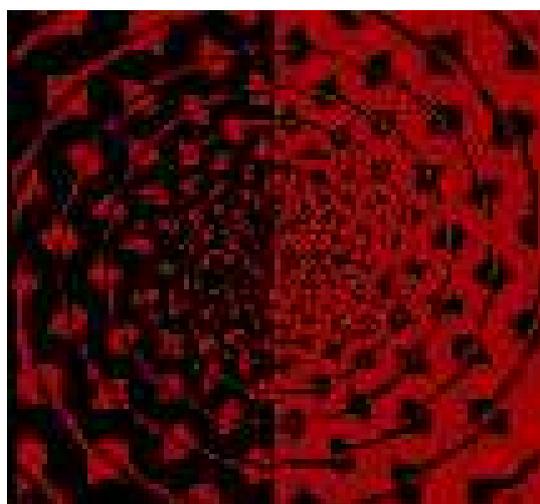


Les Carnets du Centre de Philosophie du Droit



**The Concept of Plural Subject :
A Symbolic Mediation of Social Differences**

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N°: 132

2008

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This paper may be cited as : Alessio Lo Giudice, "The Concept of Plural Subject : A Symbolic Mediation of Social Differences", n° 132, 2008

The Concept of Plural Subject: A Symbolic Mediation of Social Differences

by Alessio Lo Giudice (CPDR)

1. Introduction

This text deals with a problem deriving from the growing relevance of the postnational dimension in politics and law: juridical imputation of acts and beliefs to social entities can no longer be exclusively solved through the model of the nation-state. Indeed, the widespread cultural and institutional pluralism jeopardizes the centrality of the national sphere, it affects the ‘great divide’ between private and public law, and it obscures the status of agents as well as determinants in transboundary legal developments.

My intention is to show, using the schema of plural subjectivity, the ways in which we can deal with the question of imputation – foundational from the legal and political point of view – without running into any category mistakes that often guide the theoretical configuration of collective individuals. At the same time, I do not want to fall victim to the kind of methodological individualism in which unity is only a linguistic label for aggregated plurality.

Therefore, I deal with an opposition that has been marked by the classical terminology of social ontology: individual and collective on the empirical plane and, in particular, plurality and unity on the legal and political planes. On the one hand, there is no point in denying the factual plurality of individuals, cultures, and institutions that comprise the social plane, which is no longer confined to a national schema. On the other hand, we must appreciate the undeniable need for unity that postnational politics and law demand in view of social integration.

My conceptual inquiry finds its *raison d’etre* precisely in this socio-political fact. Indeed, pluralism as a sociological term and subjectivity as a philosophical term delineate the plural subject as a legal-political center of imputation that is both institutional and non-institutional. In this sense, the political subject should be articulated in its capacity to accommodate differences and, thus, plurality. Therefore, by introducing the category of plural subject¹, I do not set aside

¹ There are different possible approaches to this category. Within contemporary studies on social ontology Margaret Gilbert’s account of the plural subject is prominent. See: M. Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992; Id., “Reconsidering the ‘Actual Contract’ Theory of Political Obligation”, *Ethics*, 109/2, 1999, pp. 236-260; Id., “Social Rules: Some Problems for Hart’s Account, and an Alternative

collectivity as a social movement in the making; instead I intend to capture its political expression through institutional self-organization. The result is a conception of the plural subject as a synthesis of movement and institution.

Indeed, I argue that we should appreciate the need of what Habermas calls an *Abstraktionsschub*, that allows people to perceive the collective dimension as one that promises to accommodate differences. In this regard, the history of modern phenomena of social and political integration confirms that, in order to trigger integrative processes, it is actually necessary to express the political in a symbolic way. Therefore, studying the relationship between institutions and symbolization is the fundamental aim of this paper.

In a democratic context of discursive participation, it is even more difficult to accept the idea of an immediate and a-critical faith in the symbolization of the political as a source of social integration. Yet it is equally difficult to assert that one could guarantee integration simply by virtue of the rational acceptability of the normative claims advanced by institutions. That is why I want to put forward a new theory of the plural subject as a symbolic form. By symbolic form I mean a generative scheme or rule – a scheme allowing the faculty of imagination to focus on specific objects and transform them into images that yield truth claims yet to be tested. In elaborating upon this conception, I take my cue from Cassirer's idea of a symbolic form as a productive rule of a field of experience, enriched by Ricoeur's conception of the symbol as a decipherer of reality. The plural subject as a symbolic form works by means of a double process of revealing and concealing. Through what it reveals we can have an idea of what it conceals. On the basis of this idea we could be able to determine the conditions of possibility of the processes of postnational integration. Presented in this form, the conception of the plural subject proves to be extremely useful.

