Myths and Traditions of Central European University Culture

Lukáš Fasora — Jiří Hanuš

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Lukáš Fasora – Jiří Hanuš

Reviewers: Jiří Štaif (Charles University)
             Petr Svobodný (Institute of the History and Archive of Charles University)

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MYTHS AND TRADITIONS OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY CULTURE (AN INTRODUCTION FOR INTERNATIONAL READERS)

In this brief introduction we would like to outline the main ideas which led us to writing this publication and the main thematic elements which we discussed with our academic colleagues from various Czech and international higher-education establishments.

The first thing to mention is that one of the recurring concepts was the fact that universities are a special kind of *institution*. Some of them date back to the Middle Ages – therefore, important questions regarding their historical continuity have to be considered. At present they are linked to three organizational groups – the church, the state and the city. At the same time, they are related to power and education, which power and social status often co-create and define. They create a unique system, containing a social role and a system of transferred symbols and traditions. Universities have probably gained in importance in the modern age and represent a path which more and more people embark on. And as historians we were naturally interested in the issue of how universities as a specific institution "bring up" their supporters, how they look after their legacy, and how specialist interests and social trends intersect within them. As part of the history of the institution we were also interested in how universities differ amongst each other, how reciprocal relationships develop and how the university operates within its own specific region.

It took some time before we agreed on the main interpretational key to use to describe historical events and trends as well as current issues. When laying the groundwork we decided on the terms "myths" and "traditions" in order to avoid older concepts concerning Central European universities, which were mainly associated with celebrating the university's existence, with a specific ideology or with an obviously nationalist story. Therefore, we chose a more general interpreta-

tional scheme which, we believe, allowed us to examine more thoroughly specific university structures which have been handed down and are occasionally reflected upon. Our interest in myths can be explained using the example of the so-called *founding myth*. Universities, like states, churches, or nations in the modern era, have their own founding myths which do not necessarily have to be religious in character, but are often rooted in a kind of basic anthropological need to strengthen the institution, unify it and maintain its legacy. For our university in Brno, this founding myth was the fifty-year struggle over its establishment, involving the "clash between Czechs and Germans", intervention by important figures including the politician and later president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš G. Masaryk, and lastly, the republican and secular models which connected the university to the establishment of the new democratic state (Masaryk University was founded some three months after an independent Czechoslovakia was declared!). It is very interesting for us how universities, and not only our own, use these founding myths, how they emphasize specific parts of them and how they create sub-institutions to cultivate the "university's memory". Another example might be the myth in the form of a large *metanarrative* such as the Marxist-Leninist story of the class struggle, of the "Battle of Armageddon of the world proletarian revolution followed by a golden era of jubilation in a classless society" (Stanislav Komárek), a story which influenced thousands of academics in the 20th century. In relation to this we felt there was enormous significance in the symbolic behaviour of universities and their celebrations, as through them we can see how a university has existed, how it presents itself to the public and how it demonstrates its usefulness to society.

From the outset we realized that we would require more than a national framework, despite the fact that the Czech Republic offers a variety of universities for comparative purposes: medieval, modern and those established as recently as after 1989; Metropolitan universities and regional ones, universities with a more general focus and those with particular specializations, etc. However, we had greater ambitions – for several reasons we wanted to take a look at universities within Central Europe. After the collapse of the Soviet empire it would seem that the *Central European region* is reawakening from a slumber of several decades and is starting to regain its cultural as well as political identity. Central Europe once more makes political "sense", which does not mean that there are not significant differences between the countries of Central Europe. It is noteworthy that several of the universities were established within the Austrian empire which shaped Central European state unity over a long period, and thus offers a similar, comparable environment. This is why we have occasionally focused on Slovakia, Poland, Germany and Austria. Naturally, there were also instances when we had to take into account the global context, as Central European universities are now part of an international network consisting of universities from Western Europe, America and even Asia. Another key word in our book is *network* because we are aware of

the fact that the interdependence of science and education has always been a part of university life – as long as obstacles, such as ideological ones, were not in its path. The term *network* also relates to a specific type of academic and formative communication which is promoted at universities.

The identity of the Central European university has also been shaped by the dark period *under the great ideologies* of the 20th century. This is also something they share – most importantly through the loss of university freedom during the war and sometimes also the complete paralysis of university activity as a result of the Nazi's anti-nationalist measures, and also in the form of a "spiritual plague" during the communist era which curtailed the free exchange of information and scientific knowledge, while its class politics affected many people who were involved in academia, making their academic and personal lives a misery. In this sense, it is precisely in Central Europe where we can reflect on the perennial attempts to discover the meaning of university traditions and the very foundations of university culture.

