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Collective Memory and the Transformations of Political Myth in the Era of the Mass Media

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ABSTRACT. If myths have been narrated since time immemorial, this study argues that a novel kind of political myth has emerged over the past decades that has been adapted to a specifically modern significance and function. To account for the appearance of this novel form of political myth, I investigate the role of the mass media. In this perspective, the development and technological advance of the mass media has brought about a transformation in the modes of public experience and remembrance and a corresponding metamorphosis in the specific character of public space that lends to contemporary political myth its unique significance and function.

Keywords: Collective memory; political myth; mass media; symbol.

Memória coletiva e as transformações do mito político na era dos meios de comunicação de massa

RESUMO. Se os mitos foram narrados desde tempos imemoriais, este estudo argumenta que um novo tipo de mito político emergiu nas últimas décadas, tendo sido adaptado a um significado e função especificamente modernos. Para explicar o surgimento dessa nova forma de mito político, investigo o papel dos meios de comunicação de massa. Nessa perspectiva, o desenvolvimento e o avanço tecnológico dos meios de comunicação de massa realizaram uma transformação nos modos de experiência e lembrança públicas e uma metamorfose correspondente no caráter específico do espaço público que empresta ao mito político contemporâneo seu significado e função únicos.

Palavras-chave: Memória coletiva; mito político; meios de comunicação de massa; símbolo.

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Introduction

According to my conception, myth in general and political myth in particular are called forth by fundamental human concerns which, in addressing the ultimate questions and dilemmas of human existence, aim to lend it meaning and purpose. Myths may provide cosmological interpretations of phenomena such as creation, demise or rebirth or, in a more specific sense, they may be advanced to justify fundamental attitudes regarding the sense of human co-existence in a public world. In all of its forms, myths govern general preconceptions that are mobilized in view of the essentially limited character of human understanding as it is marked by plurality, contingency, and finitude. Fundamental political attitudes toward specific forms of human equality and inequality, of liberty, domination or servitude, of group homogeneity or diversity find in mythological figures powerful sources of ideological support.

Beyond this rudimentary qualification of myth, the problem of defining it is complex. Whatever structural similarities anthropologists might posit to typify and systematize the forms of myth that have been narrated since time immemorial, I will insist in what follows on the appearance over the past decades of a *novel* kind of political myth adapted to a specifically modern significance and function. I accord to modern myths a historicity which, however much they may draw on pre-modern sources, highlights their essential *incommensurability* with myths of pre-modern and earlier non-Western cultures.

How might we account for this novel function of political myth in the contemporary world? According to my interpretation, the contemporary singularity of its meaning and function depends on mutations on a

global scale in the modes of collective experience; in the ways in which experience communicated among vast groups is collectively remembered and imaginatively deployed. Such mutations may be traced to the remarkable influence of the mass media which, over the past century and a half, have relentlessly accelerated their communicative capacity and extended their global reach. Yet, beyond the acceleration and global extension of communicated information, the mass media, in conferring *public* visibility on events, interweaves them into the tissue of group experience and memory as it is imaginatively deployed on a vast scale. Mass distribution journalism, televised news, the internet and World Wide Web, social media, and other forms of digital technology that accompany them, in their everyday familiarity and ubiquity, have reconfigured the public sphere and lent to it its current form. This radical reconfiguration of the public sphere has opened the space in which contemporary political myths have emerged and assumed their novel role. Our task therefore lies in a closer demarcation of the ways in which the emergence of the mass media, through its transformation of the modes of public experience and remembrance, account for the specific character of public space in which contemporary political myth draws its unique significance and function.

In order to take on this task, I will proceed in three steps: I will first clarify the concept of 'collective experience' and 'collective memory' in the framework of the public sphere; this will lead to an identification of the ways in which the mass media, through their specific manner of formatting public communications, have altered the public realm on a global scale. After pinpointing changes in the public realm from which political myth draws its significance and function, I will indicate the specific quality of political myth in the contemporary globalized world.