2. Symbolization and Institutionalization

The starting point of my analysis is the study of the relationship between symbolization and institutions. This relationship must, in turn, be investigated on the basis of the generative capacities we could ascribe to the symbol. Two constitutive features immediately emerge: the relationships between the symbol and what it reflects and between the symbol and what it generates. Through these two features we can identify the link between symbol and reality – in our case, the political reality. The empirical social data are that which is reflected, while the political reality is that which is generated. Symbolic form allows individuals to obliquely communicate with other individuals by virtue of reference to an instance that is imagined to address a plurality of individuals in

Proposal”, *Law and Philosophy*, 18/2, 1999, pp. 141-171; Id., *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006.

some unique way. Thus, when investigating the relationship between symbols and institutions, it is definitely necessary to show the foundational role of social and political meanings that symbols express.

This is, for example, the approach essentially taken by Cornelius Castoriadis², whose politico-philosophical theory finds in the imaginary the creative form of meanings that define intersubjective relations at a political level in such way that the meanings are actually rooted in social actors and objects. This entrenchment explains the representative, and thus institutive, capacity of symbols to express social meanings. Social meanings are instituted precisely by representation, that is by being pictured as present in spite of their absence.

A further step towards the analysis of the symbolic form can be made following John R. Searle's study of the construction mechanisms of social reality³. According to Searle, a distinction must be drawn between factors of reality intrinsic to nature and factors that exist only in relation to the observers' intentionality. The latter factors hint at every agent's capacity to assign a certain function to those objects whose existence is not independent from subjective action. In addition to this individual capacity to assign a function, for Searle the phenomenon of collective intentionality is significant. Indeed, any fact that involves the expression of a collective intentionality belongs to social facts. Moreover, institutional facts are a sub-class with respect to social facts. They only exist within systems of constitutive rules, namely rules that give birth to the various activities they are meant to regulate.

The interconnection of these three features (agent's capacity to assign a function to objects, collective intentionality, and constitutive rules), being the texture of social reality, is the necessary and sufficient condition for the possibility of an institutional level. Institutions are simple default settings of collectively assigned functions within a system of constitutive rules. In the end, however, the ultimate keystone of Searle's reasoning is the capacity to handle symbolic systems of representation, like the use of language, so as to build the institutional dimension, allowing the development and the expression of the three aforementioned features. Symbolization is the condition of Searle's conditions of possibility for the institutional level. The symbolic function thus acquires a normative value in the sense of becoming a constitutive rule of the institutional reality. To the extent that this symbolic function is constitutive of social reality by virtue of institutionalization, it belongs to the core of political action.

One example that could clarify these reflections is a social group that builds walls around a territory. Let's suppose that these walls are so big and strong to keep out the enemies of the group and keep members safely inside. Let's also

² See C. Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Seuil, Paris, 1975.

³ See J.R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, Penguin Books, London 1996.

suppose that the walls fall down, leaving just a feeble line of stones on the ground – totally insufficient in order to perform the physical function of maintaining the division between inside and outside – and yet both members of the group and “strangers” continue to acknowledge the separating function of that line, establishing a procedure in order to regulate the passage of people and goods through it. We could then say that the passage is not regulated by natural and a-political aptitudes, but by the perception of the line as a source of rights and duties.

This example is a paradigm of the passage from the physical to the symbolic dimension in politics and of the symbolic function itself. After the walls fall down, territorial delimitation, political identification of friend and enemy, and the perception of rights and duties no longer depend on the physical reality of the walls, but on what the few stones symbolise. This symbolic operation is above all developed by virtue of the collective intentionality that attributes a *status* and a function to an object that is physically unable to acquire that *status* and perform that function. The transformation rule that captures this operation at the level of philosophical reflection is what I mean as a symbolic form. This does not imply, clearly, that the operation itself is a matter of philosophical reflection. What it does entail and explain is the close conceptual connection as well as the difference between symbol and symbolic form.

