Myth and Education: between Sisyphus and leadership

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Abstract

This paper aims to theorize the interplay of the mythic imaginary with education and ideology, focusing on the case of Kosovo. After the Second Wold War, a hundred Albanian-language primary schools were opened. 1970 saw the establishment of the University of Prishtina which has had a great impact not only on educational policy but also on the national political agency. This is how the educational policy came in contact with political myths. After Kosovo's autonomy was abolished in 1991, the Albanian schools and university were closed by the police forces. Education soon took over the mission of the parallel state by being implied in national ideological agencies. This ideological implication continued even after 1999, when an international protectorate was established under UN auspices. Within this political milieu the process of reform has been sketched, a process which has presented reform mainly as a protection from the wrong way, by employing political myths to create tomorrow's leaders.

Introduction

The roots of Kosovo's educational policy were forged under the very rule of the cultural and identity myth, especially during the Second World War when the Minister of Education of Albania, Ernest Koliqi, in 1941, sent a contingent of teachers to Kosovo with the mission of opening schools which might be named *Albanian schools*. However, even during the decade after the Second World War, most of the Albanian adult population was illiterate. A large-scale enrolment occurred by the 1970s. 1970 saw the establishment of the University of Prishtina which has had a great impact not only on the educational policy but also on the political agency. "With the growth of a new class of highly educated Albanians - indeed, a class which greatly exceeded the number of posts available for such personnel in Kosovo's still rudimentary economic system - the ethnic imbalance in some areas of public life was partially corrected" (Malcolm, 1998: 326). This trend was interrupted during the eighties. In 1989/90 the autonomy of Kosovo was abolished. In 1991, the Albanian schools and university were closed by the police forces.

Recently, the new educational myth of the information technology era was employed to replace the old ways of *understanding* the world and life, by offering high-tech alternatives for old ways of feeling and experiencing, knowing and admiring heroes and characters. In a word, the idea of education in Kosovo, by trying to turn itself of necessity into a perpetual search for reform and competences, remains almost indifferent to the senses of human experiences and feelings, memory, character and heroes. The school has been reinvented within the logic of competency as a reformed view of the world, ignoring so many subtle enchanting views that the myth can offer to the human mind.

The opening of the University of Pristina has been the main generator of the rapid growth of educational opportunities in Albanian which has turned the myth of education into a political myth. Moreover, the identification of some features of the mythic imaginary with national enlightenment has distorted the pure identity of myth by turning it into an ideological instrument.

After 1989 the educational, social and political situation for Kosovo Albanians deteriorated rapidly. After removing Kosovo's autonomy, the government of Serbia committed itself to imposing direct rule from Belgrade. The protests and demonstrations appeared simply as an introduction to the next step, the declaration of independence, the creation of the new *parallel state* which was built mainly on the pillars of education, healthcare, and solidarity. The unarmed resistance became the main feature of Kosovo's statehood in the 1990s. The separate systems of education (in Albanian and Serbian), from 1992 to 1998, were maintained at the same time, characterized by different curricula. It was predictable that the national myth would take central place in imagining the nation for both nations, Albanians and Serbs. "Politically, the *parallel* system had (and still has) tremendous symbolic power. For example, school papers were all stamped as being issued by the *Republic of Kosovo*, in open defiance of the Serb authorities. […] This educational system, curriculum included, was relatively successful in raising quality standards" (OECD 2003: 332). It seems odd why, after 1999, the local and international education agencies failed to make the connection with these *relative quality standards* and proclaimed a total reform which gradually became a continual total mess. Is there any explanation based on national mythology implications? Possibly.

Sisyphus and leader

In recent decades, and not only in East European educational cosmology, the mythic imaginary and culture have been reduced to a short register and approach towards metaphors, images, and symbols contained in poems, epics, and long narratives, beyond any other perceptions which could include the mythic imaginary within a complex educational prospect.

Some time ago, Albert Camus, by identifying the absurd with the myth, attributed to the latter a very large semantic and abstinent space turned into interpreting and abstaining power. If the myth of Sisyphus tells us that Sisyphus 'is the hero absurd' (Camus, 1942: 164), educational science has taken the myth itself as an absurd endeavour. Perhaps, out of all *cognitive items*, the myth seems to be one of the most inappropriate elements of the human mind which might be usefully translated into functional educational entities. In a very few cases, myth survived to be educationally attractive and useful. This unfortunate experience of myth, in particular, from the time of the Enlightenment, has experienced different statuses during the twentieth century, from unchallenged literary throne to extreme political instrumentalisations.   While the absurdity of Sisyphus did not come as an act of

denial of life - on the contrary, it was presented as an envisagement of hope - on the other hand, the myth has been classified as a harmful mean for the individual and society and has been blamed for its structural inconveniencies. Moreover, the absurd is explained by myth. If the student over the centuries dwelled on the stereotype that life has no meaning and contains the absurd in itself, the Camusian myth of Sisyphus brings us the other dimension: Life makes sense through the lens of Sisyphus. This is why at the very end of his essay, Camus concludes: *Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux* (Camus 1942: 168). This is an awe-inspiring lesson with regard to the power of myth through educational perspectives and interpretations. In addition, this example embodies some moral narratives and life confessions about the tremendously unpleasant experiences of myth with its political *mise en scènes*.

