Mythopoetic legitimation and the recontextualisation of Europe's foundational myth

Samuel Bennett
Adam Mickiewicz University

Using the example of the European Union's foundational myth that post-war cooperation led to peace, in this paper I attempt to develop both a theory of mythopoetic legitimation and an analytical framework for its analysis. I start from the position that mythopoesis is *a form of legitimation through history* or, more specifically, through selective narratives of history. I utilise Berger and Luckmann's social constructivism to show that myths are deeply sedimented narratives that integrate existing (objectivated) phenomena into a cohesive story. I then propose a framework for critically analysing myths as legitimation strategies. After detailing the EU's origins story, the remainder of the paper operationalises the framework by analysing how the EU's foundational myth is used in three, very different contexts: Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic, and a State of the Union address. In doing so, I argue that the EU has become a prisoner of the past it has mythologised.

Keywords: myth, mythopoesis, narrative, legitimation, European Union, history, social constructivism, European values, argumentation, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Myths are but one type of story that societies tell and retell. They are the oldest form of creating and maintaining societies, whose power lies in their status as stories that are sacred and true. Using the example of the European Union (EU)'s foundational myth that post-war cooperation led to peace, in this paper I attempt to develop both a theory of mythopoetic legitimation and an analytical framework to analyse it.

Legitimation is a process, involving discourse and practice, through which actions and actors are bestowed with legitimacy or marked by their illegitimacy,

https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.21070.ben | Published online: 26 January 2022
Journal of Language and Politics 21:2 (2022), pp. 370–389. ISSN 1569-2159 | E-ISSN 1569-9862

which in turn are based on socially constructed and communicated values and norms. The work of Theo van Leeuwen on legitimation (2008, 2008; van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999) was the initial 'jumping off' point for subsequent critically discursive works on legitimation, and much attention has been paid to authorisation, rationalisation, and moral evaluation. However, in his original work, van Leeuwen devoted comparably few words to mythopoesis (the process of constructing a myth). Possibly as a result of this lack of detail, studies that specifically integrate van Leeuwen's concept of mythopoesis – let alone attempt to parse it more comprehensively – are few and far between. Van Leeuwen explains that mythopoesis is "legitimation conveyed through narratives" (2008, 106) that can be either cautionary or moral tales, whilst his work on legitimation with Wodak a decade earlier (1999) defines mythopoesis as a story with a purpose. Returning to his 2008 work, van Leeuwen quotes Wright (1975, 188) when claiming that "stories may also use symbolic actions…that can nevertheless represent more than one domain of institutionalised social practice and so provide a 'mythical mode of social action," (van Leeuwen 2008, 119). Problematically – from a methodological perspective at least – the cautionary tales and moral tales that van Leeuwen provides as examples are 'fictional' and do not even pretend to be a retelling of something that happened. In their paper in this special issue, Forchtner and Özvatan (2022) write that van Leeuwen's separate treatment of mythopoesis is a case of mistaken 'category conflation', rightly claiming that "it is in fact through narrative that all forms of discursive de/legitimisation unfold". To some extent, then, mythopoesis is 'nowhere' in analyses because it is 'everywhere' in legitimation. To recall one, well-known moral tale, let us at the outset think of mythopoesis as the 'ugly duckling' of van Leeuwen's legitimation schema.

At this early stage, in order to make clear my categories of engagement and bring our understanding of the term into sharper focus, I would like to move mythopoesis in a different direction from van Leeuwen and offer a working definition of it as *a form of legitimation through history* or, more specifically, through narratives of history that are taken as truth and accepted as canonical stories that are the bedrock of social groupings. In Berger and Luckmann's (1966) terms, these stories have been first objectivated and then sedimented. Where I diverge from Berger and Luckmann's work is in my integration of Barthes' (1972) writing on myths and Forchtner's (2016) on narratives of the past – both of which are complementary to the former – to account for how legitimation of institutions rest upon myths and then through offering a framework of analysis of myths that operationalises this theory.

The paper is structured as follows. First, utilising Berger and Luckmann (1966), I argue that myths are second order objectivations that integrate existing objectivated phenomena into a cohesive story. I then propose a two-stage frame-

work for analysing myths. After detailing the EU's origins story, the remainder of the paper operationalises the framework by analysing how the EU's foundational myth is used in three, very different contexts: Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic, and a State of the Union address, in order to show how the EU's narratives are stable across contexts and genres.

2. Mythopoesis as legitimation

Legitimation is a discursive process through which institutions (be they states or corporations) and individual actors attempt to "establish…and cultivate" (Weber 1978, 325) a belief in their audience as to their legitimacy, that is, that their actions are 'right' and that their continued existence is necessary. As van Leeuwen (2008, 105) writes, legitimation answers the questions "'Why should we do this'? or 'Why should we do this in this way?'". As such, we can locate legitimation within a wider strategy of rhetoric, i.e. as a form of persuasive talk.

This acceptance of the 'rightness' or legitimacy of a (non)action or institution rests upon collectively constructed social order that is justified through a series of norms and values (Johnson, Dowd & Ridgeway 2006). An institution's "practical aims" are thus imbued with a "normative dignity" (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 111). These norms and values themselves rest upon a foundation of 'knowledge' (ibid.) of the social order that taken for granted, so that their raison d'etre is left unquestioned, and indeed unquestionable. In other words, institutions are objectivations as they are presented and constructed as real.

