

Myths in Transformation Processes. Theoretical Interpretation and Empirical Data

Abstract

Transformation processes are historical times which differ considerably from the normal course of events. As societal and group identities crumble or break down, it becomes difficult for the individual actor to retain a reference structure on which to base rational action. In consequence, actions in transformation phases often seem irrational and confused. The article argues that this perception is incorrect and should be substituted by the concept of mythical thinking as developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Mythical thinking is a different, but not inferior mode of thinking which moves to the fore when rational thinking is not an adequate or even possible reaction. Using empirical materials from East-German enterprises, the article shows how the concept can improve the researcher's understanding of managerial action in transformation times and explain hitherto „irrational“ elements in people's accounts.

Introduction

The connection between myth and transformation is a rather frequently discussed matter. Even non-scientific intuition may tell us that myths and transformation processes seem to be bonded in a strong and regular way. The myths that are familiar from literature (like the Greek myths of Oedipus or the Minotaur or the German *Nibelungenlied*) always depict a very special event, often (though not in every case) involving the creation or destruction of families and cultures. However, historians, after taking myths as pure fantasies for quite a long time, have by now come to identify some of the historical periods underlying these “stories”, and have found them to be times of grim upheaval. Thus, even though modes of writing and telling may have changed, it may not be too far-fetched to look for myths in contemporary transformation processes.

It is, however, not enough to establish the plausibility of the subject. An appropriate perspective –a scientific theory or paradigm – is also needed to conceptualize the subject. Organization studies have for some time now dealt with the topic of myth. It “appeared” in mainstream discussion with the rise of interest in organizational culture and later organizational symbolism and discourse (see below), and it was mainly fostered by constructivist or postmodernist theories. Thus, it can be said that the connection between transformation, myth and organization studies has already been established, albeit in a manner that still leaves a lot of questions open. This article addresses some of them, especially those concerning the actors’ rationality and the situational adequacy of their actions within the context of transformation.

Switching from the everyday-reader-of-literature-perspective to a scientific one, the interest in myth(s) stems from its possible contribution to describing and explaining transformation processes. A survey of the literature on East-German transformation that we undertook in 1996 (Alt, Lang and Weik, 1996) showed that transformation processes are quite difficult to describe, let alone explain or forecast. Taking into account the irregularities of frames and structures together with the imponderabilities of individual actions, this may not come as a surprise.

Classic science, to a certain extent, needs repeatable facts and probabilities to explain and predict.

If the researcher into transformation accepts this view, then only two alternatives seem to be open to her: either change your means or change your ends. In this article, I do both. I change the ends by concentrating on description and, if anything, ex-post explanation of transformation phenomena, leaving aside any aspiration to advice or prediction, as I simply believe them impossible, for the above reasons, under transformation circumstances. I will also change the means by relying on the concept of myth, which is obviously not a standard scientific mode of description. How it still relates to scientific thinking is the subject of the following sections.

Furthermore, the exploratory nature of the article should be stressed. As argued below, myth is not a simple and clear-cut concept, but a complex phenomenon which can be explained differently from different perspectives. Which myth perspective is chosen determines the “searchlight” that the notion of myth can shed on transformation processes, that is, the items it puts in focus and its contribution to the description and explanation of the processes. Given the limited scope of a journal article, I have, for reasons given below, opted for the structuralist perspective. In what follows, I discuss the basic elements of the theory behind this perspective, operationalize some of its features, and then move to empirical materials to examine the feasible explanations it can offer. The concluding section gives some starting points for further theoretical and empirical research.

Since the empirical materials have been taken from interviews with East-German managers, there inevitably is a strong focus on managerial behavior and decision-making. Moreover, while the East-German transformation is discussed specifically, I hope to offer some conclusions that can be applied to transformation processes in general.

Particularities of Transformation Processes

Transformation processes are historical phases that differ from “normal” times in various respects. The dominant feature is massive and simultaneous changes affecting the macro (i.e., political and economic), meso (i.e., organizational and institutional), and micro (i.e., individual) level. They result in a partial or complete breakdown of structures, frames of reference and value systems, which in turn creates considerable uncertainty and stress for the actors (Reissig, 1994; Lang 1996).

Figure 1 presents a very simple model of transformation as well as its preceding and succeeding stages. The major thesis of this analysis concerning transformation is that, during the transformation phase, actors cannot rely on “normal” (i.e., traditional and well-known) reference structures for judging and planning their actions, as most of the cognitive and normative guidelines for action have disappeared or can no longer be considered intersubjectively valid. Still, actors have to act. They have to take private and public decisions, lead people and enterprises, and simply get on with their lives. While science, through prescriptive theories of decision-making, planning or learning, is able to provide a lot of advice on “normal” decision-making and acting, these theories cannot be applied to transformation circumstances because they presuppose a comparatively stable and “rational” cognitive frame in which actors can plan and act. Or to put it differently, in order to “reflect” upon one’s situation and course of action, one needs some stable frame to reflect against. If this frame is taken away – as it often is during transformation –, then the conventional concept of reflection (and the theories that go with it) may need some modification.

