

## Political Myths and How to Study Them

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*Political myths are a particular kind of narrative used to shape the legitimacy of a political system, writes **Jeremy F. G. Moulton**. He argues that, despite the difference between the academic and common usages of 'myth', political myth theory can generate important insights for political authority, and that it may prove useful in understanding questions around the EU's legitimacy.*

Last week, I presented a paper at the [2016 UACES Student Forum Conference](#) at the University of Kent's Brussels School of International Studies. The [paper](#) focused on EU climate action and its interpretation as *political myth*; that is, a story that is used to explain and justify political authority.

Like most in academia, I like to flatter myself that my chosen field of study is both interesting and important – the reaction from the other attendees at the conference at least gave me reason to believe that the former may well be true. The discussion following my presentation revealed that political myth is a subject that has the potential to be of great interest and to promote spirited discussion, but it also showed that, as of yet, it has a limited readership.

This did not come as a great surprise. Within the academic writing on political myth theory, it has been recognised that sparse attention is paid to the matter. Yet, there is reason to argue that this should be (and is) changing. Since *JCMS's* [special issue](#) on the subject in the EU in early 2010, more overt attention has been given to the European project's political myths. But misconceptions about what political myth is remain prevalent.

### What a Political Myth *Is*

Political myths are narratives that become central to a polity's, or other political authority's, *raison d'être*. They are used both by those in political authority and the wider population in order to legitimate that political authority. A political myth is a story that must be widely accepted as true, though its veracity is not the central issue. In fact, the truth behind a myth may well be questionable. What matters is the dominant belief and acceptance of the story.

I think political myths are best understood as developing in four stages (an approach I've adapted from the work of [Della Sala 2010](#) and [Bouchard 2013](#)).

1. Initial framing – in this stage, a potential myth is framed as a narrative – one would imagine by those acting within or in favour of a given polity or political authority.

2. Diffusion – here the narrative is told and spread. Two distinct roles emerge: storytellers and listeners. For a potential myth to be successful, initial listeners must become storytellers and further diffuse the story. According to [Della Sala](#), aside from political actors, initial storytellers are likely to be ‘cultural elites, public intellectuals and academics’.
3. Ritualisation – in this stage, a narrative becomes part of normal life, it is widely accepted as fact and becomes a basis of political, social, cultural and collective action.
4. Sacralisation – in this final stage, the narrative becomes a central part of a polity’s mode of being and the two become inextricably linked.

There are a number of ways to classify and differentiate political myths, but one set, that of foundational and functional myths, is especially useful in relation to the EU.

Foundational myths are the stories that relate to the *how* and *why* of a polity’s formation. In the EU, foundational myths are of European peace, necessitated by two World Wars originating in Europe, and that of a united Europe being a prosperous Europe.

Functional myths are those that are used to justify a polity’s political authority and existence based on the functional benefits the polity provides. Of special interest to me is that of EU climate action, but other functional political myths in the EU include the EU as a [sui generis international actor](#), as a protector of [fundamental rights](#) and as the [Single Market](#) and source of [competitiveness](#).

### What a Political Myth *Isn't*

One of the queries that arose from the presentation of my paper was whether political myths were not simply narratives. In the political myth literature, one finds many references to narratives. Some who write on narratives also find it useful to conflate the two (e.g. [Manners and Murray 2016](#)).

However, there is an important analytical distinction between them. Political myths can be understood as extensions of narratives. One can state that a truly successful narrative is one that becomes a political myth – as Della Sala [writes](#) ‘political myths are sacred narratives’ – that is, narratives that have progressed through the stages of mythification to the point of become sacralised.

The central difficulty with political myth is the terminology. ‘Myth’ is a term that has such a clear definition in the vernacular that, without background reading on political myth theory, one naturally approaches the term thinking it denotes a fiction. This is something that Flood has [written](#) on, saying:

Studies of myth almost invariably open with the *caveat* that the reader should not confuse the popular, pejorative term *myth* as a synonym for falsehood, distortion, or delusion with the scholarly usage which stresses that myths have unquestioned validity within the belief systems of the social groups which cherish them.

I would temper Flood's certainty that the scholarly term identifies narratives of 'unquestioned validity' with the addition of 'largely', as every story has its disbelievers. With that aside, the quote from Flood necessarily establishes the two separate uses of the term.

Whilst it might appear desirable to create a new, academic term for 'myth' that steers away from any confusion, I would maintain that this is not the best course. It would mean, at least, partial divorce from the rich body of political myth literature that exists to date and would represent something of a disruption to the field and its theoretical development.

Instead, in academic texts, the term should be defined clearly, with the alternative meaning addressed. In less academic, more public-facing discussions of the subject, I would suggest that alternatively terminology is used. Perhaps Della Sala's 'sacred narratives' would be suitable.

### **Myths and the European Union**

The future of the EU is dependent on the Union finding narratives that resonate with European citizens to the point of becoming sacralised. It should be remembered that political myths can be used to both bolster the legitimacy of a polity and undermine it. As Aning and Nsiah have [written](#), if leaders fail to provide a new myth, then 'any passionate fringe group will fashion a political myth – positive or negative – for the state'.

In the context of EU crisis and raised levels of Euroscepticism, I believe that political myth theory allows for EU scholars to ask important questions on European unity and can provide insight into possible pathways for the future of a unified Europe.

Academics have a role to play in the establishment, diffusion and interpretation of these potential myths. For example, scholarly investigations into the negative myths that have developed around the EU, such as the democratic deficit, would make fascinating additions to a field which has largely focused on positive myths to date. I certainly look forward to the development of the field in the coming years, and hope to see others sharing my enthusiasm for it.

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