THE MYTH OF THE SPY

The topic of this essay raises enormous expectations which are difficult to fulfil. Moreover, two concepts of myth will be used here, only one of them being, strictly speaking, anthropological. According to the first concept, any irrational conviction held by others is commonly referred to as a myth. This is in contrast to our own beliefs, which are supposedly rational and based on science or reason. Such an understanding of myth is not acceptable to an anthropologist, but will appear occasionally in my analysis. Secondly, myth is taken in the sense of a configuration of rational and irrational elements which play an equal role and are governed by the internal logic of the myth.

It is obvious that, as Segal pointed out, 'Any modern group must elaborate its own emotional attitude to the world, and this attitude may develop, under suitable conditions, into myth' (1977: 62). It is difficult to find a sphere of human activity more prone to creating contemporary myths than spying. The collection and processing of intelligence materials is surrounded with a mystique which is constantly exploited by journalists trying to satisfy the insatiable fascination of the public, by writers of thrillers and film-makers, by left-wing critics and, occasionally, right-wing apologists. This preoccupation with spies and spying is rarely accompanied by any real knowledge or understanding. While not professing to possess either, I would like to draw attention to some aspects of this phenomenon which may be studied with interest by

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anthropologists. I am referring here primarily to the mythical culture of the world of intelligence and to the mythical way the public looks at that world. Mythology basically translates things or occurrences which are less understood into those which are better understood, those which are half-grasped by the human mind into those which are easier to comprehend, and, particularly, those which are difficult to solve into those which are easier to solve. Thus we have the general principle of mediation present in all mythologies.

Mythology satisfies our curiosity, but it also, through this gaining of knowledge, creates an orderly vision of the world and rejects the existence of disorderly elements and chaos. In some ways, this is very much the function of 'intelligence'. It is easy to notice various similarities between the mythical world and the world of intelligence. Both operate within closed systems, with their respective worlds organized according to special principles which are quite formalized. Like myth, intelligence as an organization constitutes a coherent system with its own set of rules, its own vision of reality and of the world, and its own morality. It may be studied, and I would suggest it should be studied, as a closed formal system - much as we study myth.

Numerous elements are common to both. For instance, even belief in the mythical beginning can be found in the world of intelligence. One can refer here to recent events, for example, Peter Wright's demand (1987) - in purely mythical fashion - that we return to *illo tempore*, to the primeval age before the British secret service (MI5) was corrupted, before (as he has it) the service became riddled with traitors, in other words to a state of original purity, the mythical ideal. He does not realize, I think, that he is talking about the mythical idea and not reality, because there never was a purity of the service - its 'corruption' began with its creation. The service has not become desacralized and impure with age - it never *was* sacred (i.e. unblemished by human weakness and treachery). As Mieletinski (1981: 211-12) says:

> Myth - in going beyond the accepted forms of life - creates something in the nature of a new fantastic 'higher reality' which, in a paradoxical fashion, is perceived by adherents of a particular mythological tradition as the primeval source and ideal prototype (that is 'archetype' not in the Jungian, but in the broadest sense of the word) of these forms. Thus modelling constitutes a characteristic function of myth.... Every significant change ... is projected into the past, onto the screen of mythological time, and is included in the narrative in the past tense and into a stable semantic system.

Myth and intelligence are both characterized by a certain inversion of values. Things which are good in reality are not good in myth and they are not good in the world of intelligence either. This becomes obvious when one compares a few simple oppositions like open:close, truth:lies, good:evil, public:secret, legal: illegal. Actions which are illegal in normal life are perfectly acceptable, in fact even necessary, in the intelligence world,

which is basically (among other things) the officially sanctioned theft of information. What is good and what is evil is relative and perceived in an instrumental fashion. The same, of course, applies to myth, where the hero achieves his feat and receives a reward through doing things which are perceived in the real world to be wrong - by cheating, lying, stealing. The reason for this lies in the internal logic of myth, which is shared by people gathering intelligence. In both, the end justifies the means (provided that certain well-established and necessary procedures are adhered to) and the hero (or the spy) can do no wrong.

Intelligence, like myths, shows the true meaning only to the initiated, basically to members of the same group - the spying community (or the ethnic group). Thus, although myth is a great simplifier, it also confuses, because in a way the function of both intelligence and myth is to hide the meaning from the uninitiated. But the meaning is there, the meaning does not disappear, because, as Roland Barthes has said (1973 [1959]: 121-2), 'However paradoxical it may seem, *myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear .... The relation which unites the concept of the myth to its meaning is essentially a relation of *deformation*' [original emphases]. This is exactly what happens in the world of intelligence, where appearances, illusions and deceptions constitute essential and inherent parts of the game.