1. The symbolic embodiment of collective memory

Remembrance, according to its primary sense, is carried out in the original sphere of personal awareness. Since collectivities have no substantial being independent of the individuals who compose them, they can never be said to 'remember' in any strict sense of the term. Original experience that memory retains concerns people and things, events and situations as they present themselves in a direct encounter 'in the flesh'. Beyond direct encounters, remembered experience may be communicated only indirectly among individuals at the level of the group. My interpretation here draws on phenomenological theory, above all of Edmund Husserl, who equated original experience with what he termed "[...] experience in the flesh in a given living present"¹ (Husserl, 1973, p. 278f). In its full sense, this signifies not only the perception of persons or things as single objects, but above all an encounter with them as they are given in the horizon of a surrounding world. The foreground upon which the observer focuses in such direct encounters presupposes a background, the plenitude of an accompanying context which is simultaneously given, even where the observer pays no attention to it. Where it is not explicitly noticed and stands at the horizon of the direct theme of attention, this passive background may in many cases be made a topic of recall when an effort is made to retrieve it.

When I attribute to recollection of in the flesh encounters the status of *original* remembrance, I in no way intend to claim that such remembrance would somehow recall the 'reality' of what is encountered, if this is taken to mean that it might be experienced independently of the singular perspective of the observer. On the contrary, all direct encounters are remembered from a personal perspective or from that of a given group, and we are well familiar with the possibilities of distortion, omission, and fabrication, even where they are unintentional, that may influence the remembrance of direct encounters. This is why the comparison of testimonies plays such an important role in which the recollection of eye-witnesses is fit into the spatio-temporal and conceptual logic of the larger web of events. In attributing an original status to remembrance of 'in the flesh' encounters, I claim only that they are essentially *different* from all other forms of indirectly communicated encounter which, moreover, *presuppose* this original form of direct experience. For this reason, in spite of the evident weaknesses of eye-witness testimonies, they play a singular and indeed irreplaceable role in our judicial systems and in the quest of historiographical methods to reconstruct the factual truth of past events.

For the great majority of individuals in our contemporary societies, direct 'in the flesh' experience and recollection of events that are of public significance is extremely rare; beyond official ceremonies and other public events, such encounters are usually limited to a small number of agents or eye-witnesses who are directly present. Where members of a community, as vast as it may be, share remembrances of what is publicly communicated through word, image, and gesture, this remembrance is generally indirect.

¹ "leibhafte Erfahrung in einer jeweiligen lebendigen Gegenwart" Husserl (1973, p. 278f); Held (1966).

If in its multiple manifestations the public sphere generally lies beyond the realm of personal and small group experience and remembrance, it nonetheless provides the broad context in which mass communication and the interpersonal relations it represents transpire. In this context original experience and remembrance in the flesh are endowed with communicable significance to the extent that they are embodied in *symbols*. Symbolic embodiment, as I understand it, is not an element of experience that is tacked onto it as a secondary addition; on the contrary, through the work of imaginative transfer symbols configure experience at a primary spatio-temporal and conceptual level.² On the basis of symbolic incorporation, we are immediately familiar with spatio-temporal and conceptual relations that govern our everyday world even before we reflect on them: for example, one immediately takes off one's hat as a sign of respect in a church, just as one spontaneously distinguishes between the private area of a backyard and that of publicly accessible parks, or anticipates in given cities that markets will be closed on Monday mornings and not on Wednesdays. Even the different kinds of music that is diffused in supermarkets, airports, or churches present symbolic spatio-temporal indicators to orient our immediate activity in the everyday lifeworld.

In referring to the public sector of a vast collectivity in which the mass media evolve, my analysis presupposes the ever greater predominance of social, political, and economic contexts that are no longer structured on a local or communal scale, in other words our contemporary situation that has followed in the wake of the industrial and then the technical and information revolutions, of the ever more rapid mobility of people and goods accompanied by mass migration toward urban centers and the integration of finance and of markets on a global scale. Within these collectivities, the perspectives of different groups rooted in symbol systems may overlap, such as when they share a common language, but they may also be nourished by diverse symbolic webs, in relation to religious traditions, dialects, social practices etc., a network of remembrance through which experience is oriented in relation to a given group perspective and specific group expectations. However much similarity to one another the individual members of families, local associations, and small communities might exhibit,³ the public sphere, even in the most apparently homogeneous of mass societies, is marked by a mobility, a mutability of personal and social forms of existence, and an exposure to external influences that has not only propelled them beyond the sphere of traditional communal life, but has essentially transformed their ways of being together in a common world. It is here that the mass media both mirror and configure ways of experiencing and of remembering, as well as future expectations, through which the public sphere assumes its contemporary pattern. In bringing to visibility what ordinarily lies outside the range of direct vision, and in conferring on it a public significance, the role of the media is by no means limited to reporting events, but they constitute the primary mode through which current preoccupations and events that ordinarily stand beyond direct experience are publicly accounted for and retained in memory.

