Europe's Odyssey?: Political Myth and the European Union

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The article argues that the European Union, despite being a different kind of polity, has political myths that are similar to those that have characterised nation-states. It examines two types of political myth – foundation and exceptionalism– and demonstrates that they have been used in an attempt to make the European Union understandable and acceptable as a form of governing. The article also argues that political myths about the EU have had limited success not only because they are based on the same content as national myths but also because they do not always conform to recognisable narrative forms. The EU, with its ambiguous aim of creating "an ever closer union", does not provide the basis for sacred narratives that become normative and cognitive maps that make the new polity "normal" and provide the EU with ontological security.

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In April 2013, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso launched the "New Narrative for Europe" project. The year-long initiative invited Europeans to help write a new story for "Europe 2.0", one that Europeans would see as an epic tale of where they came from and where they are going. Commentators and political leaders all seemed to agree that growing disenchantment with the European Union reflected both the success of Europe's saga of a political community that arose out of the ashes of war to find peace and prosperity and the need to tell a new story that better communicated what Europe did and meant for Europeans (Garton Ash 2012). It suggested that, much like the architects of nineteenth century European nationalism, proponents of European integration recognised that stories were an important part of a project to create a new form of governing. However, particular kinds of stories are important for framing societies and giving meaning to how they are organized: namely, myths (Blumenberg 1985; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Political authority has a narrative that frames who can govern, why, how and over whom; our normative and cognitive maps of political power and authority are charted by what stories are told about the terrain and how they have remained useful guides over time (McDonald 1969, 144).

Political myths are sacred narratives that adopt an agnostic stance towards their actual veracity. They are sacred in that their truth is taken for granted because it reflects a collective vision of how society should be organised and governed (Flood 2001, 44). By providing an overarching framework to events, they seek to make sense of why the political community came together, why it excluded others, and how political authority should govern (Cassirer 1974; Grant 2008). But do these general features of political myth apply to the European Union? The EU, as is commonly held, is a different form of political rule: supranational, post-Westphalian, post-modern, post-national, multi-level, are just some of the terms that have been used to describe a polity that has gone beyond the boundaries of conventional forms of understanding governing (Caporaso 1996; Van Ham 2002). Without reference to the grand narratives of the nation or the state, and presenting a new political order based on rules and procedures, the question emerges as to whether the European Union has any myths. Does a polity based on appeals to rationality even need the

normative maps formed by political myth? Is it a *sui generis* polity with its own political myths that do away with the more familiar models of national myths (Bottici and Challand 2013, 3-4) or do the latter persist in a slightly different form?

The aim of this article is two-fold. First, it explores the types of political myth that have emerged to give meaning to the EU and how these have been similar in content to those that have characterised the modern nation-state. Second, it argues that myths of the EU have had limited success not only because their content parallels and is displaced by national myths, but also because EU myths lack the essential elements of successful forms of narrative. The functions and content of political myth have received a great deal of attention in the social sciences; less attention has been dedicated to the narrative form of political myths and how this may affect their success as cognitive and normative maps. The first section of this article briefly describes the functions and content of political myths as well as how they relate to other narrative forms. The second section looks at two types of political myth – foundation and exceptionalism – and how these have been applied to the EU. The article demonstrates that EU myths have been very similar in content to national myths and performed similar functions, but the overall narrative trajectory is very different. The narrative arc of EU myths moves from a beginning to an intensification of conflict culminating in a point of crisis but normally stops there; there is no dénouement. I argue that the EU's lack of finality prevents its political myths from finding space alongside national myths – and possibly becoming counter-myths - and from resonating with Europeans.

Political Myth: Function, Content and Form

The Function of Political Myth

Myth can play an important role not only to identify features that bind together strangers, but, in the telling of stories that are part of a collective memory, the bonds of community and solidarity are also formed and reinforced (Brubaker 1996). As Anthony Smith argues, "It is from these elements of myth, memory, symbol, and tradition that modern national identities are

reconstituted in each generation, as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges" (Smith 1999, 9). Nations have to be invented and narration plays an important role in that process. The stability of the nation and state depends partly on the ability of these stories to adapt to changing conditions, to be re-invented with each generation and for new stories to emerge that do not put into question the original myths. This is not limited to states that are based on thick forms of identity, rooted in organic notions of the nation and ethnicity; even transnationalism and cosmopolitanism require instruments to render them what Michael Billig called "banal". Belonging and identity require not triumphalist displays but "forgotten reminders" that make them deeply embedded social practices more than psychological conditions; consequently, "an identity is to be found in the embodied habits of social life" (Billig 1995, 8).

