" or its alternative version in the form of a slogan on the white television screen, "It is empty without culture." The kitschiest of all the years was 1995, namely the year which was proclaimed as "The Year of Culture," and which inaugurated the campaign of "the struggle against kitsch" allegedly for the sake of "genuine" cultural values. The slogans of this campaign were empty phrases and trivial including the one saying that "We are stronger with culture" (See: Gordi 2001:167-168). As if culture were some sort of a matter which could be

---

<sup>1</sup> Evoking traditional Christmas Orthodox custom

physically touched. In this way, culture fell, once again, into the trap of kitsch laid for it by politics. By the way, kitsch in culture could never be subdued by the special "taste police" so that even this project, serious on the surface, was another common trick of the then socialist government.

The greatest danger from kitsch lies in the fact that, like drugs, it can be dose-controlled. It can be given in spoonfuls, or reduced, or, if needed, increased again. Its effects vary from the strength of a mild opiate to the phase when it destroys all that gets in its way; it lowers the taste, it turns the values upside down, it destroys culture. Kitsch, as we have said, can be likeably funny, amusingly loving, sweet, soft, sentimental and melodramatic. All these characteristics are sufficient to put conscience to sleep. The other side of kitsch, however, tends to simulate the effect of strength, magnitude and importance. The project of the Nazi "art" ardently manifested all the traits of its character.

Political kitsch has been used as a powerful means of political propaganda as well as a carrier of ideological ideals. Hence we can speak about political kitsch as an existential danger. This was especially prominent in the fascist times. The so-called fascist aestheticization of politics is related, as indicated by W. Benjamin, to the development of the technique of reproduction, that is, the recording apparatus. Thanks to it, the masses got an opportunity to see themselves in solemn parades and in wars, in mass sports manifestations, jamborees, parades and meetings. Benjamin states that, to paraphrase, fascism consistently follows the line of aestheticization of political life while V. F. Haug adds that, in this way, the contradiction of property relations is apparently solved since aesthetic pleasure, by arranging for the masses to face themselves, leads to further safeguarding of these relations (Haug 1981: 132:133).

As for the varieties of political kitsch, they can be spoken about from many perspectives. One of them is their service to political propaganda which distinctly differentiates *Nazi* from *red* kitsch. The former brutally expressed fascist ideology while the latter suggested an ideological view of reality in terms of "socialist realism." Both of them were undisputedly controlled and ideologically commanded.

Regarding the relation between neurosis and kitsch, Broch speaks about the *bloody* and the *saccharine* or very sugar-coated kitsch. In his opinion, Hitler, as an unconditional aficionado of kitsch, lived for the former while loving the latter. He considered both of them "beautiful." Just as well-known is Nero's "aestheticism" and pyrotechnical enjoyment in living torches of the burning Christians, impaled on wooden poles in his imperial gardens or his joy in the painful cries of his victims that he probably praised as an aesthetically valuable music accompaniment (Broch 1997:75). The saccharine kitsch, as a subspecies of kitsch, is more or less present in all forms of kitsch: as a posture, attitude, behavior, intonation, stylization, seduction and false (self)attractiveness. As an advertising kitsch procedure, it is used in various propaganda forms and commercial tricks for winning over consumers of the mass culture works (well known is a sugar-coated photo). Kitsch is, namely, making use of lies with the tendency to seduce while its own ad maker is trying to do it by courting the anonymous public in a heartbreaking melodramatic style. Such a sugar-coated style is, for a refined taste, at the least pathetic (Glušćević 1990:259-261).

Other criteria can be used for kitsch classifications. One of the more interesting ones is the way in which Kundera sees *communist kitsch*. Speaking through his heroine, Sabina, he says that the revolt against communism is not of an ethical but of an aesthetic character (*sic*). What causes resistance is not so much the ugliness of the communist world (like,