3. Discursive Acting and Symbolic Expression

Up to now we have dealt with the relationship between institutions and symbolization. However, a conceptual analysis of symbolic forms is especially crucial in view of the typically normative aspects of such a relationship. Representing their own claims of validity through symbolic expression, institutions convey the reasons of political obligation. To what extent do symbolic forms in and of themselves affect the criteria for membership and grounds of political legitimization? Could symbolic forms still carry out their integrative functions today? If so, in what terms?

An interesting analysis proposed by Jürgen Habermas aims to show that the natural force of symbolic forms has decreased due to the growth of discursive and democratic participation in the political decision process⁴. Just think of the huge discussions that arise when, in the political sphere of any state, an attempt is made to describe – and perhaps legally enforce – the core meaning of the nation that a particular state incorporates. According to Habermas, the discursive practice of contemporary democracies would weaken the attractive force of symbolic forms since, in order to perform a normative function, they should be the object of a natural and undisputed belief.

⁴ J. Habermas, *Zeit der Übergänge. Kleine politische Schriften IX*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt-Main 2001, III part.

Habermas, however, underestimates the fact that a similar ineffectiveness concerns the argumentative justifications – the models of rationality deployed to establish the validity, legitimization, and obligating force of legal and political systems. Against the backdrop of a phenomenon like multiculturalism the ineffectiveness of legal rationalism and its institutions speaks to the fact that the rational acceptability of reason is not integrative all by itself. Models of rationality do not by themselves become the source of a social boost for whomever has to decide to share their own existence with others; it takes something more, something that generates the images that allow for the articulation of social and political meanings. The symbolic sphere cannot be renounced, or else one risks paralysing the motivational push towards integration – that sort of alchemy between individual and collective interests that defines the nucleus of every civilization. What the theoretical analysis could therefore aim at is an understanding of the conceptual structure of the legal-political relationship between rationality, symbolization, and obligation. To this end, we need to analyse the reflections of two philosophers whose theoretical inquiries focus on these precise themes: Ernst Cassirer and Arnold Gehlen.

4. Rationality of the Symbolic Process according to Cassirer

A characteristic of symbols in Cassirer's theory⁵ is expressivity: symbols possess the capacity to condense instinctual impressions, transforming and expressing them as images of a field of experience. Cassirer confirms this by referring to the further characteristic of constitutivity. Symbolic expression builds up the first stages of what we could call 'objectivity for us', namely a reality that is not just 'out there', but that is 'we-out there', in which we recognise ourselves in spite of its being outside us. In symbolisation, we set ourselves apart from the world while retaining this very relationship of 'apartness' to it. Thus the world becomes knowable by the individual in the profound sense of 'knowing': if I know that p , then it is the case that p .

One of the privileged ways of a symbolic form being constitutive is through the capacity to functionally represent the reality without being a mere copy of empirical data, which characterizes the specific autonomous logic of the symbolic process. The constitutive value of the symbol makes it a structural element of thought: the symbolic expression does not precede the conceptual determination of the content, but it is simultaneous to it and remains largely implicit in it. Summing up the previous features, Cassirer's theory entails that no rigorous theory of social integration can be built without the foundation of a symbolic theory; indeed, such a theory should be aimed at establishing the conditions of possibility to know the political realm and thus generate it.

⁵ See E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen, I: Die Sprache*, Bruno Cassirer, Berlin 1923.

Furthermore, the images generated by the symbolic process carry with them “the colour of sensibilia”. The relationship between sense experience and symbolic activity is therefore complementary, where the symbol is the objectifying image that transforms, condenses, and expresses sensory data. Such supposition of rationality, inherent in objectification, is articulated through another characteristic: the claim to truth and value. Indeed, a symbolic form puts forward a truth claim yet to be tested. The symbolic function is therefore precisely that of going beyond the contingent social experience to present a conceptually universal standpoint. This also highlights the overall signifying function of the symbol. An additional characteristic of the symbol lies in indicating a direction, thereby structuring a prospective vision that can establish a project, in our case the project of a political community. This seems consistent with the rationalizing function, considering that in our case such a function entails planning the future on the basis of images of the political reality.