It should also not be forgotten that for the actor's activities to be legitimate, the actor themselves has to be legitimate; as Berger and Luckmann write, legitimation is, at base, about maintenance of institutional actors (ibid., 135). But this actor only becomes legitimate through the construction of a particular narrative that has enough affect to appeal to their constituents. The subject cannot be separated from its historical narrative; and if it does become separated (through the passage of time) or if this symbiotic relationship becomes demystified, the subject loses its legitimacy.

The legitimacy of actions and institutions are based upon the internalisation of these objectivations. From here we can see that successful legitimation strategies – those that legitimise an action or institution – are therefore second order objectivations. For Berger and Luckmann (1966, 110) the function of legitimation "is to make objectively available and subjectively plausible the 'first order' objectivations that have been institutionalised". This tallies with Barthes' work on myth as a "second order semiological system" (1972, 107) made up of pre-existing signs that become signifiers of the myth.

Such objectivization can also be understood from the perspective of intertextuality, a process through which an existing sign (or text) is inserted into another (Kristeva 1986, 39). In particular, legitimation is a form of recontextualisation, through which new meanings are produced by the integration of meanings that institutions and processes already possess (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 110; van Leeuwen 2008). More than this though, the recontextualisation of first-order objectivations is *the* discursive strategy underpinning legitimation, and especially mythopoesis, which is the telling of one story in order to tell another. Every time a sign is used as a signifier, we bear witness to a subjective, strategic repurposing of a pre-existing concept marked by its taken-for-grantedness. Their construction, telling and retelling is never arbitrary but rather intersubjectively negotiated.

Understood in this way, myths are partial stories that "transform history into nature" (Barthes 1972, 128). For the consumers of myths, these are sense-making stories that are "valid in their essentials" (Flood 2002, 5). By making relationships, processes and events appear natural, myths are about a desire for closure, coherence and fullness (Forchtner 2016) based upon morality. Events seem real or natural because they are part of a moral order and, as White (1980, 24) points out, they also gain their meaning through being a part of this order. We are thus speaking here of the ideological uses and constructions of myths.[1] Mythopoesis as a discursive strategy is only successful it if references the values and morals of a given community and I follow Forchtner (2016, 22) in arguing that myths aim to moralise and make sense of history-reality. They "structure a society's relationship with time" (Flood 2002, 34) through a prism of that society's pre-existing – that is, already objectivated – values and institutions (which embody the values).

Myths rely heavily on narrative structures, which indicate a before and an after, with events acting as "temporal junctures" (Labov 2006), although, even before a construction of a narrative, there is the pre-construction stage where a decision is made that an event is reportable (ibid., 1) or symbolic. According to White (1980) it is only from the perspective of 'now' that events can be understood as significant; without the narration of events and the continuity that it brings we are left with a chaotic list of events. Historical narratives are constructed post-hoc, the author starting at the end with the resolution and then retrofitting events in the past to conform to the aim of telling the story. The selective, causal placement of events (as objectivations) and their relationship with each other allow meaning to be constructed that is marked by its logical coherence, i.e. the sequence of events appear to be natural (see Forchtner 2016, 21). The continuity or naturalness is only possible though through the careful selection of events; actions that run

1. See Kelsey's work (2020) on the discourse-mythological approach which analyses psycho-discursive narrative constructions in archetypal storytelling

counter to the narrative or do not fit the moral claim will be left out. In so doing, the author (as myth-maker) thus lays a story over a social system of morality that can be easily identified by group members (see also White 1980, 17–18).

Drawing together this section so far, I would like to propose myths as strong communal narratives, that is, narratives that have become intersubjectively sedimented, a process which Berger and Luckmann (1966, 85) describe as follows:

> The experiences that are so retained become sedimented, that is, they congeal in recollection as recognizable and memorable entities…Intersubjective sedimentation also takes place when several individuals share a common biography, experiences of which become incorporated in a common stock of knowledge. Intersubjective sedimentation can be called truly social only when it has been objectivated in a sign system of one kind or another, that is, when the possibility of reiterated objectification of the shared experiences arises. Only then is it likely that these experiences will be transmitted from one generation to the next, and from one collectivity to another.

This social sedimentation of a narrated experience produces an objectivated sign system – a myth.

Myths are a form of intentional interaction that aid the symbolic construction of community (see Cohen 1985) to the extent that communities are only formed when a number of events are narrated as a natural progression of connected elements (Kølvraa 2016). They can thus be said to have an "integrative" function, as well as, of course, subjugative or exclusionary function (Flood 2002, 37) depending on the intentions of the myth-maker(s). There is considerable literature on the role of myths in nation-building, much of which was published in the 1980s and '90s. This includes Anderson's (1983) oft-cited *Imagined Communities*, which proposes that the nation and its political manifestation, the state, have been constructed so that they are seen and experienced as immortal, absolute and concrete. Gellner (1983) has also looked at the constructions of nations through narratives that appear in, inter alia, science, education and national culture, whilst Smith (1986) proposed the 'myth-symbol complex' consisting of myths, symbols, historical memory and key values, a concept later taken up by Billig (1995).