However, our book also hopes to open discussions on current as well as historical topics. Of these, four probably have priority today: firstly, the contradiction between unavoidable internationalization (the use of English, exchange visits of teachers and students, guest lecturers, etc) and maintaining a distinct national character, which seems to be at least as important; secondly, the contradiction between unavoidable reforms which are required through changes in our understanding of education, economic pressure and the needs of society, and the necessity to preserve traditions which allow the university to settle in a specific region and area; thirdly, the contradiction between the traditional emphasis on specific disciplines and their methodologies, and the much-vaunted interdisciplinarity which is required in relation to project and grant policies which universities are heavily involved in; and fourthly, the contradiction between the requirements of scientific research and teaching – i.e. the relationship between them. These four themes certainly do not encompass all of the issues and contradictions in today's higher-education institutions, but they do represent a kind of basis which is also connected to the complex issue of financing higher education. A basis from which it is possible to move on to discussions which this modest publication also hopes to initiate.

Naturally, the book Myths and Traditions of Central European University Culture was also written for ourselves. We are not only observers of university culture from the outside – we are steeped within it, and it is from the inside that we try to orientate ourselves in the place we work and live. This is probably reflected in some of the book's priorities as well as its weaknesses.

Lukáš Fasora, Jiří Hanuš, May 2019

MYTH: AN ATTEMPT AT UNDERSTANDING UNIVERSITY HISTORY

Given that most of the chapters in this book refer to the concept of myth, which is used by the authors as one of the keys to understanding the cultural history of universities, and indeed the history of institutions in general (state institutions, church institutions, etc.), it is worth explaining from the outset what is understood by myth here and in what sense this term is being used.

Religious studies scholars usually associate myth and its origins with cult and cult drama. "*If the task of modern drama is to 'hold up a mirror to nature', as Hamlet says to the actors, then the task of cult drama is to make the story present so that it becomes the here and now for those involved. Artistic drama presents what happened in the past or what according to the writer's imagination will happen in the future; cult drama not only presents the story but replays it.*"[1]

Of course, this basic assessment cannot be fully applied in our case. The conception of myth as a "cult drama scenario" and the joining (making present) of myth through cult drama cannot be transferred anachronistically to the modern age, which we must deal with as a priority. After all, in the religious studies conception, myth is bound up with events involving gods, demi-gods and other superhuman beings, which man participates in by means of the cult.[2] Moreover, all of this is set in a time when the cultic can be regarded as the factual. This archaic conception was captured, for example, by Alois Jirásek in his Old Czech Legends: "*...the Lúčans' witches* [probably priestesses/oracles – author's note] *and the Czechs' witches decided the next day's battle in advance – it was to be lost by the Lúčans.*"[3] The view of modern man is different, at least in the sense that he believes his methods

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1   Heller, Jan – Mrázek, Milan: *Nástin religionistiky.* Prague 2004, p. 207.

2   Ibid.

3   Ibid, p. 205.

of controlling nature to be more sophisticated and is unlikely to search for direct agents behind natural events (and yet is all the more capable of searching for "conspiracies" behind political events!) In this conception myths also have their own logic, which it is difficult for contemporary people to understand and accept. Ancient myths are not "legends" with a historical core, as one might suppose. Myths contain much that is illogical, improbable or impossible. It is not possible to insert a modernly conceived system into a myth. What belongs in a myth, as J. Heller and M. Mrázek accurately say, is the expression "so that", rather than a mere explanation of the world: "*...so that there will be a harvest and people won't go hungry, so that death will no longer reign in the village – so that the threat of disaster will be removed.*" Cult is performed precisely with a view to this "so that".[4]

On the other hand, it is clearly not possible to set up an absolute contradiction between the understanding of myths among our forebears and our modern view. Certainly, much has changed (the understanding of nature, the individual conception of man, the increasing adoption of an urban lifestyle as opposed to the traditional rural one, the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere etc.); on the other hand, complete discontinuity with the past is unimaginable. On the contrary, many – often unexpected – connections can be found. With some authors, these connections have a "comparative" form in the sense of total interconnectedness, analogousness and indeed equality of values.[5]

Before mentioning them, we would like to address one very widespread conception according to which "myth" is contrasted with "reality" and the historian's task is merely to "demolish" myths in history. There are countless examples of this conception. For example, in magazines for young people we can encounter articles in which so-called myths about the Wild West are created or destroyed. In this case the historian is the one called upon to explain that in images from the period there are few occurrences of a gunslinger with a pair of colts slung low on his hips and a repeater, and that it is not true that the criminal white men massacred the noble Indians.[6] Of course, the task of historians is *also* to explain that the colt of the time was extremely heavy, so it was quite enough to carry one, and in an armpit holster, and that the majority of Indians lost their lives as a result of epidemics and intertribal fighting that was genocidal in nature. (Incidentally,

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4   Ibid, p. 207.

