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On the Mode of Existence of Symbols: An Actor-Network Perspective on Identification and Group Formation

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Abstract. This paper analyses a specific aspect of the contribution of actor-network theory (ANT) to political theory, focusing on the role of symbols in forming groups or publics. Focusing on Bruno Latour's work in political ecology, the paper interprets ANT as an argument for including the affective dimension in politics. First, it explores the origins of the concept of symbol in ANT, drawing on the work of Tarde, Durkheim, Dewey and Lippmann. It then considers the «symbolic engineering» through which Latour aims to generate ecological mobilization by presenting James Lovelock's Gaia theory as a symbol for the ecological movement. The conclusion paves the way for further research by highlighting the differences between the concept of symbol in ANT and the left populism of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau: drawing on the reading of Dewey by Matteo Santarelli and Justo Serrano Zamora, ANT is presented as a pragmatist alternative to populism that recognizes the need to maintain symbols in touch with the reality they are supposed to stand for.

Keywords. Actor-network theory, Bruno Latour, ecology, populism, John Dewey.

1. *Introduction*

Actor-network theory (ANT), born in the 1980s from a combination of ethnomethodology and semiotics, can be described as «a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities, and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located» (Law [2009]: 141). Although ANT has been successfully applied in an increasing number of fields, it has not yet realized its full political potential, despite the efforts of its first proponents: Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law. This paper presents ANT as a political method of group formation centered on the concept of *symbol*.

Much of the success of right-wing populist parties depends on «the current depoliticisation of politics advocated by Centrist political projects» (Stavrakakis [2007]: 213), and left-wing politics has not done any better: by depicting political actors as «Spock-like beings, devoid of passion and other human emotions» (Benford in Goodwin et al. [2001]: 7), it has overlooked the role of emotions in collective action, presenting them as exclusive to the right-wing tendency to irrationally follow the gut. The instauration of an ascetic political universe, in which emotions are incompatible with reality-based praxis, caused progressive politics to either lose its appeal or degenerate into technocracy.

This is especially true of political ecology, that has been one of the main areas of application of ANT in recent years. In particular, Latour's work on the «New Climatic Regime» or «Gaia» is permeated by a plea for political ecology to accept the political agency of affects: «we must continue to search for the tools necessary to finally translate certainty, anxiety, guilt and embarrassment into a general mobilization» (Latour & Schultz [2020]: 40). A shared emotional response to the ecological crisis must be induced to create a «public» around the ecological issue: crafting symbols in which people concerned with ecology may recognize is a crucial step in this process. Social movements need to be reoriented by crafting symbols that adequately represent our ecological predicament, because an «issue» can only attract a public if it is represented symbolically, condensing a set of questions, values, and attachments on behalf of which people are willing to act. Even though Latour was critical of the concept of symbol, that he saw as dependent on the reductionist talk about «the Symbolic» – «The symbolic is the magic of those who have lost the world» (Latour [1984]: 187) – we will argue that his attempt to reactivate ecological affects is best understood as an actor-network elaboration of symbolic politics.

Of course, the possible uses of symbols have been a constant preoccupation of political theorists: what Murray Edelman defined as «condensation symbols» «evoke the emotions associated with the situation. They condense into one symbolic event, sign, or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories

or humiliations, promises of future greatness... Practically every political act that is controversial or regarded as really important is bound to serve in part as a condensational symbol» (Edelman [1964]: 7). What ANT adds to these views is a more in-depth analysis of the ways in which symbols work to tie actors together in a group. In doing so, ANT offers an alternative perspective on group formation to that of mass psychologists such as Le Bon, as well as to psychoanalytic theories of identification with a leader, beginning with Freud (and also to the social monadology of Gabriel Tarde, to which ANT owes a lot). If «our political future resides in the task of deciding what binds us all together» (Latour [2005b]: 8), then that future will be determined by symbols, and Latour's most frequent criticism to contemporary ecological movements is that they have not been able to *represent* the ecological question in such a way to collect a public around it (see especially Latour [2015]). In short, every political deficit is to an extent a *performative* deficit: «the very definition of politics is seeking out people who are not present together... and who form what Benedict Anderson calls an “imaginary community” through an extraordinary peculiarity: a performative address in which we can recognize ourselves, even though it has no mimetic character» (Latour in Citton [2014]: 154).

Our main source will be Latour because, among the classical champions of ANT, he has developed the political strand the most, particularly with regard to the formation of groups (or collectives, or publics). We will therefore just need to make the concept of symbol, which pervades much of his recent work, explicit. However, the results should be generalizable to ANT as a whole and provide an interesting perspective on the mechanisms behind the formation of political identities. Also, although our case study will focus almost exclusively on ecology or the «people of Gaia», the concept of symbol singled out in this paper can apparently be extended to any form of political identity – including apparently conservative ones, a question that will be addressed in the conclusion.