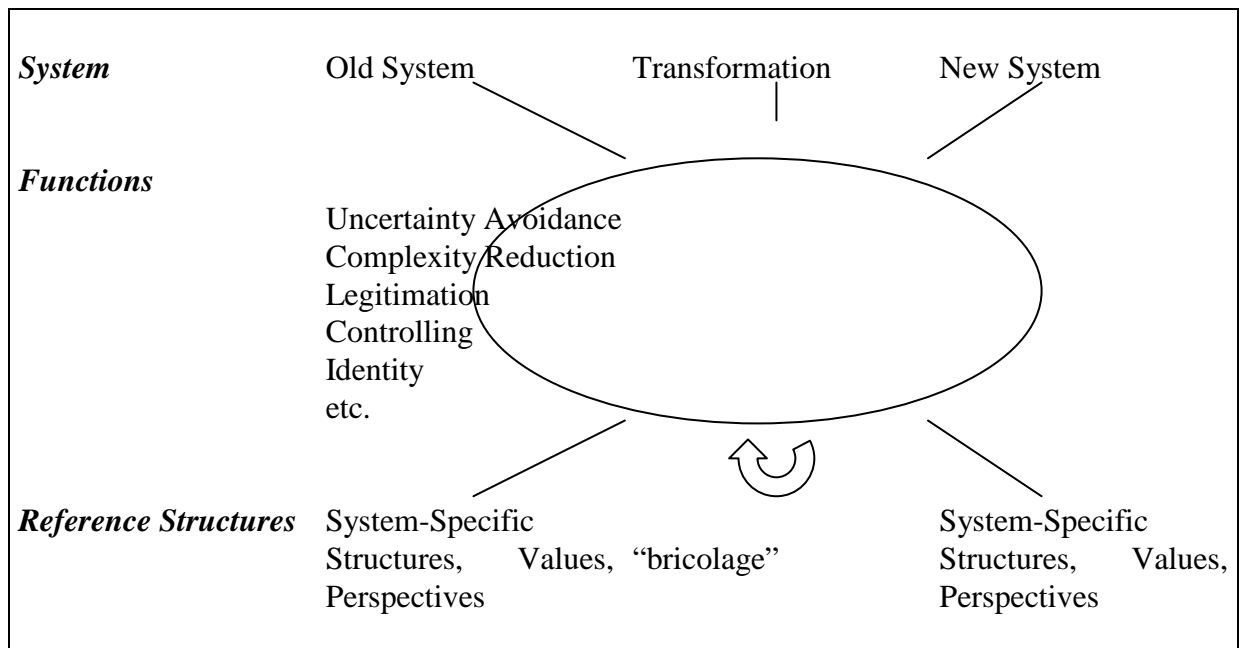


Figure 1: Old System, Transformation, and New System

Still, life goes on, even though classic science may not be able to give advice or even understand what shapes and guides social action. Concepts like “muddling through” or “incremental decision-making” (Lindblom, 1959; Simon, 1978), although useful as labels for this kind of action, depend on stable and comparable data and thus have little explanatory power in transformation times. The same is true for garbage-can models (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972/1990) which need some stability in order to estimate probabilities for specific arrangements (unless they are based on pure coincidence which again reduces their explanatory power). This analysis shows, that the role of myth may shed some more light on these actions which, by normal standards, often are termed “irrational”. It further demonstrates that they are not irrational, but simply follow a different mode of rationality in times when classic rationality must fail because it lacks the necessary conditions.

Myth in Organization Studies

It has been remarked (Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Neuberger, 1995) that myths have become a fashion in organization studies. If one undertook to count the use of the

word in various publications, the claim could probably be substantiated. Especially with the rise of organizational culture, organizational symbolism and postmodernism, and with the interest in narrative, emotions and values that went along with it, myths have also been found present in organizational life. However, as early as 1959 – and long before there was talk of a “fashion” –, Randall (1959/1997) and later Cleverley (1973) started to identify myths in managerial behavior and organizational decision-making. Looking at the literature of the last two decades, two major conceptualizations of myth can be found: one portrays myths as a collective phenomenon underlying (organizational) culture, the other as a fraud or lie designed to legitimate wrong or self-serving purposes.