5   This is particularly evident in the Jungian school, cf. e.g. Campbell, Joseph: *Mýty. Legendy dávných věků v našem denním životě*. Prague 1998. According to Jung, the role of myth is to link us with the realm of the unconscious. Through its images it awakens forces in us which have always been inherent to the human soul and which harbour the knowledge of the species, wisdom, which has helped man to make his way through the centuries. Cf. Campbell, *Mýty*, p. 23.

6   Cf. e.g. Visingr, Lukáš: Sedm statečných mýtů o Divokém západě: Jak to (možná) bylo doopravdy. In: *Bobří stopa* 3/2017 (autumn), pp. 3–5.

historians would probably lose out on work if they refused to get involved in this "search for how it really was"!)

Nevertheless, it seems to us that myths cannot be understood merely as "the opposite of reality", with our only task being to "overturn" myths. Instead, we will concern ourselves with a) possible sources of inspiration for understanding myth across epochs on the basis of new findings about the function of myth and findings from other disciplines and b) the use of these findings to formulate these findings for our purposes – i.e. processing some aspects of cultural university history.

First the question of inspiration. The first thing to mention is deliberations on the basic content of the human psyche. In this connection there is sometimes reference to basic thought patterns which are not only lexical but also pictorial (eidetic) in nature. In this regard one of the basic terms is "archetype", which refers to a Jungian concept. What is important for our purposes is that, according to C. G. Jung and other authors, "particular archetypal images surface from the unconscious into the conscious of individuals and *entire collectives,* often in the form of myths or myth-like phenomena of the modern age – or, to be more exact, particular mythologems, which is a term for their smallest constituent part not further divisible in a meaningful way."[7] Stanislav Komárek accurately points out that *"…according to Jung, the goal of human life is the so-called integration of archetypes, i.e. consciously grasping them and incorporating them into one's own psyche, which thus becomes more linked-up and coherent and (…) contributes to the understanding of one's own identity (salvation is essentially conscious self-identity), one's place in society and the world, and the increased creativity and meaningfulness of the individual destiny*."[8] This fact is, of course, significant mainly for describing the development of an individual (for example, the inadequacy of the fundamental personal "metamorphosis" in modern humans), but also for collective perception – whether it relates to the perception of the living world or the cultural world. In this connection it is worth quoting another one of Komárek's observations: "*Innate patterns of feeling and behaviour affect virtually every sphere of a person's activities, and it is remarkable to see, for example, man's inherent sense of ceremony and strict observance of rituals as it is reflected in particular areas of human activity (strict rules for religious ceremonies, magical procedures, scientific experiments and the bureaucratic or military 'liturgy' must always be stringently and strictly observed; otherwise the system 'does not work' or 'has no effect'). It can be said that the vast majority of what people have created in their cultural/civilizational efforts is a kind of rationalization and ma-*

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7   Here we proceed from the Jungian interpretation of Stanislav Komárek, whose numerous essays are often an exploration of "hidden" connections and parallels.

8   Komárek, Stanislav: *Příroda a kultura. Svět jevů a svět interpretací*. Prague 2000, p. 12.

terialization of vaguely archetypal ideas on these subjects and it is not as 'fundamentally alien' to people as is sometimes claimed." [9]

On the basis of these quotations, it is possible to question the total discontinuity between pre-modern and modern history and, on the contrary, point out anthropological connections "inherent to man" in connection with the history of institutions like schools and universities. Within this area of history, this inherent conception can primarily be linked with the world of "symbols", so typical of the education system. This is clearly not just about an understanding of the symbol as a "sign" (anchor equals hope), but also about something that operates nonverbally (or in an intersection of verbal and nonverbal expression) in an exceptionally powerful way – i.e. not just in the sphere of rationality but also emotionality. In this connection it is enough to recall a whole range of phenomena which occur in the university setting (the symbols of individual faculties and the symbols of the university placed above them, the rituals of graduation ceremonies and student initiation rites, the respecting of hierarchies and discussions about their importance, the social role and status (and mask) of the teacher, the casting of aspersions on colleagues and co-workers, the problem of the team competitor/rival and so on and so forth) and it is more than likely that inspiration in the spirit of Jungian "archetypes" is worth considering. [10]

The second source of inspiration comes from philosophy. It is based on the distinction between *poiesis*, *praxis* and *theória* known from as far back as the Platonic period. While poiesis is creating and producing and praxis is the sphere of negotiation (politics), theória is "viewing the truth for its own sake", i.e. science. The university in its ideal, platonic form is therefore a community of people who dedicate themselves for a limited time (students) or their whole lives (teachers/scientists) to discovering, mediating and acquiring many fragments of a universe of methodically discovered truths. Moreover, this idea comes to the fore in two old names for the university: *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* and *universitas litterarum*. [11] However, in this connection there is still something of fundamental importance to be added. In the European historical context, this basic idea of the university (as a community of people who search for and are "committed" to the whole of the truth) has led to universities being regarded as a "third power" in society (along with the state and church), a power that has its own virtues:

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9   Ibid, p. 13.