A political myth, as Henry Tudor says, is a story, but a story told for a purpose and not simply to amuse (Tudor 1972, 16). This purpose includes providing ways for individuals to identify politically, as a way of creating solidarity with others who share that identity and, perhaps more importantly, as a means of justifying why those who govern have the right to do so and why we should obey them (Hosking and Schőpflin 1997, 22-23). Political myths serve a number of functions, from helping to establish political legitimacy to ensuring continuity of institutions (Schőpflin 1997). They also can serve to provide ontological security for a polity, including the EU. The debate about the *sui generis* nature of the EU centres primarily on *what* it is – confederal, post-modern, compound, federalising, etc. – more than on who it is and why. However, as a social and collective actor, the EU may also seek out ontological security; that is, practices, routines and narratives that help define who it is and why it remains as a political community (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). Drawing from its use by Giddens and international relations scholars, ontological security refers to a sense of confidence of one's identity (Berenskoetter 2014; Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006). Giddens claims that ontological security, "[r]efers to the confidence that most humans beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (Giddens 1990, 92). Ontological security claims that

social actors need basic trust in the continuity of the factors that give them their sense of identity in order for them to have agency, to set objectives, define interests and act strategically. This continuity is rooted in habit and routine (Giddens 1990, 98) as well as in the stability of the environment that defines an identity. Scholars of international relations have extended the concept to argue that states seek security in ways that ensure a consistency in the narratives and stories they tells about who they are, what they do and why. Narratives, including political myths help provide this confidence. They provide a way to sequence events and the environment so that social actors can make choices in the face of uncertainty, rooted in the familiar and the understandable.

Myths are not the only ways in which ontological security may be constructed or for the creation of political identity and legitimacy; nor are they the only narrative form that can serve these purposes (Smith 2003). In the case of the European Union, a number of different actors have used a range of techniques to create Europeans and Europeanness, a sense of belonging that would allow the EU to act and govern (Calligaro 2013; Delanty 1995; McNamara 2015; Shore 2000). However, successful myths have credibility and authority, which can be tools that give political actors agency (Lincoln 1989, 24-5). They can be the basis on which governing can be shaped and guided.

Types of Political Myth

There are many different ways in which to categorise political myths. The most straight forward is to divide them between primary and derivative myths. The former, which can also be called arche-myths (Lincoln 1989, 2) or the mythmoteur (Eliade 2005 (1954)), refers to the basic stories that are central to the foundation and existence of a political community. Secondary or derivative myths, by definition, stem from the first group and refer to those stories that provide ways to understand not only the reasons for why the group exists, but also how and why it lives according to a certain normative map. For instance, the myth of America as the land of liberty and freedom, the city on the hill for all those seeking refuge from oppression, is an arche-myth from

which other myths derives, such a Bottici and Challand argue that the EU is a *sui generis* polity and, therefore, we need to design a framework for understanding myths and identity in a sui generis multicultural and supranational polity (Bottici and Challand 2013, 5). The EU does represent a new way of governing that complements, if not displaces, the state; it nevertheless needs to have practices that make its introduction acceptable and its exercise of power understandable. While it is a new kind of polity, with many institutional features that are significantly different from those of the modern state, it increasingly carries out tasks that were once the sole purview of states. The economic crisis in the Eurozone, for instance, has made clear the redistributive effects of EU policies, both within and between member states. Moreover, the response to the crisis has been to make the EU responsible for a greater number of areas of decision-making that affect the lives of its citizens, including basic fiscal policies. The EU may not look like a state but it currently does many of the things that citizens associate with what a state does or should do in governing contemporary society. As we will see below, this state-like activity has meant that not only have there been attempts to establish myths for a unique polity, there have also been EU versions of political myths that have been part of national experiences.

Political communities also have their etiological or foundational myths: stories that recount how and why the political community was formed. As in classical mythology, the hidden or guiding hand of destiny that led to the creation of the nation and the state is often present. The foundational myth has its heroic figures that possess some extraordinary quality – great courage or vision – but are still very much human and identifiable with "ordinary" citizens. Foundational myths tend to highlight the emergence of political order from "Chaos", the mythical darkness. Myths weave tales that link the founding moment with a broader universal category that is more inclusive for later generations (Smith 1992, 74).