The former conceptualization, which is proposed by a huge number of publications in organizational culture or symbolism, defines myth as shared meaning (e.g., Bowles, 1997; for a short overview, see Alvesson and Berg, 1992), a set of basic values (e.g., Broms and Gahmberg, 1982) or an archetype (e.g., Steyrer, 1995). Myth here is something ingrained in and inseparable from the foundations of social life and the social construction of reality. Within this broad stream, the conceptualization of myth may take two slightly different forms: one is to regard it in a value-neutral way as one social construct among many others (e.g. Neuberger, 1995), the other is to oppose it to rationality or factual reality by stressing its symbolic, emotional, or non-intellectual character or the elements of fantasy contained in it. In the first version, adopted among others by Meyer and Rowan (1977/1992), rationality is not opposed to myth, but is a myth itself. In the latter version, myths are opposed to rational accounts and become stories of organizational life which, instead of describing reality in a representational mode, use literary devices like metaphor or personification in order to produce a dense version of events feeding back on members' emotions and attitudes (e.g. Pondy, 1983; Bowles, 1997). This version is thus a bit closer to the “lie-conceptualization” discussed below, although it does not use such strongly normative descriptions. Both sub-forms, however, agree that myths serve a number of functions like legitimation, complexity reduction, collective identity formation and maintenance, presentation and explanation of important events, and provision of models for action.

The latter conceptualization stresses the opposition of myth to rationality in a way that myths become wrong renderings of reality, or even lies (e.g., Kubicek, 1995; Neuberger, 1986)¹. Myths, as Neuberger (1995:1583) pointed out, are “especially the myths of the others”, never foundations or devices of one's own thinking. From this classic enlightened position, myths are there to be unmasked and to be replaced by “proper” rational or scientific arguments. A second, less complacent approach in this vein is the discussion surrounding the mythical character of management fashions (e.g., Kieser, 1996), which also tries to establish a categorical difference between “fashionable myths” and “proper knowledge”. Myths here serve some of the above mentioned functions, like complexity reduction, but in a wrong way, because they may be contradictory, serving an ideological purpose, or their acceptance may be driven by managers' anxieties. Thus they do not conform to the conventional rational ideals of transparency, consistency and free discourse.

A variety of examples of both conceptualizations of myth can be found in the literature on transformation. The “myth of the market” or the “myth of capitalism” along with the “myth of the promised land” of post-transformation times, the “myth of management” or the “myth of managerial control” spring to mind immediately. Our own research (Alt, Lang and Weik 1996; Lang, 1998) has identified various myths of this type in the academic discourse on transformation in East Germany. Thus statements about the “formation by the system” and “incapability” of Eastern managers (“dictator and deficient person”) dominated the early years. These statements were in the beginning not even validated empirically. The study of Staudt and Böhm (1990) serves as an early example, followed later by empirically questionable studies in a similar vein (e.g., Wuppertaler Kreis, 1992; Altschuh and Schultz-Gambard, 1993). This myth has still not vanished and is often revived when enterprises with an East-German management fail. There are similar studies for Eastern Europe which often contrast an idealized “entrepreneur” as hero against the leaders of the big state enterprises, who are rendered incapable for systemic reasons (e.g., Johnson and Loveman, 1994; Prokopenko, 1994; , 1995). Shortly thereafter, a second myth appeared. Thus, according to Stratemann (1991) or Myritz (1992), the differences

in behavior and attitudes between East- and West-German managers were not so large, although some East-German deficits still remained; and there were only a few completely incapable East-German managers. On the contrary, the “right” training could quickly put things right. This opinion was (of course) propagated mainly by academics and practitioners involved in the training sector. Both positions rest on an “I am okay, you are not okay” attitude regarding East-West-relations. This attitude is the more surprising since a number of Western managers failed as well under transformation conditions. Their failure, however, has only seldom been the subject of empirical analyses. In recent times, East-German academics in particular (see Glotz and Ladensack, 1995; and in parts Lungwitz and Preusche, 1994) have started a kind of counter-myth, portraying East-German managers as the “heroes of transformation” who succeeded in leading their enterprises and employees through the chaos of system transformation.

However, I am going to pursue an alternative line of argument in the present analysis for two reasons. First, in contrast to the first conceptualization, I want to juxtapose myth against thinking and problem-solving in normal times, assuming it to be a mode of thinking which occurs primarily (although not only) in transformation times. It thus cannot be conceptualized as something omnipresent underlying² every culture. Second, against the second conceptualization, I want to show that mythical thinking is in general as good as rational thinking and may in particular circumstances (like transformation) be even better suited than rational thinking. Specifically, I do not regard it as a fraudulent mode. To provide these two propositions with a stronger foundation, I wish to locate the concept of myth within a wider social-theoretical context.

Theories of Myth

Anthropology and literature studies have always had a keen interest in myths, but other disciplines, like psychology or history, have, with single authors or schools of thought, also contributed to the stock of knowledge. Following Hübner (1985), Reinwald (1991) classified the different approaches into five perspectives, which

he called ritualistic, structuralist, transcendental, psychoanalytic and symbol-related. Table 1 provides an overview of these perspectives.