10   Jungianism is also characterized by excellent comparative observations – across cultures and civilizations. This aspect requires a degree of caution. It is not possible to examine these interesting aspects here, so we would refer the reader to publications by Stanislav Komárek, quoted above, who deals with these issues within a wide range of cultural and natural phenomena.

11   Cf. Lobkowicz, Nikolaus: Die Idee der Universität. *Vereinszeitung des A. G. V. München,* LIX (1980), pp. 2–5.

thoughtfulness, readiness to listen to arguments in a dialogue and an appreciation of distinguishing the paths leading to the truth.

We can also call this idea of the university "platonic" in the sense that although it functions as a kind of model, it is one that is probably never achieved in practice. Mikuláš Lobkowicz put it this way: "*In reality universities had to wage a constant struggle with the state and the church, often in relation to privileges and power; it was not uncommon for universities to let themselves be abused by other powers. In addition, because they had a tradition, they were always sceptical of innovations, and indeed sometimes – as was the case at the end of the 17th century and in the 18th century – so sclerotic that creative scientists, with the help of the relevant rulers, formed their own societies, in which true scientific progress then took place. On the other hand, it was not uncommon for universities to yield to trends of the time, so they often became a haven for ideological charlatans instead of a space for thinking. Finally, universities have long been an object of ridicule because of the indiscipline of their students and the nuttiness of their professors...*"[12] In other words, the difference between the "idea" and "realization" has always been and still is considerable, even though it is possible to speak of those in the history of universities who came very close to this ideal (generally in connection with Oxford and Cambridge, because they stood aside from revolutions and defined the social elites themselves).

However, this is not just about the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality, because this idea (which, for that matter, we can rightly consider a myth par excellence) is not simply the past. It underlies many modern thoughts about reforming universities (take, for example, the classic case formulated by John H. Newman in his famous work *The Idea of a University*, partly applied in practice at the Catholic university in Dublin[13]) and is also present in the reasoning of present-day higher-education staff and (possibly) civil servants. The idea still remains in the minds of many of those involved with the standard used for measuring the often "grim reality", the standard which raises hopes of getting closer to the ideal. This is obviously complicated by the fact that the modern age has expanded the possibilities on offer – apart from the original ideal, there are many other ideals

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12   Lobkowicz: Mikuláš: *Duše Evropy*. Prague 2001, p. 55.

13   "It is remarkable that Newman's *Idea of a University* emerged from a project that – measured by the original intentions – actually failed. The basic aim was achieved: after several years of preparatory work, which included a lecture campaign comprising what is now the first part of the *Idea of a University*, Newman founded the Catholic University of Ireland in Dublin in 1854. He also became its first rector; however, after four years he resigned from this post and returned to England. Throughout its existence, the Catholic University of Ireland contended with a number of problems, from financing difficulties through low student numbers to the fact that it did not have the right to award officially recognized university degrees (with the exception of medical ones). The main cause of these obstacles was probably the fact that following centuries of British oppression (political, economic, linguistic and religious) Ireland lacked a sufficiently strong Catholic middle class which could give rise to a university undergraduate body." Cf. Soukup, Daniel: Jednota filozofie a různost věd. Introduction to J. H. Newman's book *Idea univerzity*. Olomouc 2014, p. 6.

that attempt to formulate the aims of this institution in the modern age. In any case, these ideas, however "platonic", are still with us in the form of some modern-day myths, and the university setting guarantees that they are continually updated. The idea of the university is a myth which forms a permanent "backbone" for these institutions. Even though from time to time someone will forget how important the backbone is as a support for the body, the university tradition and a certain continuity within it enables new deliberations on the fulfilment of the ideal.