Beyond the perspective of a specific community and of the broader reach of a given public, the scope of the media is continually and ever more comprehensively extended on a global scale to encompass foreign symbolic networks, most of which lie beyond the realm of direct comprehensibility for those who receive what the mass media report. Here a given public is largely dependent on media accounts which translate and interpret what would otherwise be incomprehensible. In the process of selection and ordering, information is organized according to the spatio-temporal pattern and logic that is specific to mass communication systems. This spatio-temporal pattern and logic are not simple copies or replicas of those that govern everyday experience in the flesh and remembrance of that experience; they constitute an *autonomous* mode of symbolic embodiment through which public awareness is engendered and channeled. And, what is more, this spatio-temporal pattern and logic, far from a fixed property, is subject to modification in relation to the technical organization of the media themselves through which information is communicated.

Here we begin to perceive the outlines of my main argument, for it is in the public space configured according to the autonomous spatio-temporal and logical format of mass communications that political myth has emerged in its novel contemporary form. And in locating the way in which the mass media pattern the public sphere, we will be able to more closely identify this novel form of political myth.

² This interpretation of the symbol is in part inspired by the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. However, my debt to Cassirer concerns less his theory of symbolic forms than what he terms the "[...] originary forms of synthesis" of all experience ("[...] Urformen der Synthesis aller Erfahrung") (Cassirer, 1994, p. 17) as they are symbolically articulated in space, time, and number. On this point see Cassirer (1994, p. 17). In a different philosophical framework, Nelson Goodman made at least implicit use of the symbol in what I take to be both its narrower and broader senses. For Goodman, symbols may stand for things or elements other than themselves. Yet the symbol is not limited to this role for, at another level, it exercises what he aptly termed a more general, 'world-making' function. A 'world,' as he wrote, "[...] may be made up of atoms or qualities, of ordinary objects of certain kinds or of other kinds, of riotous Soutine-like or geometric Braque-like patterns" (Goodman, 1981, p. 130). In his book *Ways of Worldmaking*, Goodman elucidated his concept of the symbol's world-making function with explicit reference to the work of Ernst Cassirer (Goodman, 1978, p. 130). I have dealt with this theme in more detail in my book *Collective Memory and the Historical Past* (Barash, 2016).

³ The "Sphere of communal familiarity" ("Sphäre gemeinschaftlicher Vertrautheit") (Plessner, 1981, p. 55-56), according to Helmut Plessner's apt phrase; see also in this regard Gerhardt (2012, p. 202-207).

2. The mass media and the configuration of public space

Since the introduction of mass distribution daily newspapers in the nineteenth century, which juxtaposed written word and image, followed in the twentieth century by radio and the mass reproduction of animated images by the cinema, video and then high resolution computer screens, smartphones, and tablets, the mass media have benefitted from technological advances permitting them to reproduce word and image with ever greater precision. Technological progress in these areas has enabled them to increasingly perfect their ability to *simulate* experience in the everyday lifeworld, to make this simulated experience resonate in public memory and communicate it on a global scale.

The radical transformation that mass media communications have brought to the public world may be placed clearly in relief if we consider that the potency of the mass media is not the result of a simple reproduction or replication of what transpires in the everyday life-world of face-to-face encounters. In an ever more technologically precise manner television, in CNN fashion, presenting ‘hypermediated’ combinations of written text and visual image and, subsequently, hypermediated world wide web and social media internet displays, transfigure reported information in function of a spatio-temporal pattern and logical order specific to the mass media format. This format configures information in terms of a symbolic order that is specific to mass communications.