Furthermore, these distortions create ambiguities - both worlds are characterized by them. Indeed, like tricksters in myths, spies act as great mediators between these ambiguities. There is a need in their occupation to see the world in dual terms, and dichotomies are ever-present there, just as in myth. There is also a need to hide these ambiguities from people who should not perceive them, i.e. from the uninitiated (a category which includes politicians, among others).

One example of the inherent ambiguities pervading intelligence is, apart from the values mentioned earlier, the perception of data. It is very difficult to explain the data gathered in any one particular way. Everything can be looked at from two or more perspectives and will show two (or more) different aspects. There is a great emphasis on circumstantiality and the balance of probabilities. An extreme example of this ambiguity is reflected in the case of double or triple agents, whose loyalty one can never be absolutely sure about - any contact with the opposition contaminates. As a character in one of John Le Carré's novels observes: '*Gentlemen, I have served you both well*, says the perfect double agent in the twilight of his life. And says it with pride too' (1981: 120). We have here a suspension of moral judgment and an example of radical relativity. The means/end rationality becomes confused, and so do the values of good and evil, as in some trickster stories.

There is another kind of myth, in the more popular meaning of the word, the myth of rationality, to which even anthropologists, who one would have thought should know better, fall victim. This is a methodological question discussed by Alan Dundes, who has aptly remarked:

> Typically, a myth is not believed to be true by an analyst, who somehow assumes that it is or was believed to be true by some native group. With such reasoning 'other' peoples have myths, while we the analysts have religion and/or science. The fallacy here is that we analysts also have myths - whether we believe them to be true or not (1984: 98).

This is a post-Enlightenment legacy which can be described as a proposition: myth means lack of rationality, while science equals rationality.

The same happens in the world of intelligence. A good example of such an arrogant attitude is the treatment of data collected by the Israeli secret service Mossad, just before the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war in October 1973. The information about Arab preparations for an attack was available to Israeli analysts. But the analysts considered this information to be part of an Arab myth, an Arab posture which the Israelis could study in a way 'scientifically', and not treat as reality. There were certain assumptions made about the 'Arab mind', about Arab behaviour and their reactions, which made it impossible in the minds of the analysts to accept what this information really meant (an imminent attack). Instead, they looked at the data as if it had a mythical character ('Arabs are different from us', 'inferior militarily', 'could not have kept such an operation secret from our superior agents', 'they are just trying to cause us financial trouble and to disrupt our lives'). The analysts and politicians were proven disastrously wrong, mainly because, when balancing probabilities, they opted for the mythical view of the 'other', the Arabs, one which was until then ingrained in their minds (especially after the overwhelming Israeli victory during the Six-Day War of 1967).

In fairness, one should add that the task of intelligence officers is not made easier by the impossible expectations imposed on them by their governments, which themselves look at secret services in a thoroughly mythical way and ask them to do the impossible. An intelligence service is supposed to provide information, explanations, predictions and warnings - but preferably those which suit the political powers of the time. Others are largely ignored. There is a tendency to disregard the unpleasant, often until it is too late, by saying that people from intelligence services do not understand the real world, they live in a separate, unreal world (that is, not the world of the politicians), and therefore their suggestions can be disregarded.

There is, of course, an inherent opposition between the political (and even more so, the diplomatic) world and that of intelligence, because all covert actions are dangerous to diplomacy (even though diplomatic cover is often used for protection) and to politics, since they create big problems for politicians if discovered by the hostile intelligence service. At the same time, politicians need intelligence officers, with whom they have a love-hate relationship. Like tricksters, spies move dangerously across the boundaries of the sacred-secret world and back again, using certain paraphernalia (the equivalents of magical objects), guided by the motto that virtue lies in not being caught.

On both sides of the political spectrum there are myths - erroneous convictions - about intelligence services. Most of them are generated by what can be vaguely described as 'the left'. One of them, possibly the most important, is that the intelligence service is an all-encompassing organization trying to subjugate society and control it by its own secret and wicked rules (possibly in order to deliver it to the right, but often in order to assume ultimate control for itself). Secret services are assumed to be working against the interests of democracy, if the democratically expressed will of a majority of citizens does not suit their purposes. In the British context, the Zinoviev letter, leaked by the intelligence services in order to bring down the Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald in 1924, has achieved great notoriety as an example of such an action (Andrew 1985: 301-16). It has even been claimed that the letter was, in fact, a forgery produced by British intelligence, but in the light of known evidence this claim is not very convincing. More recently, certain unverifiable allegations have been made that MI5 tried to overthrow the government led by Harold Wilson.