The third stimulus is offered by the literary/academic deliberations of Claudio Magris, expressed in his now "classic" book *The Habsburg Myth*. In the foreword Magris not only explains the meaning of the term myth, but also its application to the area of literature he is researching: "*The term myth – which in itself means that reality is modified and distorted in such a way as to extract the anticipated basic truth from it, that hypothetical metahistorical core capable of synthesizing the basic meaning of reality – takes on a special added significance in this case. The Habsburg myth is not an ordinary process of the usual poetic transfiguration of reality, but rather the total substitution of one reality (a socio-historical one) for another (a fictitious and illusory one): it is therefore the sublimation of a specific living society into the picturesque, safe and ordered world of a fairy tale*."[14] What is important here is that according to Magris this "fairy tale" world was able to characterize some aspects of Habsburg society and culture, and "not without finesse and the requisite depth". So this is not just about worshipping the old world and viewing the good old days through rose-tinted glasses. Quite the reverse. The mythicizing of the Habsburg world evokes the past, but at the same time it distorts it, mocks it and at the same time makes use of it – it becomes a tool for prudent political strategy, an attempt to find a principle of cohesion for the increasingly anachronistic and intolerable form of the state. Here the expression "fairy tale" is apposite, even though the works of the writers analysed are very far removed from classic fairy tales. Nevertheless, they attempt to express their commitment to the values of the past, draw attention to specific ideals and deflect attention from the oppressive reality. Magris added something else of fundamental importance on this subject: "The Austrian myth acquired a distinct ability to penetrate into society, which used it to imbibe human consciousness and human sensitivity, and it eventually succeeded in almost completely transforming the contradictory Austrian reality into a peaceful and safe world."[15] The truth of this statement is, of course, debatable, but the basic idea is not – even the modern (literary) myth has a certain power to alter social reality. In this book, works of literature will not be analysed to this extent but rather mentioned in passing. However, we must bear in mind the lesson Magris teaches us: There is truth in fairy tales and they are capable of altering human consciousness.

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14   Magris, Claudio: *Habsburský mýtus v moderní rakouské literatuře*. Brno 2001, p. 17.

15   Ibid, p. 18

The fourth source of inspiration is represented by anthropological and social-science deliberations about the functions of modern-day myths and methodological complexes. It is no coincidence that these conceptions are predominantly found among authors dealing with modern nationalism and the creation of modern national identities and their vitality. According to these authors, "myth" is a basic tool of what is termed cultural reproduction, a tool for creating human communities. They refer to myths, rituals and symbols as "languages" that communities use to create, self-identify, demarcate and maintain their existence.[16] In this sense, myth makes it possible to understand many phenomena of the 18th–20th centuries, especially modernization, social communication, cultural transfers and especially the emergence of modern nationalism. Myths also determine the strategy of communities; they are used in publicity and social control and abused by ideological propaganda. This social-science conception, which has gradually been adopted by historians too, certainly has its limits and dangers. Its advantages include aspects that have been noted in recent decades by historians of the modern age during research into the great ideologies and ideological regimes of the 19th and 20th century. These ideologies not only discovered, interpreted and exploited "ancient myths", but also created new ones. Thus, communist or fascist regimes, for example, can be described as "myth-making". And not only that. Modern ideologies and their power applications are like islands floating in the universal myths of the modern age, sometimes without even being aware of it. One of the most frequently mentioned is the "myth of progress", which forms a background to modern ideologies and the modern world with its understanding of tradition, culture, authority, science and technology, and especially of man and his possibilities.

It is abundantly clear that in this social conception myths (whether they are narrowly focused or more generally widespread) can also be applied to the area of university history. Here it is important to recall the relationship institutions had with the great ideologies of the time (just consider the Czech example of building *national* universities(!) and the role of these institutions in the formation of a Czech national identity). The myth of progress is directly embodied in society by the creation and further development of educational institutions. It is surely not insignificant that the 19th-century "myth of progress" has been thoroughly analysed by historians (to give just two examples, the British historian Christopher Dawson[17] and the Czech, later exiled, historian Bohdan Chudoba[18]). According to Dawson, this myth consists of the theory of evolution (Spencer, Darwin) applied

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16   Cf. Hoskins, Geoffrey – Schopflin, George (eds.): *Myths and Nationhood*. New York 1997. This publication contains excellent and at the same time digestible contributions working with the social conception of myth in research into recent decades.

17   Dawson, Christopher: *Pokrok a náboženství*. Prague 1947.

18   Chudoba, Bohdan: *O dějinách a pokroku*. Brno 1939.

to social progress, 18th-century deism and its influence on the preferences of practical philanthropy, Enlightenment philosophy emphasizing an optimistic view of human nature (Rousseau), and above all the influence of German idealism (Lessing, Hegel). Dawson states that the idea of progress reached its apotheosis in the first half of the 19th century and dominated the major trends in European thinking: rationalist liberalism, revolutionary socialism and transcendental idealism.

A similar emphasis on the intellectual history of progress and its antepositions can also be observed in the present day, in the monumental work by the historian Bedřich Loewenstein *Faith in Progress*.[19] Here the Czech historian not only dissected "faith in progress" as a monolithic phenomenon but pointed to its changing and yet pluralistic face in the modern age. Among other things, he dealt with the "myth of revolution" as the preferred myth of the 20th century and analysed German and Russian thinkers who not only reflected on this myth, but to some extent also created it. In the 1990s, just as in the late 1960s, both Europe and the USA were grappling with the nature of postwar development, and systemic contradictions could not help but affect the area of science and its cultivation at universities. With regard to the history of the USA, Loewenstein gives the example of James William Fulbright (1905–1995), the committed senator and advisor to J. F. Kennedy famous for creating the student exchange programme, who became involved in shaping American politics and promoted "mentoring" and "partnership" in international politics as well as in schools.[20]

For that matter, some German authors, for example, associate the idea of progress with the "Humboldtian myth" and the difficult-to-translate expression "*Bildung*", i.e. education, which also implies modern rationality and the (Enlightenment) notion of possible – and sometimes sustained – progress in the education of man in all its constituent parts: rational, emotional and volitional.[21] Incidentally, the Humboldtian myth will be referred to many times in the book, in various connections.

