

Emily Hulme Kozey  
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## The Noble Lie Revisited: Myth-Making and the Advent of New Gods in Athens

### Abstract (500 words)

Plato, great lover of Truth and Being, was not above planting a well-designed bit of propaganda into his utopia. Indeed, in the third book of the *Republic*, Socrates explains that the founders of the city will need to use a ‘noble lie’ in order to inculcate a sense of patriotism in the guardians and other citizens. Great philosopher though he was, this is a sign of his authoritarian side, a result of his privileging the overall well-being of the state over the rights of individuals.

Or is it? In this paper, I show how the strategy of using new myths as political tools was, in fact, very common in the Athenian democracy. In the first section, I introduce the idea of democratic mythmaking by examining the case of Theseus. It is widely accepted in scholarship that Theseus evolved as a hero in response to political motivations over a period of some two hundred years. Literary and material sources indicate as much, with the advent of new myths about the hero that respond to contemporary political concerns. The Theseus myth is hardly unique in this respect, but the changes in this myth over time are especially well-documented. The changes in this myth were even noted by ancient writers, including Plato himself in the *Minos*.

We might wonder, however, how “democratic” this kind of mythmaking is. It is *taking place* in a democracy, but is it any different than the kind of mythmaking that could take place under an oligarchy? In other words, is the *Demos* speaking through these myths—or merely a *Geist*? The approach taken in the second section will respond to this question. In this section, I focus on the records of the activities of the organs of the democratic state—that is, the *ekklesia* and the *boule*—who would literally vote upon religious initiatives. Myth would play a role in these decisions. This will be discussed extensively by way of reading the very first lines of the *Republic*, wherein Socrates tells us he has just been at the inauguration of the cult of Bendis. This cult was inaugurated during Socrates’ lifetime and he, like all members of the Athenian *demos*, would have been aware of the political motivations and machinations behind its introduction.

The argument, then, proceeds in two steps: first, we consider how myths were politically motivated or influenced in the sense that politics influenced popular literature and art that in turn expounded these myths to subsequent generations; and then we’ll see first how myths are political tools in the sense that they were literally voted upon and used in democratic decision-making. In the final section, we return to the Noble Lie to reckon with what does, and doesn’t, make it authoritarian. Ultimately, my contention is that the use of myths is hardly particularly authoritarian; and, far from excusing Plato, this should motivate us to be on guard for mythmaking even in contemporary liberal democracies.