Understood in the above way, myths are vital to the telling of a community's stories, especially those of states and we should be in no doubt that the EU should be treated for the purpose of this paper as a state, or at the very least a proto-state. Recollecting Hegel, White (1980, 16) states that history requires a 'state' as the subject of historical records, a "legal subject" which can serve as "the agent, agency and subject" of mythological narratives. For indeed, the EU has state-like features: a centre of power, elected officials, and symbols (flag, anthem, Europe Day). Additionally, the myths it tells also reference heroes, for example Adenauer,

Churchill, Monet and Schuman as the founding fathers of Europe (Della Sala 2016, 531).[2]

3. Towards a framework for analysing mythopoetic legitimation

Having explained the intention and role of mythopoesis as *a form of legitimation through history*, I would now like to tentatively sketch a framework for how an analysis of mythopoetic legitimation can be operationalised using critical discourse analysis techniques. Following other CDS scholars (Wodak et al. 1999; Krzyżanowski 2010), mine is a two-staged approach, with the first being a mapping of macro topics (in this case myths), subsequently followed by a micro-level analysis of the specific linguistic realisations of the these topics.

As argued above, because we are faced with retellings of stories we are dealing with instances of intertextuality – and in particular recontextualisation (Bernstein 1990; Wodak & Fairclough 2010). In recontextualisation a text (in this case, a story) is taken out of its original context and relocated in the mythological legitimation schema. Recontextualisation "regulates the new ideological positioning of the text" (Bernstein 1990, 53) and in doing so, the text is provided with a new function (Reisigl & Wodak 2001, 164). With the text being relocated and recontextualised, so too are the discourses that are contained within it (Wodak & Fairclough 2010). To take one example, the use of a speech about the Shoah in making a case against Trump's policy on family separation would not just entail the recontextualisation of the text (speech) into another story, but also moves a discourse of genocide to one of immigration control. In Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) terms, the discourse is colonised and appropriated through this recontextualisation. Therefore, in the first, macro stage of analysis of mythopoetic legitimation strategies, our task is to unpick the stories. This is itself a two-fold process, consisting first of trying to ascertain the historical events (as objectivations) that are included in the narrative, and second laying out the causal "event-lesson-future behaviour" (Forchtner 2016, 19) narrative structure of how these events are sequentially connected, i.e. what myth are these myths being used to tell? The aim here is to ascertain how these narratives have been mobilised, by whom, in which contexts, for which legitimatory purposes. Particular attention should be paid here to partial selection of historical events and the silences in both the first-order events and the second-order,

2. Interestingly, the inclusion, and success of this move rests upon the partial telling of these figures' own histories, actions and values, especially Churchill.

mythopoetic narrative plot (Bennett 2021).[3] This might include analysis of which events and actors are not present in the narrative and a consideration of how their presence might potentially disrupt the narrative. For this, a good understanding of competing narratives and knowledge of other historical events is required. It should also be noted that myths do not have to be told in their entirety in order to have their desired aim (Flood 2002). Lexical items, especially the first order sign/second-order signifier may often be symbolic enough of the more complex myth (Kranert 2018, 6), a process known as 'indexicality'.

The second stage of the analysis is concerned with decoding 'how' these myths are fashioned at the micro-linguistic in order to demystify their construction as objectivations. At this stage, an analysis of actors and processes should be undertaken. It also important to examine the different nominative and predicative strategies (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) used in the story. Myths include heroes and villains, so how are these actors rendered in the text? One actor that should be taken into is the speaker/narrator and how they construct themselves and those for whom they speak. Is the speaker an individual or do they represent a 'we'-'us'? If so who is 'us', and does this change through the course of the narrative? Do they place themselves inside or outside of the story? Are they passive or active, subjects or objects, victims or heroes? What/who is the deictic centre?

Next, given their role as a method of persuasion and, as mentioned above as form at legitimising (non)action through fear, myths attempt to elicit an emotional response through their "vivid, extravagant, often grandiose" content (Flood 2002, 36). As such, the use of hyperbole might be looked for, as well as metaphors and strong modality, which can be expressed through, amongst others, modal verbs in different tenses ('must', 'had to') and adverbs ('the truth always wins', 'never again!').

Finally, myths are complex discursive formations and it is neither easy, nor desirable, to separate out mythopoesis from other types of legitimation. Mythopoetic constructions are successful because they tell a story that conforms to the values of the receivers of the text and so moral evaluation of events and processes as a legitimation strategy should be accounted for (van Leeuwen 2008). Similarly, and as noted previously, narratives are only successful if they appear to be logical. We can therefore also analyse texts for examples of instrumental rationality (reference to goals, uses, results) and theoretical rationality (reference to the natural order of things) as ways of legitimising action (ibid.), especially the future behaviour that is shaped around the lesson learned from the myth. Lastly, the narrator may attempt to legitimise future behaviour they suggest through their self-

3. On silences and absences in discourse, see Schröter and Taylor's excellent edited volume *Exploring Silence and Absence in Discourse: Empirical Approaches* (2018)

construction as authorities or experts (ibid., 107–109). In a nod towards the later sections of the paper, to sum up this section I have proposed a two-stage analytical framework for investigating mythological legitimation strategies which involves a macro-level analysis of narrative structures and a micro-level analysis of how these are constructed as the sentence and clause and word level.

4. Europe's foundational myth

One of the key strategies deployed by the EU (and before it, the European Economic Community) to legitimise its existence and actions was that of mythical narrations of the continent's past in an attempt to tell a coherent story about the block. The EU's 'origins story', its etiological myth, is that the European cooperation from the 1950s onwards was a departure from its previous history, in particular the wars of the twentieth century. Returning to Labov's (2006) narrative work, the Second World War is thus *the* reportable event for Europe. In this myth the war was a crisis point, one which marked the end of the old state-centric European order and the birth of a new Europe (Della Sala 2016, 533). In this way, the EU's story is anti-nationalistic (Beck 2003), and for some believers in a federal Europe even an anti-national one.