Another important political myth is that of the exceptionalism of the nation and, consequently, the state. More than just an appeal to ties of belonging based on blood, this narrative sees the nation as possessing a feature that has given it a unique mission (Smith 1999, 56-57). This

is especially the case in settler nations, such as the United States, where each new arrival can easily identify with the nation's quest to be the "city on the hill". The state, in the modern era, became the instrument used both to capture and unleash exceptionalism. It had the legitimate authority to govern precisely because it embodied exceptionalism in its institutions, rules and values. For instance, the British sense that it is an island nation rooted in pragmatism and industriousness, which has made an organic evolution of democratic institutions possible, has helped establish the legitimacy of a state that is rooted in a hereditary monarchy and an unwritten constitution (Smith 1999, 15). An important part of the narration of exceptionalism is the invocation of the "virtue" of the nation. Examples are found in the claim that France has a "civilising" role as the birthplace of human rights, as well as the Canadian "celebration" of its uniqueness rooted in multiculturalism and the proliferation of diversity. These are examples of successful myths in that political power is exercised in their name.

A third type of political myth that has been central to modern governing projects is the myth of transformation. Nation and state-building were part of highly disruptive social processes which uprooted traditional societies, whether through industrialization or colonialism. Making sense of these epochal changes required stories that were able to place their processes within the broader arc of the nation's march through history (Gamble and Wright 2009). Redemption and atonement are at the heart of another trope that forms the basis for many national myths. The nation, but more often than not the state, has committed acts or alternatively was the subject of some historical wrong for which it must it must make amends. For instance, many European states in the post-war period have very powerful narratives of resistance to fascism and/or Nazi occupation (Passerini 2003, 24-5). As we will see later, the story of Europe that stood up to Fascism is one that is also very much part of the larger story of European integration. The redemption myth plays on the role of heroic individuals who kept alight the flicker of the nation's virtue during a dark period, affirming both the anomaly of the disruption and the higher values that formed the nation; it also becomes the basis for justifying policy and political choices. For instance, the Italian Constitution written in the

immediate aftermath of the war and the Resistance guaranteed a wide range of rights as well as rejected war as an instrument of foreign policy. Redemption is important for the political community in that it speaks to the inherent exceptionalism of a group that shines through despite moments or lapses in the longer trajectory of history.

Another myth is of the nation and state as the "fortress", the hearth around which solidarity amongst those that were once strangers is forged as part of a shared political community. The "motherland" and "fatherland" frames are often used to capture the protective shell that shields the political community from forces beyond its borders and, sometimes, those within its midst. Interestingly, myths can refer to both the state and the nation invoking narratives based on a range of elements such as geography, architecture and institutions. Often, it is combined with some of the other forms of national myths such as the return or conquest of a traditional "homeland" as the end of suffering or as a redemption for the nation (Judt 1992, 89).

The fortress narrative is closely related to an equally prominent and powerful tool in the process of building the nation: the myth of solidarity and its attendant notions of sacrifice and responsibility. As in classical mythology, stories of the ties that bind strangers are powerful instruments for inducing citizens to engage in forms of behaviour that imply some personal sacrifice whose returns are not necessarily evident beyond generating and enhancing a sense of belonging. The notion of solidarity is clearly not just limited to nation-building as it is central to many class-based narratives of social organisation. However, it is essential for the nation to have citizens feel that the state can call on them to provide some resource to come to the aid of others. Whether it is a military campaign or "buy national" exhortations, the principle is always the same: we belong to the same community so it is right that we extend what we have to those within our community who need it. Myths about the homeland resonate when they embody and promote widely shared values in a society. The vastness of the territory in the United States, for example, fits well with the notion of American exceptionalism, of a wealth of opportunity available to the hardy and brave (Smith 1992). Nationalism has often tied this myth of territory with a call to a

golden age, past or future, an arcadia in which the nation is born, re-born and flourishes (Schőpflin 1997: 28).

Solidarity and fortress myths are often closely related in that they work to create the "other" just as much as in the construction of "us". They are essential instruments in determining which strangers will be worthy of our sacrifices – in the form of taxes, loss of personal freedom, military service, etc. – and which will be excluded from sharing in the benefits of our community. The myth of difference is just as important as that of exceptionalism in deciding who is excluded and who is part of our community. For instance, surveys in Canada consistently show that Canadians hold their public health care system as an important defining feature of Canadian identity, one that distinguishes them from their neighbours to the south (Tyrrell 2013).