The *ritualistic* perspective developed in the second half of the 19th century and was heavily influenced by a feeling of European superiority vis-à-vis so-called “primitive” cultures. While on the one hand truly fascinated by the exotic qualities of those cultures, the newly established disciplines of anthropology or ethnology nevertheless served to provide scientific reasons and justifications for the ongoing colonialism of the major European powers. Thinking in myths was identified as something typically primitive. Relying heavily on Darwin’s evolutionist theory, mythical thinking was assumed to be an early stage in the development of human thought, whereas European thinking was the latest. Primitive cultures were considered a real life, open-air laboratory in which one could observe mankind’s development. Myths were a pre-logical expression of the religious and normative beliefs that “those” indigenous people held, and served to maintain moral order and a number of political institutions. The stress on ethics, religion and social institutions demonstrated the non-intellectual character of myth – a kind of thinking that was not, so to speak, proper thinking.

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Stream	Authors	Major Theses	Myth existing in Western cultures?	Myth inferior to scientific thinking?
Ritualist	Frazer (GB), Durkheim (F), Mauss (F), Malinowski (PL/GB), Radcliffe-Brown (GB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - myth as function and institution - myth pre-logical, inefficient - primitive societies on a lower evolutionary stage will in time develop (to European stage) → primitive societies as "laboratory" of human development - focus on societal function of myth 	- no	- yes
Structuralist	Lévi-Strauss (B/F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - myth as specific mode of thinking 	- sometimes	- no
Transcendental	Cassirer (D), Hübner (D)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - search for fundamental (universal) system of ideas in mythical thinking (esp. space, time) - development myth → religion → science - mythical thinking concrete/synthesising vs. scientific thinking abstract/analysing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no (Cassirer) - sometimes (Hübner) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes (Cassirer) - no (Hübner)
Psychoanalytic	Freud (A), Jung (CH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - formation of myth as psychol. phenomenon; myth as mirror of the subconscious - in myth triumph of desire over self-control (Freud) - myths as expressions of archetypes (Jung) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sometimes (Freud) - always (Jung) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes (Freud) - no (Jung)
Symbolic	Bachofen (D), Otto (D), Eliade (ROM), Kerényi (HUN), Kolakowski (PL) Predecessor: Herder (D)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - national/local specificity of myths, harboured in and expression of collective soul - myths as ancient truths → against over-emphasis of rationality in the Enlightenment 	- yes	- no, rather the opposite

Table 1: Five Streams of Myth Interpretation

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The *structuralist* perspective developed in a different historical climate after World War II, and it reflects a certain disillusionment with colonialism and the idea of European superiority. While Lévy-Bruhl in the 1920s and 1930s still clung on to the qualitative difference between “primitive” and “modern”, Lévi-Strauss as the major proponent of this perspective made it very explicit that he considered both modes of approaching reality equally valid. Although “savage” and “domesticated” thinking, as he calls them, differ significantly from each other (see the following section), they are based on the same mental structures, which for Lévi-Strauss form an anthropological universal. Savage thinking cannot only be found in other non-European cultures, but it also forms part of our own thinking, which surfaces from time to time.

The *transcendental* perspective searches for universal structures too, and finds them, as the name implies, in Kant’s transcendental philosophy. Kant (1781/1986) maintained that, in order to make sense, the human mind orders its perceptions before experiencing them (*a priori*). For this, it has “pure forms of the inner sense” (*reine Formen der Anschauung*), namely space and time, which are universal to every human being. The transcendental perspective, as represented by Cassirer (1923/1994), goes on to ask why mythical thinking seems to us irrational when it is based on the same *a priori* forms. His conclusion is that mythical thinking, while sharing the same pure forms, has a different system of concepts and categories. In addition, Cassirer followed an evolutionist perspective, this time from Hegel, assuming a “necessary development of the human spirit”, which again presents mythical thinking as something earlier and inferior to (Western) scientific thinking. Its characteristics are concreteness and a focus on sense perceptions, while scientific thinking has overcome these boundaries and moved on to “pure”, that is, abstract, thought. Within the same perspective, however, Cassirer’s developmental view was criticized by Hübner (1985) who argued that scientific thinking ultimately is also based “only” on shared beliefs, as there cannot be a fundamental scientific proposition which is not a definition or an axiom. Thus, scientific thinking is not epistemically superior or more rational, and the scientific approach to reality is not *the* approach, but only one approach among many others.

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Both mythical and scientific thinking succeed in ordering and explaining reality, but use different concepts and methods.

Although the *psychoanalytic* interpretation of myth has perhaps met with the severest criticisms, some of its tenets have nonetheless stuck (see, for example, the section on myth in organization studies above). The two different streams within the perspective are represented by its most prominent proponents, Freud and Jung. Freud found strong analogies between the development of taboo and neurosis in that both are characterized by an ambivalent attitude of desire and refusal. From this, he inferred that the creation and tradition of myths constitute a psychological phenomenon answering unfulfilled desires. As “primitives” (again an evolutionist perspective) have not succeeded in controlling their desires to the same extent as Western peoples, one can find more myths in primitive cultures. However, myth is not confined to them, but can, like desires, be found in Western societies. Children (the “contemporary primitives”, as Freud calls them) are especially fond of myths. In contrast, Jung maintained a non-evolutionist stance, arguing instead that myths are expressions of the unconscious, which may be repressed but is still active. Myths represent archetypal ideas which are, however, already consciously designed and shaped. Nevertheless, they are part of the collective unconscious of modern humankind and thus in no way confined to other cultures.