At the same time, there is another myth (fallacy) which states that a hostile intelligence service does not in reality inflict much damage on one's own country. Here we face an opposite perception about the main features of the service. For instance, it is not uncommon to read that whatever damage Philby did to the British intelligence service was not really in the realm of operations, but only in the political sphere, by creating lasting suspicions between the British and the Americans (especially their agencies the CIA and the FBI). This is a quite widespread and popular view which conveniently forgets, apart from the damage to the security of the state and the service, the death of scores of people betrayed by Philby.

Another popular myth-fallacy of the left is that intelligence services badly need each other in order to justify their own existence and that they are totally unnecessary. To support this claim Khruschev is occasionally quoted as having allegedly suggested to Kennedy that they could exchange the lists of agents operating on their respective territories and nothing would happen because the agents were totally irrelevant - they only needed each other. The *raison d'être* of the CIA is, on such an argument, the existence of the KGB and vice versa.

Thus, as some people on the left see it, there is a conspiracy on the part of the intelligence community against the general public and their elected representatives. Intelligence is seen simultaneously as efficient and inefficient - efficient against its own domestic enemies, but inefficient as far as foreign enemies are concerned. Conversely, the activities of foreign services are not particularly important, probably - at least partially - for the same reason.

The political right has different mythical preoccupations. One is with infiltrators and deceivers, who try to damage valuable sources of information by discrediting them and question reliable assessments of data, creating discord and an atmosphere of suspicion within the intelligence service. Two famous examples of this

were Anatoli Golitsin and Yuri Nosenko, both KGB agents, who defected to the West in the early 1960s. Each was suspected by some people in American and British intelligence of being a Soviet plant, while others valued their services highly and regarded them as genuine defectors. Nosenko was for years accused of being sent to the West to discredit Golitsin, and nobody could establish how much truth there was in his allegations. In the intelligence business, as in myth, there are ambiguities - things appear to be and not to be at the same time, and truth, if it is found at all, is very elusive and illusory.

The second mythical concern of the right is with deep penetration agents or sleepers, popularly called 'moles'. The best-known case in Britain is the chase for the Fifth Man (to complement Maclean, Burgess, Philby and Blunt) and/or the mole in MI5 who, according to Chapman Pincher (1984) and Peter Wright (1987), reached the elevated position of Director-General (allegedly Sir Roger Hollis). The question which has often been posed in connection with this mole-hunt is what damages the service more - the search for the traitor, or his actual existence (that is, assuming there is a deep-penetration agent placed in such a position)? One could argue that constant suspicion and endless inquiries paralyse the organization just as much as the mole in its midst. On the other hand, it is almost certain that any evidence against a suspect will be inconclusive, due to the nature of his activity. Unless the person admits his guilt, it is always difficult to come up with hard proof. It is sufficient to recall the cases of Philby and Blunt - the former provided the final proof of his guilt by defecting to Moscow, the latter exchanged his confession for immunity from prosecution. Neither of them could have been prosecuted succesfully in court for lack of admissible evidence. Because of the ambiguous nature of intelligence, it is easy to hide the truth. It is equally impossible to prove guilt or to clear one's name completely - *vide* the case of Hollis.

The fallacy about the efficiency of the service exists on the right as well as the left. This myth is easily disproved on a number of levels. Let us take the example of the Israeli secret service Mossad, thought by many to be the most efficient in the world - another mythical perception. At the strategic level, the fact that in the early 1970s Mossad was largely preoccupied with chasing Palestinian terrorists resulted in the organization ignoring real preparations for war on the part of Syria and Egypt. At the operational level, Mossad provided a spectacular example of total inefficiency during the so-called Lillehammer affair in 1973, when a group of Israeli agents killed a Moroccan waiter living in Norway, mistakenly believing him to be the person who masterminded the massacre of Israeli athletes during the Munich Olympics. The fiasco was compounded by the fact that some agents were captured, tried and sentenced. There is little doubt that the whole thing was carefully set up by Israeli's enemies in order to discredit them and, probably more importantly, to distract their attention from the war preparations of the Arab states.

At the tactical level, or the level of tradecraft, stories about inefficiency are numerous and sometimes amusing. As

Constantinides showed (1986), no intelligence service is immune to ridicule, and there has been little improvement over the years.