Unlike the classical educational imaginary (Adler, 1993; Bantock, 1980; Bloom, 1987), qualified as traditional, Leonardo claims that "an important dimension of education is to conserve and pass down the tradition, rather than open it up, lest we stain it. We can dub conservative critics as *conformers"* (2004: 8), by attributing to the tradition the singular role of the archive. Within this conceptual framework, tradition would have unpleasant implications for curriculum building and philosophy of education with no chance of being in touch with the contemporary aims for competencies. Perhaps this is the most *real* picture of the myth in the current philosophy of education.

The last Core Curriculum framework in Kosovo is built precisely on the desired competences for almost everything; "competence for communications/expression, for thinking, for learning, for life, work and environment, for the personal and the citizenry" (MASHT 2012: 12). In fact, as in many European countries, the word *competence* seems to have been reviewed semantically and advanced with the technical associative level of *being able to do something*. In a word, *competence* has been technically and professionally reformatted in order to bring guarantees for a new, successful philosophy of education. By escaping the old-fashioned traditional perspective, coloured with mythic imaginary, the new educational agency is promoting *today* the *school of tomorrow* as a kind of prevention or vaccination, without any sense for the school of yesterday, without any deference for the tradition which is painted as having no credentials to offer anything to any post-modern competences.

To what extent does it make sense to speak of the philosophy of schooling beyond any traditional conception of the school? If school could be arranged conceptually within the concept of tradition as an incremental changing entity, would be possible to add here the notion of competence and to arrange it within some already known learning standard? Consequently, without *conformers* as *formers*, it sounds odd to speak of reforms or reformers.

Ideology and Reform
It is said that "school reform is an ideological event made intelligible through discourse" (Leonardo, 2004: 7). This discourse is irritating and, at best, represents a new sense of humour. By neglecting the supporting forces that school consistency was supposed to generate, by neglecting the fact that reform would always be understandable within the limits of producing changes beyond strong ideological events, the reform discourse became a self-ironic modus within the language. But,

throughout post-communist South-Eastern Europe, it is precisely the urge toward the post-communist *ideological events* that has been turned into a show of reform. The spectacle of reform, dictated by the political agenda of the new economic and political regime, has turned on its head the normal reform process generated by itself as much as by social, economic, and political actors.

The political myth of Reform is still the main agenda of educational and political development in Kosovo. This myth represents the best stand-up live comedy of the tragicomic emptiness of the domestic and international pact to create *leaders for tomorrow*. It is not by accident that such an educational and political approach toward the concept of Reform has been followed by the situation where "the University of Prishtina has faced charges for serious violations of basic norms of academic integrity which not only severely damaged its already vulnerable reputation, but also created serious consequences in its normal functioning" (KFOS, 2014: 14). While the reform is supposed to be a positioned perspective mainly concerning techniques and methodologies, the myth of reform has simply produced anarchy in educational policy (Eşi, 2014: 73-83). This is why, "regardless of efforts to develop state and local standards, new forms of assessment, innovations in technology, or applications of new approaches to teaching and learning, these attempts at educational reform will not succeed without fundamental and heroic changes in the culture, structures, policies, and perceptions of the place we call school" (Brown & Moffett 1999: vii). Thus, despite the enthusiastic radical approaches in curricula, competencies, teaching and learning, "a prime function of mythology has always been to touch the mind and heart in powerful ways that propel the human spirit forward despite the obstacles that pull it back" (Idem. vii).

Today's *schools of leaders* are built for producing professionally trained workers in accordance with the marketplace and the commercial mentality. *To be a leader* became a synonym of techniques and mysteries which would lead everyone along the right path towards becoming a leader. If a "critical reform, like critical education, is the search for *emancipatory conditions for learning*" (Leonardo, 2004: 2), this search would proceed in parallel to the project of ideological critique which is also exposed to ideological projections while "like education, school reform should gravitate toward democracy" (Leonardo 2004: 4).

The new educational myth of informational interchangeable processes has replaced the old mythic effort of *understanding* the world and experiencing it. The old myths survive by showing patience toward the ambition of the technological myth in replacing our feelings and experiences. By trying to convert the inner irrational requests and corporeal, and psychological needs into a show with actors from computer mechatronics, computational and business actors etc., the techno-myth aims at abolishing the sentimental and mental education for the sake of the inner human agendas.
It should pay attention to the fact that "the productive person is now the educated person" (Dunne 2005: 148l) by being turned, this way, into a new prospect of democratic engineered emancipation. To some extent, the education is trying to build its agency as a professional education (Eşi, 2014:131-138; Eşi, 2010: 41-50) more than an *interest without interest* as in golden ages. The distorted relationship with knowledge has come to the point where Albert Camus' warning about scientific education as all-knowing mean on earth has come true. Is this educational agenda becoming a *Wegbereiter* of the new *order of things*, of the new ideology?