let's say, palaces in ruins turned into stables) as *the mask of beauty* that this world puts on itself, in other words, communist kitsch. A striking example of this kind of kitsch was the celebration called the First of May. On that occasion everybody pretended to be genuinely smiling, genuinely happy, genuinely gleeful; the idea is that they should all look like *genuinely conforming*. It is not, as Kundera writes, the issue of politically conforming with communism but of conforming with existence as such. Accordingly, the written and unspoken slogan in the First of May parade was not, "Long Live Communism!" but "Long Live Life!" The shrewdness and slyness of the communist policy the author sees in the taking over of this "genuine tautology" ("Long Live Life!") for the sake of attracting people who are indifferent to the goals of communism (1990:295). When things go that way, then nothing can be changed. There is a consciously created atmosphere of reluctance to any change since changes can spoil what we already have. Something else or different could apparently be even worse than what we already have. Thus, it goes in a circle: empty dialectics, obscurity and nonsense. That the well-known writer, communist dissident, is not so politically one-dimensional or ideologically blinded can be seen in the subsequent pages of his book where he speaks about the kitsch which is found "on the other side." Thus, in his opinion, expressions such as "President Carter," "our traditional values" and "barbarian communist regime" belong to the diction of the so-called *American kitsch* (311).

Since we are already in the domain of communism and something representing its opposition, namely democracy, let's quote S. Jovanović who introduces the concept of the *humanist pattern* as a key means of their differentiation. Though it looks somewhat obsolete from today's perspective, the degree of an individual's refinement is, in his opinion, measured by the degree of his enlightenment. In so doing, he notices that, regardless of how much the importance of institutions is emphasized in democracy, it is necessary to keep in mind that it is upon the sophistication of individuals that the successful functioning of the given institutions depends. "Communism needs an individual who could be unconditionally ruled by the society; it will master him much more easily if he is less capable of self-rule. In a communist society, like in an army barrack, obedience is the main virtue and every attempt at independent thinking means a punishable violation of discipline. Social discipline in this way excludes personal self-discipline which is stigmatized as something anti-social which indispensably leads to anarchy" (2005:44-45). We are trying to avoid being biased here; we are also infinitely far from ascribing kitsch to only one social system. However, it is obvious (as confirmed by historical facts) that communism was a peculiar factory of lies that manufactured, as if on a conveyor belt, a diversity of sycophants, yea-sayers and spiritual mediocrities who were, as people would say, "ready to sell their souls to the devil."

Our acceptance of the fact that there is communist kitsch is not, therefore, at all founded upon the ideological assumptions, let alone convictions. It is entirely certain that there is also *anticommunist kitsch* springing from anticommunist fundamentalism. It is as much as the communist one permeated with bizarre, totalitarian ideas that call forth hatred, uniformity of mind and lack of tolerance. In radical anti-communist behavior and actions there are only two colors, black and white. The slogans such as, "Red bandits!" do not imply how diverse and complex the society and the world really are comparing to the views of those who utter this cry. Ultimately, *the communist-anticommunist kitsch* rests upon equally one-dimensional, superficial and trivial assumptions. Very witty and accu-

rate is the remark that it is wrong and false to be a communist. Yet, there is another even worse and more dangerous thing: to be an anticommunist. "When it comes to totalitarian people, the color of their totalitarianism is negligible" is a short and compact commentary made by M. Mihailov, a well-known dissident from the communist times. In addition, while we are still with totalitarianism: totalitarian ideologies always tend to present themselves as rationally founded and scientifically based, which means justified. Thus, Marx's theory was used by Bolsheviks, while Darwin's theory of evolution was used by Nazis. In this, the leaders were always free to change, depending on their current needs, some of the theoretical principles of the given scientific systems. These procedures were most often justified by alleged rejection of dogmatism.

Not so long ago, on the occasion of an unprecedented terrorist act, the first and greatest tragedy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that hit America hard (September 11 2001), I was not slightly amazed to hear a part of the speech given before the Congress by the President of the United States George Bush Jr. The speech was most resolute yet emotional, often interrupted with applause; I thought that such decor was specific only to mass communist rallies. On that occasion, it was said that not one single battle was to be expected but "a long campaign with no precedent." By this the President implied "spectacular attacks, broadcast by TV" (*sic*). He continued to hold similar speeches from then on, especially for the sake of justifying the American invasion of Iraq. America, definitively, cannot do anything without spectacle.