For instance, during the First World War a German agent pretending to be a worker travelled in a first-class train carriage to a place on the US-Canadian border to conduct an act of sabotage. When asked after his arrest why he was travelling first-class while wearing workman's clothes, he replied that a German officer always travels first class (ibid.: 101). Things had not improved much by the time of the Second World War. A German agent was captured in 1940 in Ireland, first because he had a previous espionage record known to the British, and secondly, because he parachuted in wearing his jackboots and black beret, and with a pocket full of his medals from the First World War (ibid.: 100). The Soviets are known to have provided one of their agents going to Switzerland with a Finnish passport supposedly issued in Canada. The Swiss, however, quickly discovered that the agent could speak neither Finnish nor English (ibid.: 101). Another Soviet blunder involved an agent who in order to leave Nazi Germany was provided with a Portuguese passport describing him as one-armed, while in reality he had two (ibid.: 102).

At the same time, one should not assume that intelligence services are inefficient by nature, because it is obvious that one hears more about the problems than the successes, due to the secretive nature of the profession. Also, the border between the two is very fine indeed. A most bizarre example of fieldcraft which appears on the surface to be incredibly foolish was reported by the French press in 1986. A French diplomat in China became a victim of the so-called 'honey-trap' and fell in love with a Chinese opera singer employed to entrap him. He was subsequently persuaded that only by supplying information to the Chinese secret service would he be able to see his beloved and prevent her prosecution. However, as was discovered during the trial in Paris, the Chinese opera singer was actually a man - a fact which the diplomat had been unaware of for twenty years. Constantinides, who quotes this story, comments:

> One can well imagine the reaction of the superiors of the Chinese officer who proposed this variation of the sexual entrapment ploy as an operation. Initially, they must have considered it as the height of operational folly and as intelligence tradecraft run amok. Perhaps the lesson in this instance is that tradecraft first seen as folly assumes the mantle of the unconventional if it succeeds (ibid.: 107).

Intelligence, like myth, is basically a complex system which requires simplification if it is to neutralize various human fears and reach the general public or the politicians. This simplification/translation is done by someone who is initiated into the system: in intelligence, this means a spy and/or an analyst. In myth there are mediators or tricksters and heroes telling tales. In

this respect, the spy plays the role of a trickster or mediator who resolves the differences by making them increasingly less complex. He is also, of course, a possessor of secret knowledge (as in myth) and power, which helps him to solve the problem but which makes him necessarily, both in myth and intelligence, a dangerous person. He is able to achieve all this because by becoming a spy he enters a hermetic universe that can only be entered by overcoming immense difficulties, like the initiation ordeals of archaic and traditional societies. In this, he is a bit like the member of an intellectual élite reading *Finnegan's Wake* or listening to atonal music. And the spy clearly perceives himself as a member of such an élite, superior to the rest. In this respect, the world of intelligence resembles that of conspiracy. In the real world, intelligence demands secrecy - in a way, the more secret the information the more valuable it becomes - but at the same time, these demands create a variety of rituals, just like myth, in this case often related to tradecraft or fieldcraft, which cannot be explained in purely functional terms. We learn about the most bizarre instances of ritualistic fieldcraft imaginable when agents behave in a highly unnnatural manner, supposedly in order to avoid detection, but actually attracting people's attention by doing so.

It would be ludicrous to claim that all intelligence services live in an unreal world, but I would argue that it could be useful to examine any intelligence service as an organization which creates a variety of myths and is governed in some way by a higher meta-reality created by the myth. Myth then becomes a higher form of truth. Intelligence services could then be looked at in the same way as myths, in the sense of a closed system of rules in which supposedly reasonable and apparently unreasonable elements are mixed in a way in which an anthropologist can analyse them. I believe that this kind of examination can be most productive if conducted by a structuralist or a semiotician, because as Umberto Eco (1979: 7) said when describing the latter discipline:

> *Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie*. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all. I think that the definition of 'a theory of the lie' should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics. [original emphasis]

Since intelligence services are largely occupied with practising and studying lies and half-truths and their relations to reality, I think structuralist anthropology could in turn study these organizations fruitfully. Like many other organizations, they are not immune from acquiring a life of their own. Segal has written:

> The semiotic approach to the study of mythology examines myth in the general context of human group behavior as a system that models the surrounding world or portions of it in the minds of individuals belonging to the group. It is of particular interest to study how the world picture, as it takes

> shape in the group, influences people's behavior toward the world (1977: 59).

This would seem to be quite applicable to research into intelligence services which is therefore of more than just purely academic interest. The spy might well be addressed with the invocation from the temple of Apollo in Delphi, 'Know thyself'; for if he does not, he might end up like the hero of de la Fontaine's adage: '*Il connaît l'univers et ne se connaît pas*'.

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