Part of this myth is a claim of common experience of suffering, with the Holocaust being constructed as a European tragedy. Linked to this, it is also a redemptive story for the countries, especially Germany, constructed as guilty for bringing the suffering (Della Sala 2016, 533). Gardner Feldman (1999, 68) argues that there were two drivers of reconciliation: Forgiveness and rapprochement. In the first, there is a moral imperative for reconciliation between societies and thus overcoming the past, whilst in the second, there are (economic) incentives for amity. The common understanding is that the rapprochement elements were important as they were the practical measures that allowed for subsequent reconciliation of populations. In this myth, co-operation and union are rational decisions, the natural outcome of past events and processes (Della Sala 2010). However, in the myths that Europe told and continues to tell, it is the "moral drama" of the early-mid twentieth century that is the valid reason for the EU, rather than economic integration, at least in the first instance (Kølvraa 2016, 173).

As Kølvraa (ibid.) rightly notes, though, this foundation myth conveniently ignores other parts of history, for example the Cold War, as well as the fact that some states had different reasons for joining. But beyond this, it also ignores historical co-operation between European nations and populations, for example pan-European political movements (socialism), academic conferences and associations. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that the EU's foundational myth has

also needed to co-exist with pre-existing national ones (Della Sala 2010, 13) and therefore, in their mythopoetic attempts those who represent Europe have to be particularly careful and selective in what events they reference, so that the story does not contradict national ones and thus weaken attachment to it by still generally nation-rooted citizens.

As well as the foundational myth, Della Sala (2016) has identified what he terms 'derivative myths' that are variations or branches of the foundational one. However, it might be better to see these as secondary or subsequent, rather than derivative. That is, they are not necessarily linked to the foundational one, but the rather the EU's subsequent discourses have been driven by different legitimacy logics which needed to mobilise different narratives.[4] Whilst these secondary myths are all employed to lesser and greater extents in EU's discursive legitimation of its actions, it is the foundational myth that is employed to bolster the case for the bloc's continued existence. For reasons of space and relevancy, I will not detail these secondary myths, but suffice to say they include that of: human rights (Della Sala 2016) – stemming in part from the common experience of the Holocaust ; and European exceptionalism – a common European space, ancient history, the enlightenment, the renaissance, modernity (ibid.). These two combined form yet another second-order myth of Europe: as a normative power that attempts to promote human rights and other values of democracy, rule of law and freedom around the world, and especially to its near neighbours in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and North Africa. In this myth, the EU are saviours of others; bringers of peace and democracy. Della Sala (2016, 531) has called this the EU's "missionary role".

5. Analysing the EU's mythopoetic legitimation

As stated in the introduction, this article is primarily a theoretical and methodological contribution. For this reason material for the analytical section is not guided by a systematic collection of data, but has instead been chosen indicatively. All of the excerpts come from speeches made by different EU actors at different points throughout the EU's 'long-decade' of crisis, 2008 to 2021.

For a myth to be socially agreed upon (that is, internalised and sedimented) and take on its symbolic value, narratives need to make sense to individuals under specific historical, political and social circumstances, including, especially crisis points. The first two periods chosen are Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic.

4. Many thanks to Franco Zappettini for introducing me to this understanding of the second-order myths when commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

These are quite clear examples of legitimacy crises for the EU. Brexit was seen as a challenge to the bloc's democratic and operational legitimacy which manifested in symbolic myths of sovereignty and independence (Bennett 2019a; Zappettini this issue, 2022), whilst the coronavirus crisis has also brought the EU's legitimacy into sharp focus through challenging its ability to provide leadership and unity, first over border controls and later, vaccine rollout.[5] By contrast, the third speech is taken from 2013, which whilst not a year of crisis for Europe, was nonetheless an eventful one – the bloc was in the midst of the bailout programme for six of its member states, there were upheavals in its neighbourhood (conflict in Syria, which would lead to the subsequent refugee crisis; the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine), and Croatia became the 28th member state, meaning that the EU was at its largest territorial extent. In choosing to concentrate on these three periods, I do not wish to silence the other myths and narratives that might have been used during the same period. To the contrary, they have been chosen specifically as indicative examples to show how the EU's foundational myth has been deployed by key EU actors in a number of different situations; that is, to show the foundational myths *recontextualising potential*.

Excerpt (1) comes from a speech by Donald Tusk, the then President of the European Council, following a meeting with the Danish Prime Minister. The speech occurred a month before the Brexit referendum and the focus of this portion of the speech is a response to the strong rhetoric of Boris Johnson (a key character in the 'Leave' campaign) the previous day.

(1) …when I hear the EU being compared to the plans and projects of Adolf Hitler I cannot remain silent. Such absurd arguments should be completely ignored if they hadn't been formulated by one of the most influential politicians of the ruling party. Boris Johnson crossed the boundaries of a rational discourse, demonstrating political amnesia. In some sense, he illustrated a state of minds and emotions of many Europeans, not only from the UK. In no way, however, can this be an excuse for this dangerous blackout.
The EU may be blamed for many things, but it still remains the most effective firewall against […] conflicts among the nations of Europe […] the only alternative […] is political chaos, the return to national egoisms and […] the triumph of antidemocratic tendencies [leading] to history repeating itself.[6, 7]

5. For state-level challenges, see Filardo-Llamas & Perales (Spain), and Szabó & Szabó (Hungary) in this issue.

6. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/05/17/tusk-meeting-denmark-prime-minister-rasmussen-copenhagen/ Accessed 21.04.2021

7. See Bennett (2019b) for a previous analysis of this excerpt with regard to EU values during the Brexit campaign.

In the first stage of analysis, the goal is to identify the story being told and the myths used to tell it. The story being told here aims to reaffirm the need for European cooperation in the face of challenges. It is a future-oriented cautionary tale about the dangers of forgetting the history of the continent. As such, the story being used is that of the processes and norms that led to the Second World War. The war itself is never explicitly mentioned but it looms large in the narrative regardless. The recontextual move is the placement of the war into a story about criticisms of the EU.