Finally, the fifth source of inspiration was found with the contemporary Czech historian Jiří Štaif. He discusses his understanding of "myth" and "social rituals" in the work Writing Biographies and Authorial Self-Reflection, which is an exposition of his conception of a biographical book about František Palacký. Here Štaif analyses the term "symbolic communication" and explains his own approach within this context: "*I paid some attention to biographical issues specifically with regard to Palacký. What I was primarily interested in was how to explain the historical fact that his image "settled" in the modern memory of Czech national society as one of its constants.*

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19   Loewenstein, Bedřich: *Víra v pokrok. Dějiny jedné evropské ideje*. Prague 2009.

20   Ibid, p. 482.

21   Mittelstraß, Jürgen: *Die unzeitgemässe Universität*. Frankfurt am Main 1994, pp. 95–104.

What seemed key to me was the myth that saw him as the symbolic Father of the Czech nation. I originally thought that this conception of the cultural integration of national society was only typical of "late" national movements. However, in time, through the influence of Mircea Eliade, I came to realize that this kind of myth can function even in the modern age, because it makes it possible to develop the integrating role of the patriarchal father responsible for his "children". It offers them the opportunity to seek and find in him "their own" certainty amid the uncertainties of the modern age, even after he is no longer physically alive, for as long as they believe he is their authoritative compass. As a symbolic father, Palacký is thus to assume moral responsibility not only for the birth of his children, but also for their lives, as well as the lives of their descendants. As his "offspring" they have the assurance that he is always "watching over them".[22] Of course, when it comes to the history of institutions such as colleges, universities or academies, the biographical method can only be partially employed. Nevertheless, the way our colleague from Prague approached his material seems to us extremely productive and also applicable to the history of such traditional institutions as universities.

These five examples should suffice to outline the basic assumptions of our work and explain our understanding of the crucial word "myth" as it will be used in this work. As part of the summary of the conception presented, the following should be added:

1. The conception of "myth" used in the above connotations can be a useful tool for the history of university culture even in the modern era. This is primarily because it makes it possible to reveal intentions of those involved which would otherwise be incomprehensible and to grasp long-term trends underlying university traditions and operations. It can shed light on the world of symbols and at the same time it is possible to interpret its new meanings within the framework of changing social conditions.

2. This conception obviously needs to be applied to the relevant areas of university life in its institutional and personnel sphere. For the historian there is also the necessity of not pre-empting the "language of the sources", which always has priority, but the theoretical concept allows the segments of university culture that we consider the most significant to be discussed in isolation in individual chapters.

3. Clearly, the cultural history of university institutions cannot be exhausted using a single method, even if we consider it a pivotal one. For that reason, other approaches to social, political and cultural history will also appear in this book – it can thus be said to represent a combination of methods, taking into account the importance of biographical aspects in a work of this

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22   Štaif, Jiří: Psaní biografie a autorská sebereflexe. *Dějiny – teorie – kritika* 1/2015, p. 120. Here the author explains his motivation for writing the book *František Palacký. Život, dílo, mýtus.* Prague 2009.

type: we believe that what is critical in university life is not just "structures", but above all the people who create and influence those structures.

4. We are aware that university culture cannot be accurately described without taking into account the political context in a comparative European (Central European) perspective. However, our comparison can only be of limited scale and applicability – it is more about taking soundings of selected institutions and countries in an attempt to capture major similarities and differences.

5. The world of universities is not a world where teaching and research, schools and state, teachers and students coexist in harmony, but a world full of rivalry, conflicts and problems, at every conceivable level. These problems cannot be swept under the carpet; on the contrary, it is necessary and it is incumbent on the historian to uncover and duly interpret them. This is especially sensitive in connection with recent decades, a period when the witnesses of past events are still alive. A particularly sensitive approach is required by the interpretation of events linked with moments of political and ideological upheaval (in the Czech setting e.g. 1968, 1989).

6. Universities are generally a place of social mobility and the formation of national elites, a place where the struggle for university and more generally applicable freedoms takes place, a place where new ideas (which are applicable to society and sometimes "subversive") are formulated, but sometimes also a place of "intellectual bubbles" which the outside world occasionally fails to penetrate. Elitist tendencies manifest themselves across the university spectrum, and for the historian it is extremely interesting to observe how they take on diverse forms in diverse historical situations.