We have thereby obtained two outcomes relevant to my general thesis. We have briefly studied symbolic forms and their characteristics (mainly expressivity, constitutivity, autonomous logic, sensory colouration, claim to truth and value, signifying function, rationalizing function, and prospective function); we have also understood that, precisely due to the rationalizing function of the symbolic process, symbolic forms are able to root rational knowledge, expressing in an intelligible and objectifying way the reasons that could motivate individuals to build socio-integrative bonds. Applying the rationalizing function of the symbolic process to the political and legal realm, the symbolic form can establish the framework for deploying the argumentative force of political-legal systems – which, however, require their own internal reasonableness as a condition, even if not sufficient, of acceptability.

5. Arnold Gehlen and the Force of an *Idée Directrice*

I would like to compare the functions and characteristics of symbols found in Cassirer’s theory with Gehlen’s view⁶. Gehlen’s philosophical anthropology is founded on the structural incompleteness that characterizes man as a being requiring self-discipline. Not having specializations means, however, being open to the world and being naturally decontextualized. Therefore, men undergo a multiplicity of stimuli and impressions that, if in one way cause unforeseeable situations, also demand to be managed.

On this theoretical basis, Gehlen defines the so-called principle of exemption. All burdens naturally imposed on man, because of his physical deficit, are transformed into appropriate tools to guarantee his survival. A process of exemption develops through acts that transform natural pressures and

⁶ See A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, Junker und Dünnhaupt, Berlin 1940.

consolidate human capacities. Hence, the necessity of a symbolic operation arises. Man, as a being who acts, gathers a set of experiences that partially allow himself to disanchor with respect to nature. Among the devices to initiate this distancing are the symbolic forms, which displace objects, making them available and manageable beyond immediate contact and context.

Therefore, within the process of exemption and orientation, symbolic forms carry out a determining function, breaking the “circle of immediacy” and thus producing a space that can be panoramically expressed and governed. The expressive function of symbolic forms highlighted by Cassirer thus shows up in Gehlen’s anthropology too. In addition, both Gehlen and Cassirer deem it necessary to appreciate the “sensory colouration” of the symbol. As for Gehlen, the symbol does not alter the actual objects, but represents them through an intention that is independent from their physical presence.

Consequently, the analysis of imagination becomes fundamental. Gehlen conceives of it as the faculty to represent previous experience, as the displacing capacity oriented towards a future project, as the capacity of distancing from immediacy. These characteristics make the imagination the *elementary social organ*. Indeed, according to Gehlen, every group acquires its reality as long as it is represented, through the imagination, in a common and symbolic non-I that stimulates an action conforming to mutual obligations. One example is the symbolization comprised in a totemic process. This process starts with the identification of the group with the totemic animal; every member of the group is identified with the animal conceived as a common non-I. Yet this individual identification with the totem generates a reflexive practice that constitutes the self-awareness of the group. The following process results: from the group as mere aggregation to the individual identification with the totem, and then from the individual identification with the totem to the individual awareness of being part of *our* group. This dynamic entails also normative outcomes to the extent that it guides and governs action from a specific point of view: consequences for others and for oneself as ‘the other for others’. For instance, consider the general prohibition of killing the totemic animal and, as a corollary, the prohibition of killing the “brothers”, i.e. the co-agents of the group since, after the individual identification with the totem, everyone acquires the same nature of the totem. In this way, the totem symbolizes the constitution of the group and guarantees integration based on mutual duties.

Thus it becomes clear that the signifying function of the symbolic operation is also in the background of Gehlen’s theory. But where Cassirer appeals to the rationalizing function of the symbolic form, Gehlen emphasizes its stabilizing function. For him the latter is indeed the role of every guiding idea as a socio-political image provided by the symbolic process. This *idée directrice* generates centres of social gravity such as institutions – contexts of adaptation of behaviour – so that spaces for superior types of activities can be made free. This

means that we cannot, as from their foundation, interpret institutions as outcomes of a rational action driven by a goal, independent of the capacity of the symbolic process to generate the *idée directrice* of these institutions.

6. The Symbolic Hermeneutic of the Plural Subject

Considering the functions that a symbolic form carries out, we could say that a symbolic form is a generative scheme allowing the imagination to produce images from a field of experience such that we become able to articulate our being in the world in terms of truth and value. In turn, a symbolic form itself appears only as a system of symbols, a world of images systematically organized to enable knowledge of an aspect of the real; it is a constitutive rule of production of *our* reality. Clearly, it is both an epistemic and a normative rule. With these results in mind, I mean to read the idea of plural subject, as a centre of legal-political imputation, applying the schema of symbolic forms. Therefore, if we aim to verify whether the plural subject can be qualified as a symbolic form of the political, we should take into account that its symbolic nature should presuppose the Ricoeurian conception of the symbol as an element of organization and decipherment of reality⁷. Thus, a symbolic form cannot be articulated without an account of the symbols it generates. Ultimately, the hypothesis to be tested is that the plural subject is a system of symbols considering that its generative function expresses the need, for any group, of an image of a group *taking itself as object qua subject*. In explaining when and how this is at stake we may point to common linguistic praxis, to the multifarious references to the collective entities in subjective terms, and to the historical-political articulation of processes of social integration.