From the introduction of mass circulation newspaper journalism and then radio, television, and internet, the ever more perfect simulation by the mass media of experience in the everyday lifeworld has largely corroborated their claim to portray the *reality* of this world. In accord with this ambition, news reporting has provided the paradigmatic format through which mass communications confer public visibility to action and events and assume an essential role in the configuration of the public sphere.⁴ Its ambition, however, to represent the *reality* of public actions and events as they occur in the immediate lifeworld is necessarily limited by the media format through which information is configured for mass dissemination in the public sphere. As we will see, the limits of the mass media’s claim to represent the reality of what it reports has an essential bearing on our discussion of contemporary forms of political myth.

How might we characterize the salient features of the format through which the mass media configure information for mass dissemination? First, images and accompanying information are condensed and tailored to the space of a small screen and subjected to the split-second timing required by the rapidly moving sequence of reports. Second, information is adapted to the generally undifferentiated interests of the largest possible number of spectators. This characterizes what has often been qualified as its anonymity.⁵ If, to a certain extent, the new interactive forms of social media are designed to introduce a measure of personal interrelation, encounters are nonetheless mediated by an interface through which face-to-face presence is simulated and formatted for potential transmission to larger groups or to a mass audience. Moreover, in the case of search engines deployed on social media and other platforms that decide how information is to be tailored to seemingly personalized queries, powerful algorithms channel the information proposed in terms of an anonymous system that operates in favor of a preconceived logic.⁶ Third, information is selected in function of its recency in the field of current events, of its status as ‘breaking news’, that is subjected to a constant turnover in which older items are replaced by more recent ones. The currency of information and the rapidity of its turnover place it in a decontextualized perspective in which all but the most recent past is excluded from consideration. Fourth, in the manner of mass circulation newspapers and television news, different items of information are typically subjected to haphazard arrangements, setting commercial messages, sports, weather, and breaking news alongside or following one another in a seemingly random order. This mass communication format prevails on hypermediated CNN-like screens and internet displays where, analogous to news reporting, information in different sectors is transmitted. In sectors of entertainment, advertisement and sports, the attention of a mass public may thus be drawn to the ‘latest’ sports results, to ever-renewed entertainment programming, and to ‘new and improved’ commercial products.

The uncanny capacity of the mass media to simulate the lifeworld in an ever more precise manner ordinarily leads us to *overlook* the reconfigured spatio-temporal pattern and logic of representation according to which information is disseminated. Where events are publicly remembered, their mass media format is

⁴ Luhmann (2004, p. 120–141).

⁵ Luhmann (2004, p. 11).

⁶ On the role of algorithms, see for example the suggestive analysis of Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) and the different chapters of the book *Algorithmic Life: Calculative devices in the Age of Big Data*, ed. Amoore and Piotukh (2016).

rarely brought to mind. The power of the mass media to ever more precisely simulate what we collectively take to be the reality of the lifeworld is all the more effective where the act of simulation is itself dissimulated and forgotten.

The power of the mass media to simulate experience in the lifeworld, while leading us to overlook the act of simulation itself, opens up the space in which the unique form of political myth makes its appearance in the contemporary globalized world. This possibility depends, on one hand, on what I described at the outset as the increasing 'distance' of personal experience and remembrance in the everyday lifeworld from the public sphere and, on the other hand, on the potency of the mass media which, through the format of disseminated information, lends to events in the public realm immediate presence, *as if* they belonged to the everyday lifeworld itself. If we take myths to be ways of completing experience by compensating for the limited character of human understanding as it is marked by plurality, contingency, and finitude, then information in media format, where it overlooks its own limits and substitutes the formatted part for the complex and multifaceted whole is readily open to mythical elaboration. What is more, in referring to mythical elaboration, I draw on the process well described by Ernst Cassirer in *The Myth of the State* (2008, p. 200-202), where he characterized the specific quality of modern political myths as deliberately fashioned narratives that aim to promote specific political objectives.

If, according to my argument, contemporary political myths insinuate themselves into the gaping space that separates experience and remembrance in the everyday lifeworld from the public sphere configured by the mass media, their potency depends first and foremost on the capacity of the mass media to confer *public visibility* on people and events, to lend them an iconic status and a public aura. Their potency is nourished by a public celebrity that both marks their distance from the everyday lifeworld, and simulates presence within the lifeworld which, in the form of the decontextualized, anonymous, and ever-shifting format of media events of which they are part, resonates in the memory of a mass public. And, as recent history has amply demonstrated, media celebrity is readily translated into political power.