The climax comes with a statement made by President Bush that all the countries, in the fight against Afghanistan, the Taliban, the regime in Kabul and the leaders of the terrorist organization *Al-Qa'ida* headed by Saudi billionaire Osama bin Laden, *will have to* join transparently one of the conflicting sides. "Either with us or with terrorists" was his appeal to the "rest of the world." The President of the USA did not miss the chance to abuse the word "culture" aiming at, primarily, "a new ethics of responsibility" among young Americans. He has invited graduates from the University of Ohio to make a highly patriotic cultural gesture by putting themselves in the service of their country as volunteers, telling that it is up to them to decide whether theirs will be a culture of selfishness caring only about itself or they will embrace a culture of service, looking outward. In all this, with no guilt on its own part, it is culture which suffers. Even more so since it is heard from the American administration that Bush partly "based" his speech on the teachings of numerous philosophers, from Aristotle to Cicero, to Adam Smith and Alexis de Tocqueville and even Pope John Paul II!? All this resembles disgusting glue used for political purposes as the American author Susan Sontag would say. I had thought that such exclusiveness and demagogical conditioning in the representational kitsch manner can only come from the "communist kitchen." I had been convinced that the famous slogan of the political jingle kitsch such as "Who is not with us is against us," could be used only by some Bolshevik of the Leninist orientation or some communist political commissary. Thus, kitsch has once again convinced me that it has no borders, including ideological-political ones.

Regarding the anti-communist kitsch it is necessary to observe that the collapse of communist totalitarianism does not lead directly and automatically to democratic outcomes. Namely, very possible are unexpected consequences which stand in the way of development of the postsocialist societies. Since the collapse of totalitarian communist power does not directly lead to the road of democracy, Z. Golubović is right in pointing to

the possibility of a new authoritarian/totalitarian order which could replace communist totalitarianism as a society of transparent kitsch. Politically speaking, the most dangerous anticommunism is the one preached in the name of national affiliation; here, as in any kitsch "swamp," incompatible things are mixed up with one another. Namely, the mask of nationalism taken on by totalitarianism is threatening with a new homogenization within the nation-state. Then sovereignty based on the ethnic principle is opposed to the liberal understanding of democracy which rests upon the sovereignty of citizens as free people, in the sense of *demos* as a political category against ethnicity/nation as an organic category (See: Golubović 1999:25-35). Politics, mythmaking consciousness, nation and totalitarianism very easily and often are to be found in kitsch as some sort of common denominator.

## 2. KITSCHIZATION OF MYTH

The domain which nowadays seems to be more than any other liable to the impact of kitsch is *myth*. Motives accompanied with the nature of mythical thinking and mythical consciousness are a topic for the interdisciplinary study of history, sociology, psychology and culturology. These theoretical approaches are in a more or less direct relation with anthropology. Therefore, we can agree with Broch that the fundamental structure of human problems is always conditioned by theology and myth. As a form of cultural relations, the domain of myth is ambivalent. Dorfles makes a distinction between positively understood authentic *mythopoetic* energy and false *mythogogic* will. While it is from the former, the benevolent mythopoetic forces, that new myths are created which affect the creation of works of art as well as social and political achievements, it is the mythogogic aspect which leads to fetishization and mystification of elements which in themselves have no value at all. In the last case what almost always takes place is "kitschization" of myth. As a consequence of the deviation in taste there emerges a kitsch-myth the background of which is predominantly imbued with irrational, fantastic, "sub or pre-conscious elements."

Dorfles also analyzes modern pseudo-myth ("the myth of our times") which is represented by fascist and Nazi myths, myths of sportsmen, champions, singers and movie stars. The common man is prone to ascribe to a certain person the character traits which elevate him or her to the level of a mythical hero while it is the case of surrogate, falsehood and "a simple image." The Italian aestetician, however, notices that modern mythic heroes become outdated very fast and inevitably; that is why they take to the "dosing" of *effects* in the purest kitsch style (for instance, think of "stupid" or "entirely thick" heroes such as Batman or Superman with their coats resembling the bat's wings and who are dressed in jerseys with a big printed letter S). The conclusion is that a false myth tends to unite with a genuine one giving rise to an outlook and behavior which are indisputably kitsch (See: Dorfles 1997:50-58).