Political Myth and the Narrative Form

The success of these myths may depend on a number of factors (Rich 2008). First amongst these is resonance with prevailing ideas, norms and practices in a given political community. It is not the veracity of the myth itself that has to meet the test of success but the extent to which a story could be true and would be right if it were so. In this way, the link between rationality and myth is really one that needs to be re-calibrated. Critics of the nationalist use of myth may be right to point out that it is irrational to accept the veracity of stories such as those of national suffering or glory. But this is not the terrain on which the game is to be played. The more important question is whether the story serves to connect the story-teller and the listener to a broader construction of a political community and its forms of political power. A myth that survives over time is one that continues to transmit a message that captures and shapes the normative and cognitive frames of political community. It needs to be consistent and cohesive with other stories and discourses that transmit similar or complementary messages about the nature of the political community and the reasons for the use of political power. Political myths, then, have a hybrid nature (Bouchard 2013). They bring together fact and fiction in a way that makes each less important than the story that they

create together. This helps to skirt around the issue of their veracity or their falsehood; they are both true and untrue but serve a greater purpose all the same.

There is a significant and growing literature on political myth but relatively little that helps us understand why some narratives are more successful than others in assuming the characteristics of a political myth. A notable exception is Gérard Bouchard, whose "sociology of myth" tries to set various stages in the myth-making process. He divides it into three essential stages that lead myths to distinguish themselves from other narrative forms: diffusion, ritualisation and sacralisation (Bouchard 2013; Bouchard 2014). In the first, a range of actors, including cultural elites, public intellectuals and academics, emplot events in a narrative form, giving them a structure that is understandable and consistent with existing collective representations. In the second phase, these narratives become part of social life and the basis for decisions about collective action. The narratives become political myths in the third phase when they assume a sacred quality, defining the basis for the political community. To question the myth is to raise doubts about the very identity and existence of the political community. It is this last quality that distinguishes myth from historical narrative and helps to establish what Bottici and Challand call "significance". However, more than this "emotional grounding" which they claim creates significance in myth, myths make appropriate political discourses and practices. Some of the conditions that lead to this sacredness include: a coherent definition of the community, including but perhaps not necessarily its territory; adaptability that also comes from a diversity of meanings; the ability to leech or build from existing myths; the invention of adversaries; symbolic representation of the myth (Bouchard 2014, 137-152). A successful political myth is a sacred narrative that helps a political community define who, more than what, it is.

Whether or not political myths resonate with citizens is also partly determined by whether they are in a narrative form that is recognisable and understandable (Bottici and Challand 2013, 4). Narratives assemble actors, actions and events in a way that makes their unfolding comprehensible and gives them meaning (Strath 2005, 256-7). Their success depends, in part, on the extent to which

those who hear or read the stories recognise how they have been arranged (Ricoeur 2010). The classic narrative form is Aristotle's three-part structure, with a beginning, middle and an end. Gustav Freytag's pyramid (1863) or five-stage narrative arc provides a useful structure for understanding how political myths are constructed as stories. Like Aristotle, he identifies a beginning, essentially an introduction or exposition that has an inciting moment which disrupts the existing status quo. This trigger is followed by rising action in which the protagonists face an intensifying number of conflicts and tensions, which come to a head in the third part, the narrative's climax; this is the peak of the pyramid, the point of greatest tension and provides a decisive turning point. Then follows the dénouement or falling action in which the consequences of the crisis or critical juncture play themselves out between the protagonists and the antagonists, leading to the fifth stage of the narrative arc, the resolution or conclusion in which a new order is established. Successful political myths make the world understandable because they have a clear narrative arc that leads to a resolution that has an equally clear normative message. As will be illustrated below, the sacred narratives of the EU do not have the same clear post-crisis trajectory, although they are often based on the same pre-climax pattern. What is lacking in EU myths is a clear direction for what comes next and how we will get to the new order.