Finally, the *symbol-oriented* perspective is a very heterogeneous school of thought which centers around the thesis of the contemporaneity of the mythical. Its origins lie in the anti-Enlightenment currents of the late 18th and 19th century, which argued that there was more to knowledge than (instrumental) rationality. Authors like Heyne and Herder became interested in local customs and legends, and found myths to be an expression of the intuitive and traditional knowledge of national and local particularities - in short, of the people's soul (*Volksseele*). Later authors agreed that myth belonged to every culture to express a non-empirical, non-rational dimension which is nevertheless valid. Evolutionist arguments within this perspective are reversed: since mythical thinking is considered more complete

than scientific and rational thinking, modern humans who rely on it are rather degenerated versions of what they can and used to be.

The study of myth in organization studies as sketched out above has mainly followed either the psychoanalytic or the symbol-oriented perspective. However, a comparison of the five perspectives shows that only two remain as possible theoretical frames if one adheres to the presuppositions stated in the previous section, namely to the equality of mythical and scientific thinking, and to the possibility of the alternating presence and absence of mythical thinking. These are the structuralist and the transcendental perspectives (Hübner's version). In this analysis, I focus on the structuralist perspective, with another forthcoming paper investigating the transcendental one. Within the structuralist perspective, I focus on the work of the major author concerning myth, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962/1994). In the following section, the terms "myth" and "mythical" are used according to his definitions (differing from the use of the previous sections), and are later slightly modified by operationalizing them for empirical analysis.

Savage Thinking

In his book "La pensée sauvage" (1962/1994), Lévi-Strauss often referred to mythical thinking as "savage thinking" and contrasted it with "domesticated thinking" (also often called "scientific thinking"). Although these terms, as so often with opposites, might indicate a normative preference for the latter, he stressed repeatedly that he considered both modes of thinking equally valid. They are not separated chronologically, but are subject to different strategies of coping with the world. Mythical and scientific thinking differ with regard to the following characteristics:

- *Determinism*: Mythical thinking accepts more forms of causality. Apart from "scientific causality" (as *causa efficiens*), similarity, analogy or teleology may also be causes for the development of events and objects.
- *Sign*: Whereas scientific concepts are abstract, mythical concepts function as signs in the structuralist sense. This means that they are at the same time concrete by forming an image of something and abstract by referring to

something invisible or absent. For example, the heart-shaped leaf of a herb gives the visible image of a heart while at the same time pointing to its invisible medical usefulness as a potion for strengthening the heart. On the discursive level, names are often used in this semi-concrete manner. Here it is believed that operations on the name (like creation, deletion or substitution) affect the object or concept in the same way.

- *Classification*: Mythical thinking classifies objects and events by their secondary qualities, scientific thinking by their primary qualities. Secondary qualities are those that can be perceived by the senses (like color, shape or taste), while primary qualities are those that lie on a microscopic or even lower level (like atomic structure or crystalline configuration).
- *Bricolage*: This is the French term for improvisation, tinkering or ad-hocery. In the present context, it indicates that mythical thinking produces new perceived objects, structures and explanations by taking existing objects, structures and explanations and recombining their elements, which are still identifiable afterwards. In contrast, scientific thinking deduces from abstract concepts and axioms producing outcomes that do not resemble previous results. Thus, in mythical thinking, projects are not planned from scratch. Rather, adherents search their (arbitrary) reservoir for useful things which may be incorporated in a novel manner. Everything is stored and everything is useful within the limits given by its current form or material. In starting a new project, no new concepts are developed, but the current reference structure is reorganized. However, “. . . mythical thinking is not a prisoner of events and experiences it constantly orders and reorders to discover a sense in them; it is also liberating: by protesting against the non-sense [i.e., obscure primary qualities] with which science up to now has compromised” (Lévi-Strauss 1994, pp. 35ff.).

A survey of these characteristics shows that mythical and scientific thinking cannot be regarded as dichotomous or logically opposite forms. They are ideal types residing at two ends of a continuum, but in practice, it may sometimes be difficult to separate them so clearly.

Both modes commonly involve thinking, and this meant for Lévi-Strauss that they follow a will to order the world that surrounds us so that we can manage our affairs. In figure 1, I listed several functions which may serve to specify this ordering function. Again, I share with Lévi-Strauss the contention that mythical and scientific thinking fulfill these functions equally well, albeit with different instruments.

Empirical Findings

Empirical materials can support or falsify empirical hypotheses, but not any of the five perspectives discussed above. As ways of looking at the world, each will always produce its own verification when applied to empirical materials. Hence the aim of this section is not to “prove” the superiority of the structuralist perspective, but to demonstrate that it can render useful explanations of people's behavior in times of transformation.