Myth is, by definition, a story about events in the past told in a dramatic way. So deeply rooted is a wrong opinion that, for this reason, myth is quite an ordinary fiction or illusion which is not based on reality but on somebody's fantasies or wishes. In telling myths, of course, there is no academic discipline so that there are indications that it is rather a set of beliefs that do not have to be true. They are, as a rule, utopian; yet, this



gives no one any right to deny such beliefs publicly. Unless they are instrumentalized, politically or religiously, they can provide firm strongholds for explaining someone's feelings and experiences. Myth-telling expresses collective representations which, among other things, refer to the glorification of the past of a nation, especially of its national history and tradition. A great number of myths are devoted to particular people who are characterized as heroes and idols. The heroes of culture, as H. Marcuse calls them, have their origins in ancient classical mythology. They differ, just like people, regarding their character traits. Thus Prometheus is represented, to paraphrase, as a cultural hero of laborious work, production and progress by suppression. At the other pole are Orpheus and Narcissus as well as Dionysus who is congenial to them. While Prometheus, to paraphrase Marcuse's explanation, creates culture "at the cost of his own pain," the characters of Orpheus and Narcissus symbolize a revolt against the culture based on laborious work, domination and self-denial. As for Orpheus in the aesthetic sense, his language is a *song* while his work is a *dance*. The life of Narcissus is, in its turn, a life of *beauty* while his existence is *contemplation* (Compare: Marcuse 1985:144-145).

Mythomania as a negative side of mythology breeds heroes of quite a different kind. It is related to totalitarian systems and dictatorships dominated by *the cult of leader*. Myths contribute to the deification of leaders by representing them as incarnations of fate. In Germany, it is from Nazism and the myth about the Aryan race that the myth of Hitler was born; it is upon the foundations of Italian fascism and the myth about the nation that the myth of Mussolini was created while in the USSR the most prevailing myth was that about a proletarian state and equality of all people with the most formidable episode of Ždanov's Stalinism. The USA as the Great Power has cherished for quite a long time a myth of omnipotence yet without any prominent leadership cult thanks to its ruling democratic order. To this we could also add Serbia that brought up, on the basis of the Kosovo myth, its leader S. Milošević who, in return, brought his country to the edge of extreme poverty. In addition to evident differences, the myths of all the national leaders have something in common, which is best embodied in the leader of the German national-socialism Adolph Hitler. Many "Hitlerologists" have recognized in him not only the "will to power" but also "will to catastrophe" and "will to downfall." He did, according to some interpretations, everything not only to prolong the war but for his country to disappear together with him. There are also other messages, like that of the Canadian historian Robert Gellately, who sees, in the relationship between Hitler and his people, a mixture of approval and compulsion. It is, in his opinion, the matter of "populist dictatorship" that rests upon the support of wider population layers. Even more direct is the British historian Ian Kershaw who, in his book *The Hitler Myth (2002)* proves that the leadership cult is partly a reflex of the already existing mentalities, expectations, hopes and wishes. People saw, in their leader's thoughtless actions, the Providence of the Messiah; hence, blind obedience. All takes place as in a popular saying, "You can make someone sing but you can't force him to sing with such enthusiasm." Has anyone mentioned Serbia and Milošević?

Even today heroes are quite a profitable commodity though heroism seems to be a character trait in the warring societies while a conscious production of myths about an individual's superhuman abilities and his readiness for sacrifice and suffering belong to the archaic way of thinking. The mythologized heroes are now moving to sports stadiums, show business or media world of film and television. Ronaldo and Schumacher, Madonna and Eminem are only some more valuable jewels in the treasury of today's heroes. It is

worth noticing that idolatry is unselfishly supported by mass media that draw, from their promotion, a great profit for themselves. The processes at work here are those of identification and projection. Here is how the editor of a popular fashion magazine has explained why David Beckham seems to be a "natural choice" for the title page, "For every woman he represents something: father, football player, icon. In a word, he is the 'ultimate hero.'" Today's Serbia has its own heroes. These are "war heroes": Ratko and Radovan. The main heroine is a singer of patriotic orientation, Svetlana Ražnatović-Ceca. All of them seem to have emerged from the myths about Tsar Lazar, Obilić or the Maiden from Kosovo. Nothing strange in it when we know that all the "heroes" come from the dominant system of values and mass media propaganda spiced up by nationalism, sensationalism, exaltism and other "isms." The Pink TV is not the only "pink" one. Many Serbian broadcasters are turning "pink," including the state one or so-called national television or "public service."

Historically it is well-known that politicians who have used up their political credibility, that is, betrayed or failed to fulfill their political promises and thus deceived those who voted for them (people), readily turn to the (ab)use of myths in order to prolong their own political life. The use of myths for daily purposes, as a rule, leads to coarse distortion of their messages and violation of the original meaning. These are the cases of so-called *kitschization of myth* by which the myth becomes the medium for disseminating half-truths, lies, and hypertrophy of particular personalities (their strengths, beauty, wisdom) as well as for transferring all this to the contemporary political life. Inadequate and historically ungrounded actualization of myths is usually done without enough taste and - measure. In these cases the historical consciousness gives way to monstrous mythologization, that is, fairy-tale-ish, unreal and irrational interpretation of reality. "Overdosed mythologization of the past has stimulated the attempts to flood the historical consciousness by daily triviality of political developments and *kitschy decor* of the political stage." (Božović: 112).