To have wisdom in teaching is also to forge a relationship with mythopoetics as "a wide range of ideas embracing the inquiry processes and curriculum practices that confront the dominant rationality paradigm" (Kesson 1999: 88). The attempt to differentiate myth and knowledge lies at the very foundations of modern social epistemology, by pushing the myth towards the status of pure fiction and the story-telling attitude, nurtured by arbitrary fantasies and beliefs. This conception of myth has underestimated the power of mythical fog in the educational process, perception, understanding and interpretation. "For learning by unlearning opens up mythopoetic possibilities for productive forms of confusion in the classroom that do not counter the science of education from outside, but that bring into empathetic inquiry the mythic energy that motivates it from within" (Davison 2008: 61).

If Hirsch's (1987) and Bloom's (1987) model of cultural literacy – where, to some point, the myth should belong as well - threatens the very democratic and pluralist approaches towards education (introduced today in post-conflict societies as the perfect choices for your new century education), the latter threaten educational imaginary by turning it into anarchy caused by the total mess and fragmentation of postmodernism.

The former policy - typical of the entire South-East European region - which has been fully engaged in demystifying and demythologizing the myths by transposing them into new ideological, proletarian myths, propagated as an *absolute truth* of the *new socialist man*, has now advanced into a policy of ignoring the mythical imaginary. At best, myth is mentioned as a kind of rhetorical figure or as a story identified with legend. The former anti-myth designed as a political icon - the socialist *hero with a pickaxe* - has been transposed into the new myth-hero of our era - *the student in front of a computer* with the etiquette written above his head: *we create the leader of tomorrow*. What do we do for our past and present life today? There is no answer.

For instance, a half century ago, within the Albanian cultural arc, an interesting recreating mythic process, driven by political agendas, happened with the old Indo-European myth of the human sacrifice. In school curricula and in classroom teaching practices this subject has been accordingly taught to ideological licentiates. The teacher had to offer a demystifying exegesis and explain the myths according to rational ideological logos. Then, after the fall of *the iron curtain*, some renewed myths merged with recently engineered political myths and were employed as a *tour de force* for both "an explanatory and an identity-building function" (Segesten 2011: 74). It seems tragic that the new political face has been engraved immediately in the new politically forged myths.

Although the myth survived through centuries by being encrypted within different poetic and psychological structures, the politically nurtured myth named as *the myth of the-end-of-myth* has been gradually developed "during the centuries before the Enlightenment in the fertile ground of earlier myths" (Davison 2008: 57). As an insightful provider with suggestions and ideas, the innocent myth unwittingly contaminated the modern ideologies, communism, fascism and nationalism, among others, to such an extent that it has turned their doctrines into particular political myths. In this way, the political mega-myth has been engaged in a severe struggle against

the traditional mythology and mythological perception, against their *primary house*. The school curricula became part of this mega-myth perspective on the *old ones*.

Conclusions

Today it seems obvious that "the Kosovo education system could not absorb some major changes in education (especially in didactics, teaching practices, pedagogy) that have taken place in OECD or some former communist countries of Central Europe (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Romania)" (OECD 2003: 333). The large-scale political engineering made it impossible for Kosovo's educational capacities to absorb or reject, depending on the needs. Unfortunately, "modern methods of pedagogy (for teachers) and active study skills (for students) are badly needed" (Idem: 262). *Badly needed* always means - without imagination.

Recently, the school as institution is trying to imbibe and minimise the concept of teacher. Once upon a time, *school* meant *teacher* and *teacher* meant *school*. "Teachers and curriculum workers are, indeed, myth-makers" (Leonard & Willis, 2008: 2); they bring a symbolic power to the system and philosophy of education.

The mythic mind cannot be converted into reasonable argument. "Imaginal knowing moves the heart, holds the imagination, finds the fit between self-stories, public myths, and the content of cultural knowledge. It is deeply personal, yet open to the universe" (Leonard & Willis, 2008: 3). It is deeply universal, yet open to the personal.

It is no accident that, even in post-conflict Southeast European societies such as Kosovo, "education has been treated as a tool in conflict resolution with millions of dollars being poured into reform programs" (Segesten 2011: 3) and myth played its role. However, in many cases, the myth reigns here as the other side of facts. This is why the ideological myth-making industry in South-eastern Europe, from political authorities to language and history textbooks, appears as a new face of the newly political engineering that has been promoted as a new wave from the late eighties of the last century.

The transformation of the reception of myth, by educational policy under different ideological backgrounds, has implications in turning them into new political *mitoi* in service of large political prospects and ideologies. Very often, even the biblical messianic myths have been modified into new revolutionary and missionary myths. The myth under the socialist realism regime has undergone such a typical revolutionary procedure.

Summa summarum, by being narrative and contemplative at the same time, the myth always remains a dangerous fire; suspicious of being used by educational and political agendas without being decontaminated. But the decontamination of the myth and its recontamination are very often sides of the same coin.

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