The materials stem from various studies conducted by my colleagues Rainhart Lang, Ramona Alt and Thomas Steger from 1992 to 1996. They interviewed managers of East-German companies (not only East-Germans) with regard to their experiences during transformation, their attitudes and value orientation, and their personal and professional trajectories during that time. The interviews were narrative in character and of one to three hours in duration.

My analysis of these materials is secondary for two reasons. The first is historical. During the primary analysis of these materials, there was a feeling that what, by any standards of detached scientific observation, counted as “irrational behavior” appeared to be perfectly reasonable from the point of view of somebody living in East Germany at the time (as we did). Hence my intention was to find a scientific approach to reconcile these apparently contradictory observations. The second reason is methodological. As stated above, myth and mythical thinking often carry negative connotations. Thus, it is almost impossible to ask people directly for instances of mythical thinking, especially managers, who, acting under uncertainty, have to justify every decision with rational arguments. Even

secondary analysis cannot avoid this problem completely, because one can never be sure how much rational thinking took place during the decision-making process, and how much was *ex post* rationalization. Still the materials can provide some insights into mythical thinking because, with very long interviews, it is improbable that the interviewees, while certainly providing some *ex post* rationalizations, would be able to redesign their accounts completely and consistently in this fashion. In general, due to the structuralist philosophy of science, attributions like “rational” or “mythical” are imposed by the researcher and are not based on any reflexive activity of the interviewees.

Moreover, the analysis, as its primary counterparts, is qualitative. While, given the narrative nature of the object, it may not be necessary to discuss this methodological choice at length, it seems nevertheless necessary to point out one major shortcoming of this kind of study, viz. the impossibility of giving any precise quantitative measure to the phenomena presented. Hence quantity is only referred to in terms of “often”, “seldom” etc. It would have been most interesting to see how exactly the frequency of the characteristics discussed below varied over time (or in comparison with non-transformation times), but this could not be done within this frame of analysis. Consequently, passages presented in this paper have been selected for their typicality, as judged from the background of somebody living in East Germany, rather than their frequency.

Conceptualization of Characteristics and Empirical Illustrations

In this section, I enlarge upon Lévi-Strauss's analysis by drawing on examples from our empirical materials. First, I treat determinism and signs together, since questions of causality and sense-making often appear in the same passage and therefore cannot be separated at the empirical level. Second, I apply the concept of *bricolage* in the analysis of the transformation experiences of East-German managers. I omit consideration of mythical classification since the materials, probably due to its social nature, do not provide satisfactory instances.

Determinism and Signs

When times become unpredictable one might theoretically expect a decrease in causal connections as intransparency and coincidence increase. However, the findings point in the opposite direction: instead of viewing events as isolated and undetermined occasions, people tend to establish more or less complicated constructs with regard to cause and effect. Doing this, they not only refer to “normal” Western concepts of causality, but also to those typical of mythical thinking, such as teleology or causality due to similarity. Some general observations may help to illustrate this point.

During transformation times, it is quite obvious on both the macro and the meso level that *names and rites* are attributed an extremely important role. People may not admit this when asked, but it is hard to find another way of explaining the huge number of changes in East Germany ranging from street names to names for enterprise departments and functions. These changes are the more surprising since they incur high monetary costs at a time when resources for both the state and companies are scarce and badly needed elsewhere. Furthermore, a lot of the former names did not even carry a special meaning regarding the old system. In companies, for example, German names for functions and departments were usually exchanged for English names, like “Leiter” for “manager”. Still, renaming was carried out with a single-mindedness that cannot be explained by the standard symbolic value of names and labels as in non-transformation times. Rather, there was a certain “name-magic” involved as people hoped to shed contents along with their labels. This “name-magic” occurs when objects and their representations are viewed as identical (see Weik, 1998, pp. 158ff.), and representations in the form of rites or images are manipulated with the intention to manipulate the object itself. Passages from the interviews also show how names and ceremonies, like party membership or modes of staff selection, receive special attention far beyond their recognition in “normal” times:

I was the engineer responsible for the manufacturing scheduling. After that, I was the technical manager of production, and even before the turn [German Wende, i.e. the events of 1989/1990] I became director of the plant

here at Leipzig. I never was a member of a party. Even today I do not belong to any party. It has become important to stress that (Executive director, 1995).

Interviewer: If I understood correctly, you have been in this company since 1990.

Interviewee: By competitive appointment (Technical director, 1994).

Another aspect of mythical causal explanation is a *stress on intentional causality* and accordingly a strong tendency of personalization. Events are interpreted as outcomes of intentional activities by certain persons, groups or institutions (very prominent, in the East German case, the “Treuhand”³). From this situation may even result a pathological corporate culture (Kets de Vries, 1991) in which managers feel permanently persecuted by either competitors, the government, the Treuhand or the banks. Instances of this attitude could also be found in our interviews:

In the end, you stumble from one magic word to another, and none makes good on its promise. The first magic word was D-Mark, the second market economy, and now it is production planning and control system. People think they can push the button on the first of January, and everything will run smoothly (Works council member, 1992).