Moving to the second stage of the analysis, Tusk places himself personally within his speech. With the use of the personal pronoun 'I' in 'I cannot remain silent' he constructs his gloss of Johnson's likening the EU to the projects of Hitler as an affront so serious that he is forced to intervene and defend the good name of the bloc. Johnson's forgetting of history is metaphorically constructed twice as a health affliction, first as a longer-term condition 'amnesia' and later as a shorter loss of consciousness 'blackout'. Johnson's words are also implicitly rendered as irrational by 'crossing the boundaries of rational discourse'. Furthermore, by stating that Johnson represented many EU citizens thoughts and feeling in his words, he places Brexit within a wider tendency of anti-Europeanism, which is thus also constructed anaphorically and cataphorically as a sickness that must be treated, lest it attack the body (politic). Moving through the narrative, the EU is designated as a firewall, which can be read metaphorically in two ways, firstly as a break against an encroaching fire or, in a more modern way, it could be seen as a way of stopping a virus from infecting a computer. Understood thus, the EU becomes a specially written piece of software to defend against attacks by malware. Later in the same sentence, the EU is framed not just as a saviour, but *the only* saviour of Europe – a future of chaos is the threat on the horizon. Lastly, 'history', an abstract noun, is activated and given agency. Perpetrators of the past chaos are removed from the story and replaced by history as the existential threat.

The second context I want to look at is the EU's initial response to the coronavirus pandemic. This speech was delivered by Ursula von der Leyen (the current President of the Commission) to the European Parliament during the plenary session the European coordinated response to the COVID-19 outbreak (Excerpt 2). As a genre, it is a reactive, issue-based political speech by a leader that also acts as an opening speech of a parliamentary discussion. It thus sets out the speaker's position on the pandemic and as the highest representative, presumably the EU's (collective) position, too.

(2) A Europe that works at top speed when it feels as though the whole world has pressed pause. A Europe that is there for its people and Member States when they need it most. A Europe that has empathy and puts compassion above all else. A Europe that in times of need is both resilient and selfless.

> That is the Europe I want.
> It is precisely this Europe that our founding fathers and mothers dreamt of amid the ashes of the Second World War. When they created this Union of people and nations, they were painfully aware of what egotism and overblown nationalism could lead to. Their goal was to forge an alliance in which mutual trust grows into common strength. And it was from their great idea that within decades a unique community of freedom and peace – our European Union – arose.
> Today, in the face of our invisible enemy, these fundamental values of our Union are being put to the test. We must all be able to rely on one another. And we must all pull each other through these tough times.[8]

Von der Leyen starts by outlining a vision of how Europe should look, employing a triple repetition of 'Europe' for rhetorical effectiveness. As the myth-speaker she is establishing a utopian, or at the very least normative, vision of the future. The vision is marked as yet to be realised by the use of the verb 'want', in 'that is the Europe I want', which implies a desire for something that is not yet present or available. In doing so, the same claim also includes the presupposition that this 'Europe' currently does not exist. Moving back one level of analysis to the macro narrative, this part of the speech recontextualises the European founding myth into a call for unity to deal with the pandemic. In the middle paragraph we are offered the another telling of the foundational myth: In the event→lesson→future behaviour schema we have 'second world war' as the event, 'mutual trust' leading to 'freedom and peace' as the lesson, and 'only by working together can we tackle the pandemic' as the lesson. The similarities with Tusk's speech are striking; where Tusk uses 'national egoisms', von der Leyen speaks of 'egotism and overblown nationalism'. Von der Leyen also indexicalises the second world war, via the metonymic 'ashes'. No exact details need to be given as it is presumed at the audience know what she is alluding to with the metonym,

However, of more interest here, are subtle differences in this retelling of the story. With the foregrounding of 'mutual trust' as the lesson that was taken from the war von der Leyen I would suggest that von der Leyen is attempting to show the need for trust in the EU by member states (as well as between member-states and, possibly the public) in handling the pandemic, for which it came under considerable fire, not least for vaccine roll-out and border closures. If this reading is correct, then it indicates a clear attempt to respond to internal challenges to the EU's legitimacy. Moving on, in von der Leyen's retelling there is another notable addition, that of 'founding mothers'. Returning to the topic of silences

8. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_532. Accessed 14 April 2021.

in discourse and in myths, the archetypal foundational myth speaks only of the founding fathers of Europe, which ignores female actors such as Simone Weil and Sofia Corradi, amongst others (Di Nonno 2019). Lastly, in the final paragraph, she uses a common DISEASE IS AN ENEMY metaphor, which allows us to 'visualise' the disease (enemies), despite them being invisible – i.e. we are more accustomed to images of war than we are disease. The metaphor also foregrounds and presents the virus as threatening the values enumerated earlier in the speech, using 'our invisible enemy' to refer to coronavirus, 'we' (in this case audience of the plenary – MEPs and other EU actors) become mobilised as soldiers, with von der Leyen as a commander in chief. As Musu (2020) argues, through this metaphorisation of a pandemic "politicians [can] call for obedience", which can be noted in the rhetorical repetition of 'we must all' indicating strong normative modality.[9]