In order to lend support to the argument here, the comparison between Cassirer and Gehlen appears vital. Even though I will come back to the difference between their conceptions, the conceptual platform is largely a shared one. Therefore, the value of the plural subject as a symbolic form can be clarified by virtue of the characteristics explained above.

The plural subject carries out a transformation of social data (*expressivity*). That is, it changes immediate perceptions of social experiences into the expressions of the political realm in which they will have to receive their normative meaning. The social conflicts and divisions are not themselves erased or concealed; it would be neither possible nor useful to do so. Instead, they are expressed in a political sense, represented within the political sphere as signs of what happens at the level of an organized collectivity. Thus, conflicts are channelled and ordered through concrete political images, such as ‘harmony’, or

⁷ This approach could be verified in P. Ricoeur, “Le symbole donne à penser”, *Esprit* 7-8, Juillet-Août 1959, pp. 60-100.

‘growth’ or ‘welfare’ or ‘guardianship’ in the institutionalized methods of social coordination between unities.

The plural subject constitutes political “reality” for the individual (*constitutivity*). It attributes an ideal politico-legal meaning to the empirical social phenomena through its contributions to the conceptual structure of the centre of imputation. By virtue of its imputational function, for instance, we can think of the institution/individual relationship, the relationship between states or political entities, the administration of justice in the name of the people, and the relationships between individuals regulated by law. The plural subject is a sort of vanishing point from the threshold of the political realm, where an internal/external relation is articulated. Therefore, it enables us to perceive the transcendence of political unity with respect to social divisions. Its symbolic nature appears through its capability to mediate and coordinate these differences on the base of a shared political project.

The plural subject possesses an autonomous logical structure based on the scheme of subjectivity (*autonomous logic*). This scheme enables the plural subject to be not a conceptual copy of a supposed macro-person, but rather a generative rule of political images that, to the extent they are mutually connected, create political reality. The properties of will and personality are outcomes of the structure of subjectivity and the logic that governs its expression. For example, the logic of mechanisms for attributing legal personality to collective entities is based on the necessity to functionally represent intersubjective relationships accomplishing a shared project. Inherent in the predicate ‘shared’ is already the structure of subjectivity: it functions as an index of agent that is capable of referring to itself as object qua subject, of demonstrating this capacity over time, and of intending to keep doing this in future.

Obviously, the plural subject is “coloured” by social facts within a specific culture or history (*sensory colouration*). It is not pure abstraction. It generates images of the political realm that are rooted in contingent social experiences of individuals and groups. For this reason, the plural subject indeed designs political reality and not a presumed political metaphysics.

Moreover, being a centre of political-legal imputation, based on a unifying schema of reasoning, the plural subject acquires the quality of a standpoint that conceptually goes beyond conflictual contingency (*claim to truth and value*). Therefore, the political order entailed by the imputational function of the plural subject is a truth claim yet to be tested. It puts forward a schema aimed at ordering the society and conceived as a condition of integration. However, the truth claim needs to be verified. Indeed, for several reasons, the concrete attempt to regulate society on the basis of the model of plural subjectivity could succeed

or fail. Such a claim to truth and value is thus the expression of potentiality of the political realm.

Previous features could be summed up by saying that the plural subject generates its own world of images that contribute to determining political reality (*signifying function*), coloured by the images that the project conveyed by the plural subject is able to generate in specific circumstances of place and time. In this vein, a collective entity that plans to establish respect of human rights as the hallmark of its politics, is able, following the imputational schema I put forward, to express its aim as the will of a culturally “coloured” plural subject – a will that it is aimed at imposing its content on the components of the plural subject and using it in order to assess the relationships with third subjects⁸. This signifying function could be tested in relation to other images and meanings, such as that of political progress, solidarity, inclusion, exclusion, self-legislation, and so on. When Cassirer affirms that the content of symbolic signs is condensed in the signifying function, to our ends he points out the core of the symbolic nature of the plural subject. Its content is not aimed at promoting hidden meanings per se; its content coincides with the ability to signify political reality and produce the signs of the political realm.