For example, first of all we invested in a new computer system. And with this computer system it is possible to fulfil scientific-technical tasks, like the analysis of parts lists, in a quality that was unthinkable before (Technical director, 1994).

Both passages point to the concentration on one tool or concept which is believed to be a panacea. The stress on monocausality stands in stark opposition to the observed heterogeneity of events. In the first example in particular, the D-Mark and the market economy are taken to signify more than abstract economic concepts; instead, they are causes actively determining the course of events – often leaving no space for personal or entrepreneurial decision-making. This *over-*

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determination can create two different reactions. Firstly, a certain amount of *fatalism* may be displayed:

What is there to decide? Who knows who will buy us and which [computer] system they use? (HRM director, 1992).

We could have refused, but we did not see any sense in it. If we had refused, we would have wasted our energies. Next year, with the coming of the joint stock company, it would have happened anyway (Works council member, 1992).

Instead of retreating into fatalism however, people may also become anxious to establish *reassuring patterns of explanation* – although a detached observer may find it difficult to discover any logic of selection if 90 percent of the staff is dismissed:

Of course, you ask yourself [with regard to imminent dismissal] why me, why not the other person . . . well, somehow you are . . . you reassure yourself saying I am better than he is, so why me (Manager, 1995).

Bricolage

With the previous experiences of East-German managers devalued and those of West German managers rendered useless by transformation circumstances, it became almost impossible to plan and decide in ways envisaged by prescriptive decision theory. However, although consistency and integration with regard to frames of reference and value systems are a thing of either the past or the future (see Figure 1), there are still many “free floating” single, individual experiences and values to which managers resort, because they must base their judgements on something. As we are used (and, in the case of managers, often forced) to give our arguments and decisions an appearance of consistency, private “theories” about the transformation and its functioning become established. They can be characterized by a mixture of old and new values and knowledge that are sometimes combined with special forms of causality (see above). Thus, one can,

for example, detect many patterns of thought which have been formed in a symbiosis between Marxist-Leninist education, Marx's critique of capitalism, experiences with the old juridical system⁴ and central economic planning on the one hand and transformation experiences on the other. This *bricolage* is fostered by an environment which is so highly dynamic that plans would not make much sense even if they could be made. In these circumstances, one has to take the people and tools at hand and try to make the best of it:

[T]hen he had to prove if he could do it or not. Things have happened when we had to sack people. For example, three or four months ago we had to fire our distribution manager, whom we had taken over from MZ [motor company], because he simply couldn't cope . . . Could say that as well of new people we have employed from West Germany . . . [a] procurement manager whom we had to fire, and then we took an employee from the company. This is a continuous process where simply everyday work shows whether somebody can live and work with it or not . . . At the end of the year we will be around 165, and then a company can only function if everybody can substitute for everybody else, and things are done efficiently . . . Professional skills, of course, play an important role . . . but we sometimes also use unconventional methods . . . We have a young man . . . He completed his studies as a teacher in '82, and then trained to be a baker, and now has been managing the sale of the Elektro-Roller [motor vehicle] for the last six months . . . We have, we were of the opinion that the man himself, we met him . . . when he asked for the position all by himself, and we found that he had certain potentials and is used to working on his own . . . He wanted so hard to work with us, and we had looked for somebody . . . and then we just took the risk . . . and he then had to jump into the cold water, and it worked, and on the other hand we employed a highly qualified man from West Germany with experience . . . and after some time, he didn't meet our expectations . . . You cannot say I must get the best people from there [West Germany] or any other place and then it will work. This is going to fail because here in the East you live in a . . . Well, building an enterprise, as we are trying, that's not easy (HRM manager, 1995).

The example deals with the process of personnel selection in a very concrete manner and the description certainly not conform to HRM textbooks. As a result of trial-and-error learning, people found out that even carefully planned personnel selection does not provide any guarantees for successful work under transformation conditions. Thus, they experiment. Similar experiences were recounted in other interviews:

Due to the turn, I broke off my studies in 1990, because it did not matter any longer. I then came to [company] and started in the accounting department in 1990. After nine months the dismissals started. For me they found a job in HRM. There I stayed until the end of 1992, no, sorry, until the end of 1991. I conducted all the dismissals, and in the last round it was my turn. I mean, there were social selection criteria, i.e. age and income of the family and so on, and thus I was sacked too. Then I went into job training for two years training for a recognized job in commerce. After that, I had a trainee position here at [company] for one year working at the procurement department, and there I could qualify for a job in the department, and here I have been since, let me think, the beginning of 1994 at [company] again (Manager, 1995).