7. The authors' decision to write a history of university culture goes hand in hand with a conviction that "culture" is something of fundamental importance in the life of modern states and institutions. It is an element which is often rooted very deeply in national societies, mentalities and reputations, and its permanence and specificity is more important than its variability and universality. In other words: we are of the opinion that an "institutionalized" culture is not easily interchangeable and contains a certain national and intellectual "flavour", some aspects of which may be non-transferable. Culture, made up of unique historical phenomena, can to a certain extent be regarded as "myth", which we live off and use as a source of inspiration for creative life.

We are aware, however, that our approach and the research presented here is only a kind of introduction to the issue. It does not represent a synthetic view of the whole area of university culture – such an ambition would simply have been unreasonable. Nevertheless, we believe that the following chapters offer food for thought and for subsequent discussion, especially in the university setting, which may help to invigorate the regular course of university life.

THE MYTH OF UNIVERSITY FREEDOM

This chapter will aim to highlight the issues surrounding the origin of universities. University culture refers back to a very old medieval concept, which is a fact that has to be taken very seriously as the institution of the university as we know it today with its faculties, courses, lectures and titles, comes to us from the medieval world. We can safely say that cathedral schools and certain informal groups acquired their form during the 12th century. But how would we characterize a university? Some authors see their characteristic features in the canon of required texts from which teachers lectured and added their own views, forming academic programmes which conferred titles, in some cases independently of other institutions and offices. In the thirteenth century, we see for the first time a certain freedom of "universality" – the rightful holder of a title could teach anywhere in the world (ius ubique docendi). It was a type of legal "university stamp". As in other spheres of medieval society, the fundamental matter was the granting of privileges (mainly by religious dignitaries at universities). The Czech scholar Pavel Spunar sees the main characteristics of medieval universities as being their administrative and spiritual autonomy, which was strictly guarded from the outset (the outward expression of authority was an academic community directed by a rector, who was elected from among them and who exercised jurisdiction over the members of the university), in a community which was created by the participation of people from all social groups (social background did not play a decisive role for the students or teachers!), and by a new border between clerics and laymen (the term *clerikus* was not unambiguously understood and there appeared attempts to transfer it from the religious to the secular sphere). According to Spunar, an "intellectual class" began to form in Italy in the 13th century, where student lawyers were no longer considered as laymen, but as clerics, even though they had not been religiously ordained.[23]

Freedom in the modern sense of the word did not exist in the Middle Ages. Privileges were understood as "the presentation of freedom" in a world divided by the estates. There was no concept at the time of a universality of rights.[24] The freedom of universities was at first linked to the freedom of the clerics, which was also granted by secular rulers. It is clear from the start that they fought for these privileges, and that the character of the university as an intellectual corporation matured with these struggles. Documents exist which tells us about the right to suspend lectures, about professors' salaries, even about the right to strike (*Parens scientiarum* Gregory IX).[25]

On the other hand, the early universities differed from later ones in many respects: for example, universities did not have libraries, sometimes not even their own buildings, the most common and most popular subject was law, which was seen as preparation for other vocations. The main subjects taught were the 'seven free arts', as well as civil and canonical law, cosmology, medicine and theology. From the outset, universities received a tremendous boost for their development from the intellectual renaissance which was occurring in the emerging Western world. The core of teaching and education lay in the 'disputation', which was designed to stimulate the ability to argue logically (the scholastic argumentation is best described in Summa Theologica by St Thomas Aquinas, the learned Dominican).[26] A future master had to demonstrate his knowledge of a specific canon of books, after which he could apply for a licence to teach, and this process was accompanied by an act of loyalty. Sometimes the licentiate would also receive a master's title. Again, the concept of "freedom" here is part of a precisely defined framework. In terms of the medieval concept of independence, we have to add that the university began at that time to represent a certain "power" in society, and its self-confidence grew in this regard. It is possible to recall a chapter from Czech history which relates to the time of Charles IV and the Hussite period, and is illustrative of the role which the university (Central European by this stage) played in scholarly disputes and how it assumed powers. In religious disputes, universities had the tendency to place themselves as the arbiter of the true interpretation of Biblical texts, Christian traditions, as well as history. One example of this was the history of the medieval and early modern age councils.[27]

The Modern Age continued to be linked to these university origins. This is best shown in the relationship towards the main figures in medieval scholastics,

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23 Spunar, Pavel et al.: *Kultura středověku*. Prague 1995, p. 87.

24 Cf. Hanuš, Jiří (ed.): *Lidská práva. Národ na obecnou platnost a kulturní diferenciace*. Brno 2001.

25 Woods, Thomas E.: *Jak katolická církev budovala západní civilizaci*. Prague 2008, p. 45.

26 Cf. Floss, Pavel: *Architekti křesťanského středověkého myšlení 1*. Prague 2004. A scholastic interpretation from its origins to the later period.