The EU's Political Myths

The European Union may represent a form of governing different from the nation and the state, but this has not meant that it has been spared the attempt to create a repository of political myths that give it meaning. Historiographical debates have emerged in recent years as to whether or not the EU is ahistorical; that is, does the EU need a repository of historical memories to provide it with legitimacy, as is the case with the nation-state? Whether or not there is a repository, it is clear that there have been concerted efforts to "imagine" Europe through historical memory and myth (Bal 2009) and that historians have been part of this process (Bottici and Challand 2013). Interestingly, while the EU tends to eschew the grand narratives that are part of nation-building

(Ifversen 2011), we can nonetheless identify in its own genesis many of the different types of political myths that have been part of national projects. These have ranged from sacred narratives that trace why and how the EU was created to accounts of its exceptionalism, suffering and redemption, its missionary role, of its transformation and renewal and of a territory or political space. While there may not be a the objective of a meta-narrative underlying these attepts at myth-making, they do seek to provide the EU with ontological security.

Europe's Foundational Myth

There is near consensus regarding the story of how the original member states of the EU emerged from the ashes of the war to renounce nationalism as a basis for governing and for relations between states. It is replete with heroic figures such as Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi and Winston Churchill (Calligaro and Foret 2012). Even bureaucrats such as Jean Monnet assume a mythical status in the tale of the birth of the EU and in its evolution (Réveillard 1998; Kølvraa and Ifversen 2011). An identifiable group, "The Fathers of Europe", has been constructed, replete with museums, associations and networks dedicated to telling the story of how this group of "friends" challenged the forces of nationalism and led the rebirth of Europe (Cohen 2007; Joly 2007). Its basic premise is that nationalism brought the continent to the point of ruin in the twentieth century but it was in its darkest moment that the vision for a new order took root. The rise of fascism and the destruction of war were seen as the death knell of political power entrusted and enshrined in the sovereign nation state. A united Europe emerged as the response to the failures of the first-half of the twentieth century. Moreover, it has been responsible for the peace and prosperity that has followed. We see a clear narrative structure in this morality tale that presents the reasons and the basis for the post-war construction of the EU.

Whether or not integration was the only answer to extreme forms of nationalism is not the question that concerns us now; nor whether or not the EU has been responsible for the peace and prosperity of the last half century. Arguably, the Cold War and the creation of a multilateral order

under American hegemony have also played a considerable role. What there is no doubt about is that few people question the foundational myth of the EU: that European integration was the result of a desire to overcome nationalism as the means to ensure stability and economic security on the continent. For instance, at the height of the Eurozone crisis in 2010-2013, comments such as those by European Council Herman Van Rompuy or Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski, warning that the spectre of nationalism and war would once again reign over the continent if the euro and the EU were to fail, were not uncommon. In a speech marking the fall of the Berlin Wall, Van Rompuy stressed the point made decades earlier by Francois Mitterrand, "Le nationalisme, c'est la guerre", when arguing the dangers of member states seeking national solutions to economic crises (Constantin 2011; Kaiser 2011). These were far more than exaggerated attempts at fear mongering by those frustrated with public opinion which seemed to be reverting back to national narratives. They were evocations of one of the most enduring political beliefs of the European Union: that only an integrated Europe stood between stability and peace, on the one hand, and a return to the nightmare of twentieth-century instability and war fuelled by ideology, particularly nationalism, on the other. European leaders sought to transform a complex economic and governance crisis into simple, understandable terms which provided reasons why governing should take place at the European level. It was the past, symbolised by war and nationalism, which gave reason for the present and the future status quo of European integration. Moreover, this was done with the confidence that the audience understood the symbols of the past and what they meant for the legitimacy of the post-war political order.

This foundational myth has become institutionalised in many facets of European life and EU policy (Van Rompuy 2010). The Preamble to the Treaty of Paris, which remains the cornerstone of the EU's constitutional order, states unequivocally that the EU does away with historic rivalries between states and that economic interdependence will lead to peace and stability. Moreover, it also states that this form of political organization in Europe will make a contribution to "civilization" and to a new form of international order. The attempt to formalise the notion that Europe was

responsible for a democratic and peaceful Europe evolved from Article 1 of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007): "DRAWING INSPIRATION from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law". And it would seem that Europeans want to believe the story that integration was born from the need to bring peace to the continent. For instance, the European survey, Eurobarometer, found that even in 2012, close to 60% of respondents felt that peace and stability was the greatest contribution of integration, clearly outpolling any other choice (Della Sala 2013; Bottici and Challand 2013, Part II).