And this second level of management, too, was exchanged, and almost everywhere new people moved to the top. And thus there were many conflicts, but . . . it is not like that; some of the old managers with their stock of knowledge and experiences have remained at the company. They have not all been . . . have sometimes taken lower positions (Technical director, 1994).

This experience has not been limited to managers:

[A]t this point I was still happy to take this job. I reorganized the whole stock throwing things out, labeling. And suddenly everything was in vain. No, not this, go there now. Well, everything is so short-term with somebody saying you should start doing this, and you don't know if tomorrow they think of something else (Worker, 1992).

These instances of biographical and professional *bricolage* must be taken all the more seriously as in both East and West Germany pride in professional skills and education has played a much more important role than in Anglo-Saxon countries. It is the rule to have trained employees for even comparatively low-hierarchy jobs; and both workers and managers regard this long personal investment in education and training as part of their identity. Thus it does not come as a surprise when short-term personnel planning is considered unacceptable:

First of all, there is no management here. It is kind of an insult to management what we have here. No, I really see it like that, coolly, these are neo-capitalists – or whatever you want to call them, I don't care – they haven't got a clue. Trainee management, if you like, is the best I can say about this (Engineer, 1992).

On the other hand, *bricolage* is not limited to biographies or careers. The following example shows how the very concept of the company is assembled from available historical and contemporary ideas:

Nobody [of the employees] knows the force with which the market economy can hit. They must feel the punishment of the law. [...] A company only lives from the correctness of its employees. It must be able to trust in them and vice versa! [...] We still have the old heritage here and believe in friendliness and helpfulness (HRM director, 1992).

Conclusion

It is no surprise that this study raises more questions than it gives answers, even though the latter are significant.

One “answer” is that evidence of mythical thinking as defined by the structuralist perspective can indeed be found in transformation processes, and that the theory behind it can provide some explanations of people's accounts, experiences and perhaps even motives. By providing elemental characteristics of mythical thinking on the one hand, and an integrative (*bricolage*) view of the characteristics on the other, it allows an interpretation of complex phenomena (such as people's

reflections on their experiences) without having to break them down into little pieces which can never be reassembled. It also “rationalizes” this kind of thinking in a way that makes it more understandable for those trained in scientific thinking. On the normative level, a theory proposing the equality of both modes of thinking can perhaps also contribute to a fairer exchange of views between East and West – a political and cultural problem that has been most prominent after German unification. Furthermore, the concept of *bricolage* can serve as an integrative concept for other, non-structuralist theories as well. For example, the (socio-)logic of *bricolage* finds strong resonance in ethnomethodological arguments about indexicality, reflexivity and everyday accounting practices (Garfinkel, 1967). As with *bricolage*, these concepts are based on the assumption that words, objects and structures have different meanings (and thus different uses) in different situations. In both cases, it is rather the local characteristics of the situation which make the actor (re-)define or (re-)combine relevant elements than any long-term “rational” strategy.

As to questions, quite a number arises from the application of this perspective to the research materials. As far as the actors are concerned it would be interesting to see whether findings differ between groups of interviewees as a result of the different amounts of pressure they face concerning rationalization. It might be assumed that managers, for example, are under much higher pressure to rationalize their actions and thus may resort less, or less openly, to mythical thinking. The frequency of mythical thinking may also vary over time. Judging from our evidence, it seems that while the early years provided many instances of *bricolage* and determinism, the interviews of the later period became more and more “normal”. This could be explained by new frames of references becoming established which facilitate a return to scientific thinking.

In a more discursively oriented vein of study one could investigate what other (typical) forms of complexity reduction can be found in transformation times. Perhaps the classificatory scheme here could be elaborated by additional findings with regard to the various functions listed in Figure 1. As stated before, mythical thinking is not limited to transformation times, and instances of mythical thinking

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may also be found in “normal” times. Hence it would be interesting to investigate the nature of the circumstances surrounding its appearance. More specifically, it could be asked if there are any constraining or promoting external factors for the different forms. This, in turn, could provide clues as to what makes transformation times, perhaps even categorically, different from other times.

Finally, with regard to the myths themselves, one could ask which myths prevail and why. It would be interesting to see, for example, why and how the difference between market economy and planned economy became a category that could explain everything on every level. This could lead to processual concepts of myth creation and degeneration like, for example, life cycles.

Further research into such questions seems inevitable, but this should not be seen as failure, but rather as an indication of how fruitful this perspective can be.

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Notes

¹ Neuberger (1995:1583) cites the study of Ingersoll and Adams according to which the negative connotations of "myth" dominate the positive by 16:1.

² The objection of whether one needs the word "myth" if it just means "basic assumption" should in my view be taken seriously. However, I cannot discuss it in this paper.

³ The "Treuhand", the privatization agency in East Germany, operated between 1990 and 1994. During this period, around 8,000 firms were fully or partly privatized or given back to their old owners, while around 4,000 enterprises were closed down.

⁴ Examples are: value instead of process orientation, lesser ambivalence, lesser importance of courts