Finally, the plural subject shows direction; it does not reveal the unknown political future, but evokes the way towards this unknown dimension (*prospective function*). In the postnational context, the “unknown” seems to be the project of social integration itself, given the conditions of widespread pluralism. However, it is precisely the “unknown” that makes it possible to think by starting from the symbolic form of the plural subject. Therefore, the plural subject at the same time reveals and conceals. It is enigmatic because, on the one hand, it reveals the conditions and the structure of a process of social integration, while on the other concealing the outcomes of the concrete implementation of such conditions and structure. Above all, it conceals the way of interconnecting the model of plural subjectivity with contextual and historical conditions. Precisely by concealing the exact mechanisms of this interconnection, the symbolic form is able to accommodate unforeseeable conditions. Thus, the plural subject poses the first condition of the route for integration, which – in order to be fully followed – of course demands the settlement of concrete political wills.

Taking stock of these considerations, I submit that the whole argument developed for dealing with theories of symbolic forms attests to the validity of a general thesis: *the plural subject must be interpreted as a symbolic form of the*

⁸ This is the reason why, for instance, the concept of state has taken on so many different values in the course of history: a polis or an empire, a nation, a people, a minority, a ‘member state’ or a supranational subject as the European Union. In all of these cases, as well as in others, the political image of a collective will is generated by the schema of plural subjectivity.

political. We now have to detail this verification by making explicit the laws that seems to govern the plural subject in the political realm.

7. Laws Governing the Working of Political Plural Subjects

We have seen that the plural subject as a symbolic form mediates between individuals and social facts generating the political realm. This mediation occurs by generating a set of images that enable people to capture the political meaning of social facts, particularly in view of political integration. However, the general mediating function is not performed by the symbolic form exclusively. To be sure, the rationality of the reasons for integration is also crucial for the mediating function of the plural subject to become normative. The symbolic form of the plural subject, therefore, crystallizes in what it conceptually conveys: namely, the procedure of a democratic and discursive action that poses the premises for the acceptability of the norms.

Nevertheless, there is one specific point that we have to take from Gehlen rather than Cassirer. Going back to the expressive function of the symbolic forms, we appreciated already the creative and transforming power that symbolic forms structurally possess. Gehlen takes this to extreme consequences; indeed, he does nothing other than reveal the “natural” aptness of the symbolic form to apply its generative structure in view of a claim to rationality. To be sure, the symbolic form is not something we can create, rather we can only grasp its meaning and function, and take advantage of its products. Actually, to the extent we proceduralize its expression and dispute its origin, we also neutralize its generative and expressive function.

Therefore, the plural subject as a symbolic form of the political is governed by two complementary mechanisms: it carries out its mediating function, conveying political content produced by discursive and rational action, thereby conveying reasonably acceptable normative claims; and it also preserves its generative function and thus its normative and integrating force – which brings to fruition rational claims – by maintaining a sphere of indisputability, untranslatability, and opacity, as Habermas admits. Thus, in deploying the second mechanism, an immediate normative aspect would be ensured that cannot be put to the test of discursively mediated acceptance. To explain this aspect, we should appreciate that through the symbolic form of the plural subject the individual perceives the potential of collective action in solving common problems and achieving common goals, despite ignoring the exact functioning or the precise outcomes of this action. In fact, the logic of the plural subject is to a certain extent totemic in Gehlen’s sense; it is the logic of the common non-I becoming authoritative. By virtue of this third person “relatively extraneous” to the individuals involved, the individuals can identify themselves as parts of a whole to which they *belong* in the strongly normative sense of the word. Thus,

the plural subject provides a symbol of “belonging together” on top of “being together” and of the norms that guarantee cohabitation⁹.

Such considerations open the way for the fundamental philosophical question that conceiving the plural subject as a symbolic form of the political entails. The problem is how to conciliate the immediacy of the symbol of plural subjectivity and the mediation of the thought – of the intellectual construction – to which this symbol gives rise. The enigmatic value of the plural subject has to be respected. While we engage in creatively disclosing a range of its potential meanings (from more to less received), we should then maintain that its full potential of meanings will never be exhausted. What we retrieve in the end is the social and political perspective that it contains for us, here and now, in condensed form, plus the oblique awareness of not yet accessible meanings.