The first section of the paper will analyze the insights that Actor-Network Theory (ANT) takes from sociologists such as Tarde and Durkheim, and theorists of the public such as Dewey and Lippmann, to demonstrate that much of ANT's political theory stems from ideas conveyed by other thinkers through the concept of the symbol. According to ANT, society is not an already constituted whole; «the social» is a fragile web of modes of existence that must be composed through a difficult collective process in which symbols play a decisive stabilizing role. The second section examines Latour's «symbolic engineering», i.e. his tips on how to create a symbol, with a particular focus on his criticism of heroization. This approach emphasizes the importance of creating new symbols rather than identifying with pre-existing actors, which exposes a group to a sort of symbolic tyranny in which a single actor capitalizes all the potency of those who associate with him. In the conclusion, following the

reading of Dewey by Matteo Santarelli and Justo Serrano Zamora, the ways in which Latour's pragmatist-inspired politics distances ANT from the left populism of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau are briefly discussed, opening the way to further enquiries.

2. *On the mode of existence of symbols: sociology and the theory of the public*

As Latour makes clear in *Reassembling the Social* [2005], most of ANT's insights into group formation come from Gabriel Tarde's social monadology (see especially Tarde [1890]). Against the classical sociology of Émile Durkheim, who considered the social as an already constituted field, Tarde was the first to explain solidarity between actors (or monads) not by fusing them into a totality that scales up and defines a new dimension, but by sewing them together through the agency of an actor that does not become «bigger» than others. Tarde replaced the metaphor of the Big Animal or of the Body Political with the rhetorical figure of *metonymy*, through which one actor comes to *stand for* all the others: «The whole is only one part among others which circulates like a cloud of qualities grouped in the middle of the monads... *the whole is a part taken for the whole* and which circulates differently thanks to forms to which the most extreme attention must be paid» (Latour [2011]: 10-2). It is this capacity to «circulate» that we erroneously define in terms of a «whole»; for example, France is not «something superior in dimension and in authority, in materiality and in ontology, to the billions of billions of entities» it gathers, but is an actor like all the others that «only circulates as a simplification of them all» (Latour [2011]: 5).

Latour never explicitly uses the concept of symbol. However, many definitions of the symbol convey the same idea that Latour draws from Tarde: a symbol is a sign that circulates without totalizing; it stands for something larger than itself; it is an actor that holds other actors together without «scaling up» or degenerating into a leviathan. Moreover, this Tardian heritage is best understood as an elaboration on insights taken from three other authors who interpreted the same mechanism in symbolic terms. Two of these authors are John Dewey and Walter Lippmann, who anticipated the need for symbolic condensation to guide the public through the complicated issues of the contemporary world. The third author is the more surprising Émile Durkheim, to whom ANT usually opposes Tarde's sociology of associations.

Let us begin with this *bête noire* to whom ANT theorists owe more than they are willing to admit. Durkheim learns that symbols are «material forces» that shape societies when he analyzes totemism in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1915], where terms like «emblem», «flag», and «coats of arms» recur. The totemic object is a symbol designed to make tangible the impersonal

force known as the totemic principle, but it is also «the flag of the clan, the sign by which each clan is distinguished from the others, the visible mark of its distinctiveness, and a mark that is borne by everything that in any way belongs to the clan: men, animals, and things» (Durkheim [1915]: 208). The totemic object is not a transcendent fetish; rather, it interacts «horizontally» with the practitioners of the cult: «the power to which the cult is addressed does not loom far above, crushing him with its superiority; instead, it is very near and bestows upon him useful abilities that he is not born with» (Durkheim [1915]: 225). As a result, «primitive societies are not Leviathans that overwhelm man with the enormity of their power and subject him to harsh discipline» (Durkheim [1915]: 226).

This concept of the symbol is strongly at odds with the reading of Durkheim as the origin of the tendency to hypostatize Society. Latour recognizes this in *Reassembling the Social*, his most anti-Durkheimian work, which includes a long quote of «Durkheim having a Tardian moment» (Latour [2005b]: 38):

That an emblem is useful as a rallying center for any sort of a group it is superfluous to point out. By expressing the social unity in a material form, it makes this more obvious to all, and for that very reason the use of emblematic symbols must have spread very quickly once thought of. But more than that, this idea should spontaneously arise out of the conditions of common life; for the emblem is not merely a convenient process for clarifying the sentiment the society has of itself: it also serves to create this sentiment; it is one of its constituent elements. Moreover, without symbols, social sentiments could have only a precarious existence... But if the movements by which these sentiments are expressed are connected with something that endures, the sentiments themselves become more durable. These other things are constantly bringing them to mind and arousing them; it is as though the cause which excited them in the first place continued to act. Thus these systems of emblems, which are necessary if society is to become conscious of itself, are no less indispensable for assuring the continuation of this consciousness. So we must refrain from regarding these symbols as simple artifices, as sorts of labels attached to representations already made, in order to make them more manageable: they are an integral part of them... The unity of the group is visible, therefore, only in the collective emblem reproducing the object designated by this name. A clan is essentially a reunion of individuals who bear the same name and rally around the same sign. Take away the name and the sign which materializes it and the clan is no longer representable. (Durkheim [1915]: 230-3)