The aura of people and events that gain visibility through the mass media format is not the aura of charismatic authority. Indeed, the aura conferred by the mass media manifests its contemporary singularity in its contrast to charismatic leadership in the sense Max Weber gave to it as a central category of sociological analysis. As a principle form of political domination, charismatic leadership, as Weber identified it, is "ausseralltaglich" – it stands out against the background of mundane, everyday life and its quest for financial gain and security and is characterized by an ability to prevail in situations of revolution and political crisis.⁷ The aura of the talk show celebrity or the 'reality show' personality is hardly 'charismatic' in this sense. He or she hardly clashes with pursuits of the everyday world that the media format simulates. If our contemporary situation has been propelled beyond what Weber described, it is in light of a situation created by the conditions of public visibility that the mass media propagate. Here the affiliation with groups endowed with mass popularity, such as sports and sports clubs, combined with financial influence, media ownership, and media presence, has become an ever more familiar feature in the political constellation of the contemporary world. In different walks of life and national contexts, Arnold Schwarzenegger in California, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, or Bernard Tapie in France, to cite only three well-known examples, have served as paradigmatic icons who have turned media presence to political advantage. More recently, Donald Trump's role in animating the NBC 'reality show' 'The Apprentice,' Boris Johnson's appearances as a TV personality in numerous British TV shows like 'Have I got News for You,' or Steve Bannon's prominence as the producer of a film documentary on Sarah Palin, the right-wing tea party advocate and unsuccessful candidate for the Vice-Presidency of the United States, all profited from media visibility in their accession to political power. And Steve Bannon, who has sought to unite the far right on an international scale, by cultivating alliances with Matteo Salvini, Victor Orban, and Marine and Marechal Le Pen, has recently become a star of the televised talk show circuit. These most recent examples bring to the fore what might properly be termed contemporary political mythologies: their political notoriety has been propelled by the mass appeal of resurrection myths of a bygone national past; of the pseudo-renaissances built on the reminiscence of national glory in a world prior to the globalized context of the present.⁸

And here we come to the crux of the matter. In claiming that the mass media format opens a space for the emergence of novel forms of political myth, I do not mean to suggest that *all* information disseminated in the

⁷ (Weber, 1922, p. 142-148)

⁸ On the highly suggestive concept of the 'pseudo-renaissance' to characterize the national myth articulated by fascist ideologies, see Heller (1971, p. 463-610).

mass media format would for that reason be mythical. Rather, according to my interpretation, the mass media format is *propitious* to the propagation of political mythologies where, in choosing events to endow with public significance, the decontextualized, anonymously configured, and continually shifting schemata of the media format takes precedence over the *contextual* logic of experience and remembrance serving as the principal mode of orientation in a shared common life-world. Herein lies its novelty. Publicly retained remembrance engendered by a simulated video format is essentially a memory of association, arising out of what are generally programmed assemblages of images presented through the video interface. The mass communications format, in orienting attention to the up-to-date and in simulating a presence in the life-world, or in providing a satiety of hypermediated presence that may be substituted for reality,⁹ tends to homogenize and standardize nuances of perspective, since the short-term format leaves little room for more than a cursory contextual analysis of fragmented points of view. In this essential way the logic of video communications contrasts with the contextual reasoning capable of identifying sources of fragmented collective remembrance retained by disparate groups, whose respective viewpoints draw on the deep strata of sedimented symbolic layers in a given contemporaneous framework. Ideally speaking, investigative reporting, where it accounts for a plurality of points of view in an attempt to retrieve their contextual thickness, may step beyond the limited perspective of the mass media format and integrate elements of the contextual logic that seeks to grasp the multifaceted complexity of the lifeworld. My claim, therefore, is that the schemata of media events lends itself to mythical elaboration where it *supplants* the contextual logic as it is applied to the real complexity of the life-world.