I propose to deal with this issue through the hermeneutic approach as laid out by Paul Ricoeur¹⁰. His is a plea for grasping the full philosophical and methodological consequences of hermeneutic philosophy with regard to the symbol: the symbol gives rise to thought (*donne à penser*). According to one version of the hermeneutic circle understanding and believing are mutually complementary¹¹. For instance, to understand someone’s behaviour you have to take for granted that he or she is doing things for reasons, and inversely to believe that someone does things for reasons you have to understand the link between reasons and action. The symbol requires both understanding and belief. Thus, to believe in the symbol of the plural subject, it is necessary to understand it; but in order to understand it, it is equally necessary to believe in it. In our case, to believe in the plural subject means precomprehending the issue of social integration as a perspective within which to measure the integrative value of this symbolic form – in other words, to assess the value of a legal-political centre of imputation that is symbolically articulated. Through creative interpretation, we must then come to understand the potentiality of further meanings to which the symbol leads. The precomprehension so entailed is quite different from an a-critical form of immediate belief as it cannot be disconnected from articulated understanding. Throughout this hermeneutic process one senses that the symbol is a gift to the extent that it enables us to engage this circle of understanding and believing. In this sense, I mean the plural subject as the revealer of political reality in a particular constitution.

⁹ There is a lesson to be learnt here about the effort we should make in practical socio-political life. In practice, what it all amounts to is a sustained effort to find and foster symbols that express the functional unity of a political reality condensed in an order of meanings – in other words, to understand the processes of postnational political unification as paths laid out around a centre of prospective political imputation. Rather than vainly search for a presumed common prepolitical cultural unity on which to base institutional realities, it is necessary to appreciate the symbolic and integrative quality of a future-oriented project.

¹⁰ For a specific development of this approach see P. Ricoeur, *De l’interprétation. Essai sur Freud*, Seuil, Paris 1965.

¹¹ See R. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen: gesammelte Aufsätze*, I-IV, Mohr, Tübingen, 1933-1965.

8. Limits and Perspectives of the Symbolic Forms of the Political

My plea for plural subjectivity as a symbolic form of the political is not unconditional, nor is it insensitive to objections. It is now time to deal directly with the problematic nature of the idea of the plural subject, which involves analysing some potential constraints that may obstruct its functioning.

The first potential constraint is the alleged crisis of ideological support, which – if we look back in history – a process of political symbolization seems to demand. Actually, in the first place, by conceiving of ideology in terms of false awareness (including a system of distorted communication, strategic manipulation of reality, or – most of all – asymmetries of power) we have all sorts of reasons not to regard it as supportive in constituting a polity at all¹². Let us therefore make a distinction between ideological and teleological support. Indeed, we may welcome any crisis of the former as alleged above; instead, we do need the latter in achieving a political and social *telos*, and for this the symbolic form of the plural subject provides openings to a non oppressive project.

In the second place, we should deal with the element of “uncritical” precomprehension in the symbolic form. The scope of this precomprehension is proportional to the evocative force of the symbolic form and to its immediate attractive capacity. Because we are dealing with limits and perspectives of the plural subject, I grant that this evocative force can be distorted by manipulative communication and so can become capable of misleading individuals. But one should not underestimate the critical potential of a symbolic form once it is accepted. It may easily turn against those who try to manipulate it in favour of their own political strategy. This may, for example, explain European citizens’ obstinate endorsement of the project of a united Europe that has been in development for almost 50 years in spite of all efforts to frustrate it motivated by nationalism. At present, even the critics of the European project cannot but argue their case in terms of ‘a better future for Europe’, even if they plead a more independent position for their favourite member state. They can hardly plead *Alleingang* anymore, on penalty of placing themselves completely out of the discussion.