The final instance of the foundational myth that I would like to analyse is taken from Jose Manuel Barroso's State of the Union Speech in 2013. EU State of the Union speeches were instituted in 2010 by the Lisbon Treaty in a move to make the EU more democratic and transparent. They are also common, regular parts of many states' annual political cycle (the US state of the Union, the UK opening of Parliament, etc.) and so provide the EU with yet another state-like feature. It is therefore a somewhat different genre of speech to that of either Tusk's or von der Leyen's in that it is a formal, planned part of a (proto-)state's operations, rather than an issue-specific speech reacting to an event. It thus provides a different context to the employment of the foundational myth. The democratic role of State of the Union speeches is to summarise the previous year's activities and establish plans for the coming year, but as will be seen, in this speech, the foundational myth is used as a rhetorical device to draw disparate phenomena together and provide meaning to them.

(3) And does everyone still realise how enlargement has been a success in terms of healing history's deep scars, establishing democracies where no one had thought it possible? How neighbourhood policy was and still is the best way to provide security and prosperity in regions of vital importance for Europe? Where would we be without all of this?
...
And does everyone still remember just how much Europe has suffered from its wars during the last century, and how European integration was the valid answer?
Next year, it will be one century after the start of the First World War. A war that tore Europe apart, from Sarajevo to the Somme. We must never take

9. I would like to thank Magdalena Zabielska and Laura Filardo-Llamas for their assistance with deciphering this metaphor. See also Filardo-Llamas (forthcoming).

> peace for granted. We need to recall that it is because of Europe that former enemies now sit around the same table and work together. It is only because they were offered a European perspective that now even Serbia and Kosovo come to an agreement, under mediation of the EU.
> Last year's Nobel Peace Prize reminded us of that historic achievement: that Europe is a project of peace.
> We should be more aware of it ourselves. Sometimes I think we should not be ashamed to be proud. Not arrogant. But more proud. We should look towards the future, but with a wisdom we gained from the past.
> Let me say this to all those who rejoice in Europe's difficulties and who want to roll back our integration and go back to isolation: the pre-integrated Europe of the divisions, the war, the trenches, is not what people desire and deserve. The European continent has never in its history known such a long period of peace as since the creation of the European Community. It is our duty to preserve it and deepen it.
> Honourable members,
> It is precisely with our values that we address the unbearable situation in Syria, which has tested, over the last months, the world's conscience so severely.[10]

At the start of the excerpt, Barroso uses a series of rhetorical questions based on presuppositions, i.e. that enlargement has healed scars and that the neighbourhood policy has provided 'security and prosperity'. Rhetorical questions here set out the speaker's opinion – in this case of the importance of the EU – and are starting proposals to an argument (van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans 2007). The third rhetorical question, 'where would we be without all of this?' is subsequently answered with the introduction of the foundational myth via a fourth rhetorical question, about memory 'And does everyone still remember just how much Europe has suffered from its wars during the last century, and how European integration was the valid answer?' The myth is then developed in the next paragraph.

At first reading, the foundational myth is present and complete: Europe brought peace, which is visible in the schema: *war→peace should not be taken for granted→cooperation*. However, upon closer reading, there is a major difference: the war referred to is the First World War, not the second, via the metonymic indexical 'Somme'. This alliterative metnonym is also temporal (from one important event – the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand – to another; the most famous battle of the war) and geographical, to indicate the extent of the experiences. So we have dual recontextualisating processes. In the first, the foun-

10. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_13_684. Accessed 21.04.2021

dational myth is decontextualized from its common historical roots and recontextualised into the context of a similar event that occurred before, presumably done so that it would with forthcoming centenary commemorations starting in 2014. In the second, as with Excerpts (1) and (2), this new-old story is strategically recontextualised within the speech. That is, it provides post-hoc legitimation of what came before and pre-legitimation (Krzyżanowski 2014) of future actions. Through this double recontextualisation the history of European cooperation is lengthened – and therefore presumably more legitimate – but to do this requires erasure of the Second World War in Barroso's narrative. In the same passage, we also find the speaker using the metonym 'Europe' rather than the EU in the phrase 'it is because of Europe'. This can be read in two ways. In the first, it adds coherence to the myth: If Barroso had used 'the EU' it would have logically dovetailed with WWI. Alternatively, Europe is a metonym for the EU. In this case, Europe does not exist before the EU (the EU *is* Europe) and, peace was not possible without the EU.

From here, European cooperation is then linked to the bloc's work in the Western Balkans, in which the second-order myth of European exceptionalism and bringer of peace is used to prove the efficacy of the EU's activities and thus legitimise those actions. However, the story ignores EU state's previous, and ongoing roles in Kosovo-Serbia relations, including continued non-recognition of the former by Greece, Spain and Romania and the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999. This professional amnesia deletes EU states as belligerent actors and interested parties from the narrative, and in doing so, helps to place them as saviours instead.