In philosophy and social theory of myth a considerable number of conceptions speak about the use of myth for political purposes. They can include, as representative, the following theories: Kant's theory of symbols and archetypes, F. V. J. Schelling's romantic theory of myth, J. J. Bachofen's idealist-religious theory, Freud's psychoanalytic theories and those of Jung. The modern myth has been studied by many other scientists such as E. Cassirer, C. Lévi-Strauss, M. Eliade and R. Barthes. Political myths represent mostly idealized stories about the state and social order, about the ruling hierarchy and political powers, about political ideals and authorities. To paraphrase Tudor, just like the myths about nature deal with natural phenomena, and those of religion with gods and their worship, so the political ones deal with politics. The study of political myths is, in other words, a branch of general mythology, according to Tudor (Tudor 2002:230). These myths today represent a respective social power since they suggest political opinions just as they direct people's attitudes and behavior. Myth, including political myth, is not related only to the past and archaic societies. In Cassirer's opinion, during the critical times of social life, the rational forces (*logos*) become exhausted before the awakening of sensibility (*mythos*) of people and nations. In these moments the time of myth comes again, when myths do not come into being spontaneously but are produced in the planned way by 'very skillful and cunning craftsmen.' (Cassirer, 1972:273-275). In this paper, though, we should not be going too far since kitschization of myth as a phenomenon is quite transparent in our regions as well. Very well known is the case of the most famous Ser-

bian myth, that of Kosovo or St. Vitus Day. No matter whether it was accidentally or deliberately, rationally or intuitively, yet R. Konstantinović wrote, as early as 1981 in his book *The Philosophy of Province*, about myth as a source of evil thus anticipating what was going to happen (to us) for real. The myth in this conception implies an ethical rather than aesthetical connotation. Therefore, says our philosopher, "each absolutization of every myth (including that of Kosovo) leads to intolerant nationalism or even to its ultimate consequence, Nazism... By becoming a source and form of the tribal super-ego or an irrational-mystical super-reality, every myth, regardless of its rational contents (including that of Kosovo), becomes a source and form of evil..." (Konstantinović 1981:375).

The Battle of Kosovo (1389), in Serbian historiography, takes on grandiose mythological dimensions and is treated as an act by which Serbia defended itself or even the whole of European civilization. This is the starting point of the division which has persisted so far, namely, the differentiation between those who are "loyal to God and kinsmen" and those who are "traitors" (or, in contemporary communo-fascist jargon, into "patriots" and "foreign-paid mercenaries"). The former are personified in Prince (Tsar?) Lazar and the latter in Vuk Branković. Thus the myth about a great Serbian *moral* victory was born?! It was announced by the church bells in all the European capitals since the Christian civilization at Kosovo was, allegedly with a great many victims, defended. Ever since the Serbs have regarded themselves as a sort of a chosen or *divine nation*. This kitscherization of the Serbian myth is also recognizable in the myths about nation, leader, exceptionalism of national history, Serbian lack of unity, heroism and invincibility of the Serbian nation. The Serbs have always been experts at representing their defeat as a victory. The syndrome of "moral victory" as a probably unique national Serbian specialty gives them the right to declare every battle, otherwise lost on the battlefield, as their victory in some sort of moral context. (The most recent victory was that against the NATO pact, or the rest of the world in 1999, when the Serbian forces were forced to retreat from Kosovo).

This example outstandingly illustrates the process of instrumentalizing mythic motives as well as the identification of myth with social demagogy. The characteristics of such narratives are sheer fabulation, rejection of scientific rigorousness, lack of critical spirit or even their being shaped after the principles of mass culture and popular science. This style has created a powerful and suggestive kitsch ambiance in which the prefix *pseud* stands before the terms such as politics, science, culture, ideology. The Serbian Kosovo myth is a typical example of flirtation between ideology and kitsch. It confirms the understanding of cultural nationalism as a romantic evocation of the past. It is followed by chauvinism, separatism and many other "isms." When national goals are proclaimed as general social and cultural goals, everything is possible. History repeats itself; from the graves there arise old heroes "with no flaw or fear", while the catastrophic defeats are again proclaimed as (moral) victories with the nation allegedly adamantly safeguarding its "identity", tradition, cultural continuity, peace and dignity. All this is led by mythic illusions and irrational logic of the myth while it is coated with a layer of specific political folklore. Visible relicts of our recent past of the so-called Milošević's era are today still present on the cultural and political stage of the Serbian society.