National experiences have tended to highlight the redemption, if not the re-birth, of the political community after long periods of suffering, sometimes inflicted but mostly imposed; this is a cardinal element in the EU's foundational myth. Narratives about Europe's rebirth through integration provide a way to understand the interwar period and the war that followed within a context that is both about continuity and rupture (Eurobarometer 2006, 31; 2013, 604). In the official telling of the EU story, the first-half of the twentieth century was a period of suffering at the hands of nationalism. But this is part of a broader narrative arc that leads the very same states that had brought about Europe's "suffering" to find redemption in seeking an "ever closer union". Member states may or may not have sought to break free of power politics of the modern era (some still had remnants of an empire in the late 1950s and Britain and France went on to become nuclear powers) is not so important here. Rather, the story of redemption through integration is one that provides a cognitive and normative map that resonates with the political desire to break free of continental rivalries and to adjust to a new balance of power with the Cold War (Judt 1992). The story of redemption made it seem "normal" that sovereign powers be transferred to or pooled at the European level. It made the destruction of war understandable as part of a historical process that led to both the "demise" of an old national European order and the rebirth of a new Europe.

The importance of this sacred narrative of redemption is that has become ritualised and part of EU decision-making. This is especially evident in the EU's commitment to human rights

protection in Europe and beyond, linking it directly to the Holocaust as a formative moment. For instance, the European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Máire Geoghegan Quinn, launched the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) initiative on 16 November 2010. It was trumpeted as the largest single investment into research on the Holocaust, seeking to link archives across the continent and beyond in a virtual and (sometimes) material network of scholars and research resources. The Commissioner's speech helps illustrate a number of points about the EU's attempt to help build a collective memory about "Europe". First, she did not miss the opportunity to talk about the EU's broader research infrastructure and how this was preparing European society for the challenges of the next century. The Commission is always mindful not to step into areas that are national jurisdictions, especially politically sensitive areas such as the reconstruction of difficult historical events, like the Holocaust. IT stresses that it ventures into areas such as collective memory on the basis of its mandate to encourage the development of a research infrastructure to foster a "Europe of knowledge". The aim is presented as economic and technical, not political. However, the Commission's motives are more than transparent and this leads to the second point. Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn concluded her speech by citing a report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights on the teaching of the Holocaust, exhorting Europeans to remember the past so that they could build their common future. Teaching about the Holocaust, the EU agency argues, is a good way to have future generations understand the importance of fundamental rights, which are one of the central pillars of "European" citizenship (Bottici and Challand 2013; Milward 2000). This is more than just a public information or propaganda campaign. This the Commission actively engaging in myth making, telling Europeans that the current protection of human rights comes from a common historical trajectory that has propelled them to create a new political space and common future.

Myths of Exceptionalism

Stories of exceptionalism have been, implicitly if not explicitly, part of every national experience in the modern era, outlining why geographic and social boundaries were set. Nations and states could not be, by definition, universally accessible and exceptions had to be made so that a political order could be defined and made legitimate. The European Union provides an interesting example of an attempt to create political communities that are self-governing without a story of exceptionalism. By leaving open the question of where Europe's borders end, the EU has tried to transmit the message that it is not bound by the narrow constraints of national belonging and exclusion (European Agency for Fundamental Rights 2010). Rather, what brings it together as a community are shared values and norms that are universal more than they are particular to the continent. This leaves open the possibility that no one is excluded a priori and that there may be one day a political order that expands its borders beyond even the narrow European tectonic plate. Norms based on liberal democratic principles are not exclusive to the EU and its member states, so there is the possibility that others can join in the future.

However, there is another narrative that also unfolds, which draws heavily on the trope of exceptionalism. This story has two faces: the first is, implicitly, about exclusion and the second related side is about inclusion and the reasons for coming together. EU officials and national leaders repeatedly make claims about the unique trajectory of European history that has led to the creation of the Union. Europeans had experienced war and destruction in ways that created common bonds across borders, even between former rivals. More importantly, these bonds simply crystallised what had always been present, an idea of a common European space. This was traced back, in some cases, all the way to the Roman empires but more explicitly to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the European path of modernity. The norms and values that emerged from those movements may have had universal import but they were first and foremost products of the European experience. The story of the primacy of reason and Europe's role in making it the basis for social and political order is a veiled way to demarcate the continent from its southern and eastern neighbours.