In the case of images and information disseminated through the mass media format, the act of deliberate fashioning is often concealed. It is not always possible to detect the operation of external factors influencing the selection and organization of reported events. In the political sphere, on one hand, the condensed and concentrated format of representation facilitates simplification of the real plurality of the public world, where the viewpoints of a predominant group and its elite monopolize the space of public visibility and of public recollection. On the other hand, in countries where the content of television broadcasts is not dictated by the political regime, the survival of news programs, like entertainment and commercial features, depends on ratings by which their popularity is constantly measured. Programming is consequently commanded by the competition to attract the largest possible audience.¹⁰ Certainly the mass media, and particularly the internet and the social media, may be credited with opening otherwise closed information systems to external viewpoints that may contradict the officially accepted slant. It is well known that the internet and social networks have contributed in recent years to the overthrow of oppressive dictatorships. Yet this should not lead us to overlook the influence of extraneous political and commercial factors in even the most open contemporary societies, which may not only limit but also distort what is brought by the media to mass awareness and retained in public memory.

Where investigative reporting in the best of its expressions, in its quest to retrieve the multi-faceted complexity of the lifeworld, may overstep the limits of the mass media format, the media personality invested with political power wields the full force of this format's mythical potential where he or she reinforces its propensity for simplification and uniformization. In the mass media format that strips information of nuance and contextual depth, all manner of 'points of view' may be portrayed as so many particular opinions. Peremptory assertions, formulated in the style of Twitter posts, may be placed on the same footing as well-documented reflections based on contextual analysis. And here, their manner of argumentation itself betrays a principle attribute of political mythology: as in the contest of warring gods, arguments are chosen not for their attempt to achieve completeness through the confrontation of multiple perspectives, but for their *strategic thrust*. Their truth is evaluated not in terms of their capacity to provide comprehensive accounts of the thick contextual strata of the everyday lifeworld, but for their efficacy as arms in the arena of political combat. In this mythical arena, well-informed opinion can be rebutted by 'alternate facts' and disqualified as fake news.

Conclusion

Collective memory in the era of the mass media

My analysis thus far has focused on the manner in which the mass media, through the format of mass dissemination, simulate presence in the lifeworld before a mass audience, and thereby reveal their uncanny

⁹ Bolter and Grusin (2000, p. 53).

¹⁰ Bourdieu (1998, p. 28-29); Postman and Powers (2008, p. 75-89).

capacity to conceal the yawning chasm that lies between the everyday life-world and the public realm that is ordinarily beyond its purview. This chasm, however, if it is generally unnoticed by virtue of mass media simulation, is by no means abolished. On the contrary, it continually increases where in our contemporary mass societies, a decontextualized and piecemeal presentation of the public sphere commands the representation of its reality. In this contemporary situation, the hold on the reality of a public world that is assimilated to the mass media format has become tenuous. If this has opened the space in which a novel kind of political myth gains a foothold, it also accounts for a parallel, and in many ways antithetical phenomenon that the widening gap between the everyday lifeworld and its reconstitution in media format has called forth. This is the intense contemporary preoccupation with the phenomenon of 'memory.' Indeed, in past decades, it has often been noted that we are witnessing an astonishing growth of interest in memory, conceived not only as a faculty for recalling past experience, but also as a source both of personal identity and of the identity of groups. The preoccupation with memory, and above all with the role of 'collective memory' as a source of group identity, has indeed assumed global proportions. At the same time, the intensity of interest in this phenomenon may well appear to be paradoxical: whereas the term 'collective memory' and the concept to which it corresponds are relatively recent, the social function it fulfills is as old as human communities themselves and the symbolic interaction in which they engage.

According to my interpretation, it is by no means fortuitous that this intense contemporary preoccupation with collective memory, bringing forth a proliferation of commemorations, archives, monuments, and museums, has occurred in a mass social context in which the mass media format provides the most direct source of contact with a public world that has grown increasingly obscure. If indeed, this format, through its distance from the contextual depth of the life world, opens the space for the emergence of contemporary political mythologies, the instrumentalization of these mythologies for political ends does so at the cost of placing in question, not only the veracity of isolated events, but the factual network of the past that, as an interwoven whole, can alone correspond to what we commonly qualify as reality. The resulting incongruity between political mythologies and the reality attested by past facts themselves can only be redressed through a quest for material confirmation of factual vestiges, the active group remembrance of concrete signs of the reality of the public sphere that reside in the material traces of a past heritage. In the final analysis, this quest to identify material traces, and to retain them in memory, permits us to reinforce the precarious ties between individual and small-group experience and the public sphere of political action which has become opaque.

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