The function of the foundational myth as a nexus point providing meaning to past and future actions continues when Barroso speaks about the EU being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize the previous year, which is an example of legitimation via external authority (van Leeuwen 2008). This sets up the normative claim that history is a teacher "We should look towards the future, but with a wisdom we gained from the past", which is then followed by another retelling of the foundational myth to justify deepening integration. Lastly, in yet another move between the past and the future, Barroso segues to Syria: 'It is precisely with our values' reads initially as exophoric reference to something outside of the text; other than 'peace', the previous six paragraphs make no mention of values and so the opening clause of the paragraph, at a purely grammatical level, lacks cohesion. However, the foundational myth is so prevalent in EU speeches and has been spoken so many times, that it implicitly includes a set of values (e.g. peace democracy, human rights, rule of law etc.). With this contextual knowledge, crucially shared by the audience in the European Parliament, the clause is actually an anaphoric reference.

6. Conclusion: The EU's legitimatory odyssey

In the above sections I have proposed a reading of how mythopoetic legitimation might be understood and then operationalised from a discourse-analytical perspective, and have expounded on this using examples from EU leaders. In the brief space remaining I would like to forward some conclusions about both parts of the paper. Myths have been shown to be important in how communities legitimise both their existence and their actions. Drilling down though, two points are worth highlighting. At the macro-level, recontextualisation has been shown to be a key analytical category. It is important to ascertain what pre-existing myth (sedimented narrative) is being used in a given context and how it works to (de)legitimise an action. That is, which story is used to tell another story. At the micro-level it is possible for the content of the myth (lexical and grammatical choice) to vary whilst the overall event→lesson→future behaviour schema remains intact. The micro-level thus enables the macro-level recontextualisation to be successful.

The paper does not claim to offer a broad analysis of the EU's mythmaking. Rather, I have used the EU's foundational myth to elaborate a model for mythopoetic analysis. The examples were chosen *precisely because* they were indicative examples. Given this, there are a number avenues for future research that could be addressed. For example, what I have not done in this paper is look at how other European myths have been used, in what circumstances, by whom and for what purposes. Such research would be a logical next step, as would a wider survey of how the foundation myth is used in non-institutional settings, especially those directed to citizens.

Drawing now on the analysis, I have attempted to show that the experiences of war and the 'gains' made by the subsequent peace are recontextualised different contexts as both a legitimation strategy for maintaining the EU, and to discursively construct the EU as a normative *ne plus ultra*. The EU has become a prisoner of the past it has mythologised. As Eder (2006) correctly states, the EU is a community of memory. However, as the memory of the war fades so too does the resonance of the horrors, and thus the affective potential of the foundational myth is diminished. It is also a strongly sedimented narrative for only a limited audience, most notably for a certain generation of EU-level actors. It can be, then, seen as an elite myth. Kølvraa (2016, 175) makes a convincing case that the peace is now so taken for granted that the risk of war is not seen as realistic and "'never again' has apparently for some time been a mundane – if not banal – statement". To borrow from another fairy tale, has the EU not become somewhat of a boy who cried wolf?

The same foundational myth is used in very different circumstances: Brexit (an internal threat to its legitimacy) Covid (an external 'enemy' that threatens internal cohesion, and an annual speech, in which it is used to legitimise action in the past and future. It is thus a flexible, malleable story, used in all and every circumstance and to respond to any crisis. It is an automatic, almost a Pavlovian response to a problem, any problem. To some extent then we can see the EU's long-decade of crisis not just as a crisis of legitimacy, but as a crisis of myth. The EU's origin's story as a justification for its continued existence has been challenged, not just events, but by populist movements and Euro-alternative ones alike. All of this suggests an inability by the EU to find new, affective narratives that are attractive to its citizens.

Funding

Open Access for this article was funded by Adam Mickiewicz University's ID-UB Open Access programme. Grant number: 011/08/POB5/0057

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Bernhard Forchtner and Franco Zappettini for their comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

References

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: The Noonday Press.

Beck, Ulrich. 2003. 'Understanding the Real Europe'. *Dissent*, 2003.

Bennett, Samuel. 2019a. 'Standing up for "Real People": UKIP, the Brexit, and Online Discursive Strategies on Twitter'. In *Imagining the Peoples of Europe: : Populist Discourses across the Political Spectrum*, edited by Jan Zienkowski and Ruth Breeze, 230–56. DAPSAC. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/dapsac.83.10ben

Bennett, Samuel. 2019b. 'Values as Tools of Legitimation in EU and UK Brexit Discourses'. In *Discourses of Brexit*, edited by Veronika Koller, Susanne Kopf, and Marlene Miglbauer, 17–32. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351041867-2

Bennett, Samuel. 2021. '"Britain Has Always Been a Safe Haven": Mythopoetic Legitimation in UK Immigration Policy'. Plenary Lecture presented at the Approaches to Migration, Language & Identity, University of Sussex, June 9.

Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Penguin.

Bernstein, Basil. 1990. *The Social Construction of Pedagogic Discourse: Class, Codes, and Control*. Vol. IV. London: Routledge.

Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: SAGE.

Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Norman Fairclough. 1999. *Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Cohen, Anthony. 1985. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203323373

Della Sala, Vincent. 2010. 'Political Myth, Mythology and the European Union'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 48 (1): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2009.02039.x

Della Sala, Vincent. 2016. 'Europe's Odyssey?: Political Myth and the European Union'. *Nations and Nationalism* 22 (3): 524–41. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12159

Di Nonno, Maria. 2019. 'The Founding Mothers of Europe: The Role of Simone Veil and Sofia Corradi in Defence of the European'. In *Peace and European Values as a Potential Model for Integration and Progress in a Global World*, edited by Jesus Baigorri and Elvert Jurgen. Vienna: Peter Lang. https://doi.org/10.3726/b16003

Eder, Klaus. 2006. 'Europe's Borders: The Narrative Construction of the Boundaries of Europe'. *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2): 255–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431006063345

Filardo-Llamas, Laura. Forthcoming. 'From the War on Covid-19 to Political Wars: Metaphor and Polarization in the Early Stages of the 2020 Pandemic'. In *Discursive Approaches to Socio-Political Polarization and Conflict*, edited by Laura Filardo-Llamas, Esperanza Morales-Lopez, and Alan Floyd. London: Routledge.