Cultural exceptionalism is also the basis for understanding the EU's approach to power and social organisation today. In almost every EU document where mention is made of the conventional architecture of political power in the modern era, it is stated that the EU renounces political power and sovereignty as the basis for governing. The EU is "exceptional" in its approach to social and economic policy, as well as international relations. The EU is seen as the bastion of Europe's "social model", an approach to governing market economies that sets it apart from the rest of the global economy (Christiansen, Petito, and Tonra 2000). The EU White Paper on Social Policy stated that the aim of social policy was to, "[t]o give the people of Europe the unique blend of economic wellbeing, social cohesiveness and high overall quality of life which was achieved in the post-war period." (Wincott 2003). This firm belief that the social market economy was something exceptional to Europe was captured in the Treaties, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and is widely diffused throughout policy and political debates.

Stemming from the exceptionalism myth is that of the EU's missionary role to export peace and democracy, indeed its very own historical experience to other parts of the world. For instance, let us consider this statement by Joschka Fischer, former German Foreign Minister: "Yet there is no point in fooling oneself: Only as long as the Balkan countries believe in the European Union and the benefits of membership will today's precarious peace in the region become permanent" (Commission of the European Communities 1994, 1-2). Fischer is expressing the EU belief that it remains a model for how conflict-ridden regions should achieve peace and stability. Moreover, the path forward lies not only in adopting the EU as a model, but also in striving to become part of the mission through eventual membership. To question the claim that the EU is not the beacon for democracy and stability across a wider Europe is to strike at its central argument for maintaining legitimate authority within its member states.

Despite its ambiguity over borders and its lack of geographic finality, there are narratives that carve out a clear European space, one that defines insiders and outsiders (Fischer 2014). For instance, the European Commission produced a video that it later had to withdraw from its website

after complaints of racist undertones.[1] It featured a female protagonist, modelled on the figure of Uma Thurman in the movie *Kill Bill*, in a derelict factory where she is menaced by ethnic characters using various types of violence. She disarms them by multiplying herself and forming a circle around them, at which point they lay down their arms and are ready to talk. The video was commissioned as part of a promotional campaign in support of EU enlargement, both within and beyond the member states.

Setting aside the racist and sexist elements (as these do not reflect the EU's commitment to fundamental rights) and focusing instead on some of the underlying themes in the video's narrative, the first message is that clear cultural lines are set between Europeans and the rest. The Europeans renounce violence and resolve disputes through reason and dialogue, but they can only deal with the violent world by presenting a united front, otherwise violence wins out. The video highlights a tension in the EU's narrative of endless borders: on the one hand, wanting to trace a normative map based on values and, on the other, wanting to establish a basis for why some are allowed to join the circles and others not. While the EU might be ambiguous about where its geographic borders end, it is much clearer on who is part of "us" and who is not. The video graphically showed the message that is found in almost all EU documents that refer to values and norms: the EU is the font of a different approach to social and political relations. Second, the theme that emerges from the video is that the EU acts as a fortress in a troubled world. The protagonist is cloned to represent EU enlargement but membership is not extended to those who menaced her and who are represented as physically different. It is marking out a European space which can relate to others but which is clearly closed to some. This is not so different from the narrative of immigration that is developing at the European level. The Commission replaced the controversial video with one that had as its slogan, "so similar, so different, so European". Interestingly, it has numerous panoramic shots of different landscapes in Europe as though to claim a distinct European territory, both natural and

[1] It may still be viewed online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQREDQjfzC4.

constructed, suggesting that there is a territory, including an architecture, which all Europeans would recognise as their own.

The fortress myth can also be found in another figure that has been used to tell the story of what the EU (or, at least, the Euro) does: Captain Euro. While lacking the gravitas of nineteenth-century Romanticism, superheroes do convey normative and cognitive maps that trace how a community defines itself (Costello and Worcester 2014; Dittmer 2014). Clearly, Captain Euro is modelled on Captain America, the Marvel comic book hero who fought evil that essentially paralleled first Nazism and then Communism. The same dynamic of the defender of the community's values struggling in a hostile world is presented in trying to teach children about the single currency through Captain Euro (Frank 1998). The character, created and promoted on a dedicated website, was financed by the EU and is meant to embody the basic values of the EU. Captain Euro is Andrew Andros (the reference to a Greek island very much present in accounts of antiquity may be coincidental) in everyday life, who is a polyglot and the son of a European ambassador, thus highlighting Europe's openness to the world. He runs an agency, "The Twelve Stars Organisation" (a reference to the EU flag), whose aim is "to defend the security of Europe and uphold the values of the Union" (http://www.captaineuro.com/index.htm). He vows to use, "intellect, culture and logic", not violence, to resolve conflict, a central tenet of EU foreign policy. Aided by members of his team, such as Europa and Pythagoras, "Euro combines his acquired language and technology skills with his international 'savoir faire' and his natural investigative curiosity, to protect Europe and carry Europe's message of goodwill around the world." More importantly, the superhero is an attempt to render the complex world of global financial markets as a simple morality tale with the euro acting as a shield to protect Europeans from evil forces such as speculators (part of a sinister organisation called the, "Baddies"). The Captain Euro story has a very clear objective: to construct the euro as part of a broader political project to ensure that basic European values are protected from global forces, and possibly to export them to other parts of the world as they clearly have universal appeal, according to the story.