Other constraints may occur, including the alleged absence of a tradition in support of contemporary symbolic expression. This should allegedly constitute a serious deficit for the symbolic expression of the political realm that plural subjectivity guarantees. Tradition would come in support of a symbolic political perspective since the continuity between past and present is a propulsive boost towards the future. Yet, first and foremost, tradition does not exclusively refer to

¹² For a similar account of the notion of ideology see J. Bohman, “Formal Pragmatics and Social Criticism: The Philosophy of Language and the Critique of Ideology in Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Action”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 11/4, 1986, pp. 331-351. See also: N. Bobbio, *Teoria generale della politica*, Einaudi, Torino 1999; Id., *Saggi sulla scienza politica in Italia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1996.

a given homogeneity or a natural-historical collective subject, but it can be well understood as the expression of the evolution of intersubjective relationships within a society. Tradition, therefore, is a product of the symbolic form, not an external support of it. The very concept of tradition is linked up with conceiving *oneself* as a plural subject over time. Therefore, we find that tradition is the consciousness of the plural subject – namely the self-awareness given by the self-ascription of actions, beliefs, and projects¹³.

An additional constraint may concern the plural subject's generative capacity as a symbolic form. The resulting social and political self-inclusion inevitably and symmetrically corresponds to exclusion. This could structurally hinder multicultural integration: Weber talks about a polytheism of values precisely referring to the conflict generated by exclusivity in beliefs when these correspond to a plurality of centres of value¹⁴. Is there a way out of this? In particular, can the symbolic forms that express the political realm develop even beyond culturally separated contexts?

We could say they can as far as they build a political dimension that aggregates and integrates on a projectual basis. In principle, whoever wants to join the project is included provided that the cultural background one brings to bear on the project does not contradict one's own commitment as a member. Going back to the case of the European Union, accession procedures, based among other things on specific parameters meant to assess the actual legal enforcement of human rights within accessing countries, are the expression of such a possibility. The point then is not to deny the inclusion/exclusion dynamic, because it is a law of political action at every level, but rather to build a sphere within which the inclusive potentialities are so wide as to reduce the social range of the exclusions they also inevitably involve.

The most problematic issue implied by the conception of the plural subject as symbolic form is the risk of an authoritarian drift. We have seen to what extent the symbolic form of the plural subject transcends the level of the empirical dialogue on single political contents. This implies, as we saw, a sphere of indisputability. If this would amount to a prohibition on discussions about the common identity of the polity, this would be strongly incompatible with discursive and democratic practices. However, a possibility of reconciliation with the democratic system does exist in the way through which the arena of deliberation and discursive proceduralization is transcended.

¹³ For example, the ongoing European tradition of the legal enforcement of human rights is becoming a hallmark of the European Union's plural subject. Indeed, it is not the exclusive product of a long tradition rooted in the past of Europe, but rather the expression of a political choice for the future of Europe. It is the expression of the current European Union's way of understanding intersubjective relationships, as conveyed in the symbolic form of the European Union.

¹⁴ See M. Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, 1919.

In a totalitarian context, the indisputability of the symbolic form of the political comes from the coercive imposition of an oligarchy of power¹⁵. In a democratic context, such indisputability can be instead legitimized through the awareness that even a disagreement between majority and minority, or for that matter between minorities, is still a disagreement within a political whole, which is somehow united in these disagreements; that no majority will ever use its position to prevent the minority from becoming majority; and that human rights are inviolable even if do not enter any bill without restrictions. In other words, we may think of a kind of collective awareness that certain foundational elements of the political realm should be presupposed in spite of conflicts.

The enigmatic nature of the plural subject comes back – that is, the enigmatic and concealing nature of whatever promise of social integration. The plural subject represents the very possibility of conceiving a collective project. It does not comprise everything, but it selects sufficient keys to point to the promise of a shared future. It, therefore, provides a mould for narrative collective identity¹⁶. Narrative identity combines the static cultural sedimentations with discontinuous events, forming an intelligible synthesis out of them. This allows the interpretation of contingent events in a unified, though not homogeneous, frame, thanks to the project-promise that the subject brings along with it as a guiding idea. In this sense, the conceptual meaning of the political perspective, a shared future, becomes clear. It is not the expression of a providential order, but rather the normative capacity of a projectual political action. The plural subject, therefore, should be thought of as a symbolic centre of imputation that regulates the promise of social integration.

¹⁵ For an insightful analysis of this dynamic see: C. Lefort, *L'invention démocratique. Les limites de la domination totalitaire*, Fayard, Paris 1981; Id., *Essais sur le politique. XIXe – XXe siècles*, Édition du Seuil, Paris, 1986.

¹⁶ Here I take my cue from P. Ricoeur's conception of narrative identity as it is put forward in Id., *Soi même comme un autre*, Édition du Seuil, Paris 1990. For alternative approaches see also: C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989; A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana 1981.

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