Filardo-Llamas, Laura, and Cristina Perales-García. 2022. "Widening the North/South Divide? Representations of the Role of the EU During the Covid-19 Crisis in Spanish Media. A Case Study." *Journal of Language and Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.21065.fil

Flood, Christopher. 2002. *Political Myth*. New York: Routledge.

Forchtner, Bernhard. 2016. *Lessons From the Past?: Memory, Narrativity and Subjectivity*. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-48322-5

Forchtner, Bernhard, and Özgür Özvatan. 2022. "De/Legitimising Europe Through the Performance of Crises: The Far-Right Alternative for Germany on "Climate Hysteria" and "Corona Hysteria."" *Journal of Language and Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.21064.for

Gardner Feldman, Lily. 1999. 'Reconciliation and Legitimacy: Foreign Relations and Enlargement of the European Union'. In *Legitimacy and the European Union*, edited by Thomas Banchoff and Mitchell Smith, 67–85. London: Routledge.

Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Johnson, Cathryn, Timothy J. Dowd, and Cecilia L. Ridgeway. 2006. 'Legitimacy as a Social Process'. *Annual Review of Sociology* 32 (1): 53–78. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123101

Kelsey, Darren. 2020. 'Psycho-Discursive Constructions of Narrative in Archetypal Storytelling: A Discourse-Mythological Approach'. *Critical Discourse Studies*, November, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2020.1802766

Kølvraa, Christoffer. 2016. 'European Fantasies: On the EU's Political Myths and the Affective Potential of Utopian Imaginaries for European Identity'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54 (1): 169–84. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12325

Kranert, Michael. 2018. 'Political Myth as a Legitimation Strategy: The Case of the Golden Age Myth in the Discourses of the Third Way'. *Journal of Language and Politics*. John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.17059.kra

Kristeva, Julia. 1986. *The Kristeva Reader*. Edited by Toril Moi. Columbia University Press.

Krzyżanowski, Michal. 2010. *The Discursive Construction of European Identities: A Multi-Level Approach to Discourse and Identity in the Transforming European Union*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Krzyżanowski, Michał. 2014. 'Values, Imaginaries and Templates of Journalistic Practice: A Critical Discourse Analysis'. *Social Semiotics* 24 (3): 345–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2014.930607

Labov, William. 2006. 'Narrative Pre-Construction.' *Narrative Inquiry* 16 (1): 37–45. https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.16.1.07lab

Musu, Costanza. 2020. 'War Metaphors Used for COVID-19 Are Compelling but Also Dangerous'. *The Conversation* (blog). 8 April 2020. https://theconversation.com/war-metaphors-used-for-covid-19-are-compelling-but-also-dangerous-135406

Reisigl, Martin, and Ruth Wodak. 2001. *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism*. London: Routledge.

Schröter, Melani, and Charlotte Taylor. 2018. *Exploring Silence and Absence in Discourse : Empirical Approaches*. Postdisciplinary Studies in Discourse. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64580-3

Smith, Anthony D. 1986. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Reprinted. Blackwell Publishers.

Szabó, Lilla, and Gabriella Szabó. 2022. 'Attack of the critics: Metaphorical delegitimisation in Viktor Orban's discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic'. *Journal of Language and Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.21068.sza

Van Eemeren, Frans, Peter Houtlosser, and A. Francisca Snoeck Henkemans. 2007. *Argumentative Indicators in Discourse : A Pragma-Dialectical Study*. Argumentation Library: Vol. 12. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6244-5

Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2008. *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195323306.001.0001

Van Leeuwen, Theo, and Ruth Wodak. 1999. 'Legitimizing Immigration Control: A Discourse-Historical Analysis'. *Discourse Studies* 1 (1): 83–118. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445699001001005

Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California

Wodak, Ruth, and Norman Fairclough. 2010. 'Recontextualizing European Higher Education Policies: The Cases of Austria and Romania'. *Critical Discourse Studies* 7 (1): 19–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900903453922

Wodak, Ruth, Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Reisigl, Ruth Rodger, and Karin Liebhart. 1999. *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

White, Hayden. 1980. 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality'. *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1): 5–27. https://doi.org/10.1086/448086

Wright, Will. 1975. *Sixguns and Society A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520340787

Zappettini, Franco. 2022. 'Taking the Left Way out of Europe: The Labour Party and the Ideological Polysemy of Brexit'. *Journal of Language and Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.21069.zap

Address for correspondence

Samuel Bennett
Faculty of English
Kolegium Heliodora Święcickiego
Adam Mickiewicz University
ul. Grunwaldzka 6
60-780 Poznań
Poland

sbennett@amu.edu.pl

Biographical notes

Samuel Bennett is Assistant Professor at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland. His research centres around discursive constructions of migrant integration, (non)belonging and exclusion, and colonialism. He is the author of *Constructions of Migrant Integration in British Public Discourse* (Bloomsbury 2018) and in recent years has also published extensively on Brexit and the UK's relationship with the European Union.

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3610-5261

Publication history

Date received: 28 April 2021
Date accepted: 30 October 2021
Published online: 26 January 2022