Captain Euro stories have not had the widespread success, neither commercial nor social, of the Marvel Comics series in the United States, but they are an indication that the Commission feels the need to help construct a normative story to render more simple and understandable one of the EU's most ambitious projects, the creation of a single currency. This story presents Europe as a bastion of the social market in a world of speculative finance, with the Euro as the shield to protect the homeland of humane capitalism. To challenge this story is to question not only the single currency but also the social model it supposedly protects. It has protagonists and antagonists but it is never quite clear what is the critical juncture and how our hero will bring about a resolution that constitutes a new order, especially as the member states are still seen as the guarantors of national social models.

The EU's Myths: Content and Form

There have been attempts to weave myths of the EU along the same lines as those central to the modern nation-state. In the case of the foundational myth, these contain not only the familiar story of the birth of the political community but also a clear structure. The protagonists are clearly identified and the plot structure follows a path that the audience understands. The tropes of exceptionalism and differentiation of the political community are also familiar to the audience. However, unlike that of its foundation, the complete narrative arc and content of these stories is not so clear. First, the protagonists and the tensions that they must confront are often confusing. For instance, while the EU itself may be exceptional, so are its member states. In trying to map out a reason why the political community comes together, it is caught in a tension between a universal story of values and a particular appeal to define who belongs in the community. It is not clear who is the antagonist in this universal story and what resolution the characters are working towards. Second, without a finality beyond a call to an "ever closer union", the sacred narratives of the EU do not have a driving tension that leads to a climax and a resolution that is unambiguous and understandable to the audience.

As the EU struggles to find a way to address not only the consequences of economic crisis but also the structural features of the single currency that may have caused them, it has become apparent that it needs practices that can help identify who it is and how it should act. The search is for a new narrative that provides a normative and cognitive map that will render complex governing structures understandable to citizens who may have to accept new forms of social organization. The EU has sought to create political myths that will make "an ever closer union" an identifiable form of political authority. Yet, despite eschewing the narratives of belonging conventionally associated with nation and state, it has, nonetheless, adopted the form and in some cases the content of some of the types of political myth that have characterised national experiences.

The use of political myth in the European Union highlights its continued importance for securing legitimacy for political authority, even when this is carried out at levels beyond that of the state. It is not just a question of imagining Europe; it is one of identifying the practices that make it right that citizens be governed by Europe. A polity that has ill-defined borders, such as the EU, has its own story which shapes its space and who can share in it. This suggests that discussion about the post-national organization of political power needs to consider the role that sacred narratives play. In the specific case of the EU, we need to explore more closely why some political myths work and others do not; as well as the extent to which myths about polities at different levels can co-exist or whether they are destined to clash. To paraphrase George Sorel, who argued that the working class needed its own myths to displace that of the nation, we need to ask whether the post-national can develop these myths, whether they need to displace those of the nation and the state and, if so, whether they can do so successfully. The case of the EU suggests that there is a need for myths but it remains to be seen whether and if they can co-exist with national political mythologies.

This article suggests that the types of political myth that have characterised the modern nation-state persist, even if in a somewhat modified form, because national political myths were not entirely radical departures from previous mythical forms and tropes. Foundational or etiological myths have always defined social groups and the sacred narratives of the nation's path to self-

government, rooted in exceptionalism, has many similarities to the hero's journey. This is captured in a range of examples from George Washington crossing the Delaware to Lenin's Sealed Train journey to join the revolution as embodying the sacred story of the nation's redemption. The European Union's Odyssey is a story of a unique journey, but one that has been told many times before. This is not to say that transnational forms of governance cannot have their own myths; the case of the EU suggests, though, that some of the basic stories that have given meaning to forms of social organization will be at the heart of whatever "new narrative" for Europe emerges. It remains to be seen whether the EU's myths will have the same outcomes as their national counterparts.

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