## REFERENCES

1. Arent, H. (1994) *Istina i laž u politici (Truth and Lies in politics)*. Beograd: "Filip Višnjić".
2. Balandije, Ž. (1997) *Politička antropologija (Political Anthropology)*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek/Čigoja štampa.
3. Božović, R. (1999) *Uzaludna knjiga (A Book in Vain)*. Beograd/Nikšić: Čigoja štampa/Onogošt.
4. Broch, H. (1997) "Bilješke o problemu kiča" („Notes about the Problem of Kitsch"), u: Dorfles, G, *Kič. Antologija lošeg ukusa (Kitsch. Anthology of Bad Taste)*. Zagreb: Golden marketing.
5. Dorfles, G. (1997) *Kič. Antologija lošeg ukusa (Kitsch. Anthology of Bad Taste)*. Zagreb: Golden marketing.
6. Gluščević, Z. (1990) *Život u ružičastom (Life in Pink)*. Beograd: Prosveta.
7. Golubović, Z. (1999) *Stranputice demokratizacije u postsocijalizmu (Astrays of Democratization in Postsocialism)*. Beograd: Beogradski krug.
8. Gordi, E. D. (2001) *Kultura vlasti u Srbiji. Nacionalizam i razaranje alternativa (Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives)*. Beograd: Samizdat B92.
9. Haug, V. F. (1981) *Kritika robne estetike (Criticism of Commodity Aesthetics)*. Novi Beograd: IIC SSO Srbije.
10. Jovanović, S. (2005) *Kulturni obrazac (Cultural Pattern)*. Beograd: Stubovi kulture.
11. Kasirer, E. (1972) *Mit o državi (Myth about the State)*. Beograd: Nolit.
12. Konstantinović, R. (1981) *Filosofija palanke (The Philosophy of Province)*. Beograd: Nolit.
13. Kundera, M. (1990) *Nepodnošljiva lakoća postojanja (Unbearable Easiness of Existence)*. Sarajevo: "Veselin Masleša"/Svjetlost.
14. Marcuse, H. (1985) *Eros i civilizacija (Eros and Civilization)*. Zagreb: Naprijed.
15. Rajs, R. A. (2006) *Čujte, Srbi! (Ecoutez, Serbes!)*. Beograd: Beogradska knjiga/Partenon.
16. Tjudor, H. (2002) "Politički mit" („Political Myth"), u: Čupić, Č, *Politička antropologija (Political Anthropology)*. Beograd: Fakultet političkih nauka/Čigoja štampa.

## POLITIČKI KIČ I MITOTVORNA SVEST

**Nikola Božilović**

*Sa sociološke i istorijske tačke gledišta politička svest oduvek se nalazila u blizini mitske svesti. Štaviše, politika je neretko uticala na oživljavanje i oblikovanje mitske svesti. Sa druge strane, i mitovi su imali tvoračku ulogu u usmeravanju politike određenih društava i istorijskih perioda. Sprega politike i mitova, u kontekstu koji je najčešće negativan, danas je itekako aktuelna. Društva u tranziciji, poput srpskog društva, čvrsto se nalaze u zagrljaju politički iskrivljenih mitova. Mitovi postaju opako oružje u rukama autoritarne ili još nedovoljno demokratizovane vlasti. U takvim okolnostima politika i političko mišljenje postaju sredstva laži i jeftine propagande. Vladajuće strukture zloupotrebljavaju tradiciju i mitove u cilju osvajanja vlasti ili opstanka na političkoj pozornici po svaku cenu. Pseudokultura i kič su postamenti na kojima političari uz pomoć iskrivljenih mitova mogu sejati laži i prazna obećanja. Autor ovoga članka na ovim teorijskim postavkama temelji svoja zapažanja o kič kulturi savremenog srpskog društva i njenim istorijskim korenovima.*

*Ključne reči: pseudokultura, kič, politika, mit, totalitarizam*