27 Cf. Schatz, Klaus: *Všeobecné koncily. Ohniska církevních dějin*. Brno 2014.

the study of intellectual life in the Late Middle Ages, and a rational understanding of issues in general. Naturally, there was a significant distance in this period from the medieval basis of science, and not only in the sense of time, but also an intellectual distance. Jacques Le Goff saw one of these transitional phases as the end of the 14th and the start of the 15th century, when universities "opened up to humanism", in particular in Italy (Bologna, Padua). This signalled a development in Greek studies and interest in ancient writings in general, the rejection of scholastics as a "rigid system", an emphasis on the duo of philology and rhetoric (as opposed to the duo of dialectics – scholastics), interest in the "beautiful language" – but also a certain aristocratic behaviour as the humanist "writes for the enlightened" (the home of humanism was more the ruler's court than a student hostelry!). "*From the start its world was designed as a protective hand for the powerful, for the maintenance of offices and material wealth.*"[28] It is also important that humanism pushed intellectuals from the towns to the countryside, specifically to rural residences, as was described by Erasmus in *The Profane Feast.*[29] Humanism also brought a rift between science and teaching, which was connected to the expansion of book publishing and libraries. During this period, independence was an even greater chimera than it had been previously – scholars gladly worked in the service of rulers and courts: here too we cannot apply a contemporary postmodern perspective.

We have presented these two historical situations (outlined in almost unacceptable brevity) for an important reason. When describing the main interpretive stereotypes as part of the history of universities, we might come across dual-type problems. The independence of the medieval and humanist type of scholarship and its institutions cannot hide a certain continuity through all of the changes which universities went through, even from the 18th to the 21st centuries. On the contrary, this modern period often returned to its medieval and humanist origins and mythologised them, even if this was not done within the holistic European cultural mainstream, but instead some parts of it. Therefore, for example, the Catholic universities which were founded in the 19th and 20th centuries sometimes openly declared their respect for these medieval traditions, even if the forms of teaching and their relationship towards other institutions, in particular towards the state, were more fitting for that period. On the other hand, we can see the exact opposite in the Modern Age – the attempt to escape from this tradition, the attempt to radically break from earlier periods. It is unsurprising that such attempts are also often types of "mythologies" (for example, communist attempts led to a kind of mythology about the contemporary rejection of old university forms, as we will see later). The independence of universities in the

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28   Goff Le, Jacques: *Intelektuálové ve středověku*. Prague 2009, p. 130.

29   Cf. Svatoš, Michal – Svatoš, Martin: *Živá tvář Erasma Rotterdamského*. Prague 1985.

past was also mythicised or even directly parodied, and during the Modern Age, the Middle Ages were generally (and entirely non-historically) considered to be an era lacking in freedom, of intellectual repression, whilst knowledge was better during the humanist period, in particular because the first reflections on science appear, which Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers thought signified the origins of real education. The Modern Age, therefore, mythologised both its present and the past, as it had to come to terms with the fact that universities were very old institutions, institutions whose origins harked back to the "darkness" of religious medieval Europe. On a more general level, we can talk about the idea of "progress", which to a certain degree logically saw the Middle Ages and its organisations as "outdated", or in the worst case, "reactionary". This second view, which creates the impression that later must mean "more progressive" and, therefore, "better", would appear to be the most controversial modernist idea.[30] It was research into the Middle Ages from the second half of the 20th century which showed the richness, variety and also logic of the school and university councils of the time.

Society and knowledge

The British historian Peter Burke has helped us to uncover on a general level the myths relating to education and "knowledge", and their relationship towards the autonomy of universities in the period after the European Enlightenment. He examines the relationship between society and knowledge and its fundamental aspects in his important book *A Social History of Knowledge*, particularly in the second volume.[31]

At first he determines the position of "knowledge and society" on the basis of how knowledge is used. It is a type of framework which also describes the position of universities and other educational institutions in the Modern Age, particularly in Europe and America. The most important idea which evidently determines the overall character of the epoch is the *idea of practical knowledge,* i.e. turning away from "pure" science, from "knowledge for knowledge's sake". What we have said in the previous paragraphs applies here – we have to avoid mistaken ideas about previous historical periods. To a certain degree, knowledge and education had always been practical, despite the fact that the requirements and applications of this "practicality" differed. However, it can be said that in the 18th century there was a significant expansion in practical knowledge and applied knowledge in rela-

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30   In a Czech context, one of the first historians to criticize the "idea of progress" was Bohdan Chudoba in: Chudoba, Bohdan: *O dějinách a pokroku*. Brno 1939.

31   Burke, Peter: *Společnost a vědění II. Od encyklopedie k Wikipedii*. Prague 2013.