In the 1986 essay *The Powers of Association*, Latour commented on the same quote as follows:

The main point [Durkheim] made during this short lapse is that the *durability* of the definition of the clan depends upon the *duration* of the resources used to make it hold together. The clan is a weak and short-lived notion, and it becomes longer lasting and stronger with tattoos, flags, names and scarifications. This means that in defining society we need a *longer* list that includes, of course, the notion of clan, but *also* includes flags, colours, names and tattoos. (Latour [1986]: 275)

Without using the term, Latour acknowledges that a collective is held together by the circulation of symbols. This is confirmed by the role that Latour assigns to Lippmann and Dewey, the theorists of the public who, in the 1920s, responded to Graham Wallas's diagnosis of the Great Society (the interwar precursor to globalization, in which it became increasingly difficult for ordinary people to find their way) by promoting the use of symbols to rally people around specific political issues. These symbols should have simplified complex issues, enabling people to understand and engage with them without delegating everything to experts.

In *Public Opinion* [1922], Lippmann makes the mediation of a symbolic «pseudo-environment» necessary to guide people through the Great Society. Against Le Bon and other mob psychologists, symbols are sufficient to explain mass behavior without invoking an «oversoul». Ideals and shared values, the heroization or demonization of certain figures, the «stereotypes» (a neologism introduced by Lippmann) on which our default approach to others depends – these are all symbols that condense a set of stimuli into an issue around which public life can revolve. As Lippmann explains with the example of Wilson and Americanism:

If among a number of people, possessing various tendencies to respond, you can find a stimulus which will arouse the same emotion in many of them, you can substitute it for the original stimuli. If, for example, one man dislikes the League, another hates Mr. Wilson, and a third fears labor, you may be able to unite them if you can find some symbol which is the antithesis of what they all hate. Suppose that symbol is Americanism. The first man may read it as meaning the preservation of American isolation, or as he may call it, independence; the second as the rejection of a politician who clashes with his idea of what an American president should be, the third as a call to resist revolution. The symbol in itself signifies literally no one thing in particular, but it can be associated with almost anything. And because of that it can become the common bond of common feelings, even though those feelings were originally attached to disparate ideas... when a coalition around the symbol has been effected, feeling flows toward conformity under the symbol rather than toward critical scrutiny of the measures. It is, I think, convenient and technically correct to call multiple phrases like these symbolic. They do not stand for specific ideas, but for a sort of truce or junction between ideas. They are like a strategic railroad center where many roads converge regardless of their ultimate origin or their ultimate destination. But he who captures the symbols by which public feeling is for the moment contained, controls by that much the approaches of public policy. And as long as a particular symbol has the power of coalition, ambitious factions will fight for possession. (Lippmann [1922]: 205-207)

A «strategic railroad center where many roads converge» is exactly what is needed to rally people around issues as complicated as globalization or ecology. In Lippmann's symbolic realpolitik, politics consists of a struggle to «capture» the symbols that make it possible to capitalize public opinion. However, in Lippmann, this becomes the basis for the demolition of the romantic idea that «the people rule»: in *The Phantom Public* [1927], democracy is reduced to the agonistic choice between symbols representing a few alternative parties.

On the contrary, Dewey is as realistic as Lippmann about the fact that only through symbolic filtering can the public cope with the complexity of the Great Society, but he is more concerned with participation and confident about the possibility of preserving it even in the face of growing technicality:

As symbols are related to one another, the important relations of a course of events are recorded and are preserved as meanings. Recollection and foresight are possible; the new medium facilitates calculation, planning, and a new kind of action which intervenes in what happens to direct its course in the interest of what is foreseen and desired. Symbols in turn depend upon and promote communication. The results of conjoint experience are considered and transmitted. Events cannot be passed from one to another, but meanings may be shared by means of signs. Wants and impulses are then attached to common meanings. They are thereby transformed into desires and purposes, which, since they implicate a common or mutually understood meaning, present new ties, converting a conjoint activity into a community of interest and endeavor. Thus there is generated what, metaphorically, may be termed a general will and social consciousness: desire and choice on the part of individuals in behalf of activities that, by means of symbols, are communicable and shared by all concerned. A community thus presents an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action. (Dewey [1927]: 152-153)

The following passage, in which Dewey blames the «eclipse of the public» on the lack of symbols capable of mediating issues in this way, is an almost literal anticipation of Latour's lament about the inability of green movements to adequately represent the ecological question:

the older symbols of ideal life still engage thought and command loyalty. Conditions have changed, but every aspect of life, from religion and education to property and trade, shows that nothing approaching a transformation has taken place in ideas and ideals. Symbols control sentiment and thought, and the new age has no symbols consonant with its activities. Intellectual instrumentalities for the formation of an organized public are more inadequate than its overt means... Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible. (Dewey [1927]: 142)

ANT follows this lead. If *representation* is so central to Latour's ecological proposal, it is because the stakes of the New Climatic Regime need to be condensed into an image to which many can relate. His use of symbols is a response to Ulrich Beck's [1986] diagnosis of the «risk society», the 1980s update of Wallas's Great Society, which also highlights the increasing technical nature of public issues and the difficulty laypeople face in understanding them (cf. Marres [2005]). Complexity threatens to paralyze people because it prevents them from acting on the basis of a single motive, and our capacity for symbolic creation has not kept pace with the speed of the New Climatic Regime. ANT politics is in many ways a reprise of Dewey and Lippmann's concept of the public, and an attempt to serve ecology by framing it as an issue around which people must

be brought together through the proper use of symbols that can elicit collective identification and solicit mobilizing affects. The shared affectivity that sustains a public depends on an actor that circulates through many others – on a symbol that arouses the affects necessary to mobilize an ecological public.

2. *Symbolic engineering: symbols vs. heroes*

Tarde provides ANT with the general framework of its monadological sociology; Durkheim, despite his conservative view of the social as an already constituted whole, exposes the symbols that underpin its formation; Dewey and Lippmann – the former in a pragmatist-meliorist way, the latter pursuing an agonistic or realpolitik version of democracy – show how a public can be created and led to cope with the issues of the contemporary world, such as globalization and ecology, only through the proper use of symbols. The interplay between these authors leads ANT to advocate what Lisa Disch calls a «mobilization conception of representation», in which processes of representation «participate in forming demands and social cleavages, not merely to reflect them»; their aim is «not to reproduce a state of affairs but to produce an effect: to call forth a constituency by depicting it as a collective with a shared aim» (Disch [2011]: 107). It is because a public must be «narrated into being» that «both thought and practice need fiction» (Latour [2015]: 283). Symbols are such fictions. Much of Latour's work can be read as *an exploration of the conditions under which an actor can become a symbol, beginning to circulate without scaling up*. There is a «symbolic engineering» in Latour, in the same sense that philosophers speak of «conceptual engineering», that spells out the conditions that maximize the symbol's capacity to circulate and allow it to channel the «floods of emotion» that activate politics.

The importance of such engineering becomes clear when one considers the many possible symbolic framings of the ecological question. In 2016, Trump presented himself as the symbol of the popular resentment against experts, while Hillary Clinton presented herself as the «symbol of technocracy» (Sismondo [2017]: 4) – no wonder she lost. This is the context in which Latour wrote *Down to Earth*, where political oppositions such as local vs. global and left vs. right are presented as obsolete in a warming world, «like a circular saw cutting through thin air» (Latour [2017a]: 48). To dispel the confusion that afflicts public life, Latour proposes a pair of new «attractors», buzzwords that condense different cosmologies and channel «floods of emotion» and «political affects toward new stakes» (Latour [2017a]: 49, 90). These phrases are echoed almost literally in the quotes from Lippmann and Dewey above: attractors are Latour's way of conceptualizing the political agency of symbols. After Trump's election, world

politics had to be framed in terms of an opposition between the *hors-sol*, the Out-Of-This-World attractor of the climate deniers, and the Terrestrial, the attractor of those who were still concerned with the preservation of our planet.

Prior to the Terrestrial, Latour had been working on another symbol for the ecological movement: Gaia. This is the mythological name through which biologist Lynn Margulis and especially chemist James Lovelock attempted to convey the idea of the mutual dependence of the inhabitants of this world. Gaia remains Latour's most successful attempt at providing the ecological movement with a symbol around which to gather.

Classical mob psychology *à la* Le Bon and psychoanalytic theories of identification based on Freud would suggest turning Lovelock or Margulis themselves into the leaders of the new ecological struggle, or finding other leaders – one thinks of Greta Thunberg, whose «superpower» to unite people under the banner of ecology is admired by Latour. However, Latour takes a different approach due to his distrust of heroes. ANT's philosophy of praxis does not have identification with a leader as the core of group formation. Gabriel Tarde (1893) himself fell into this error, denounced by Latour through the «critique of heroization» he has carried out since *The Pasteurization of France* (1984). Latour's main source here may be quite surprising: it is Lev Tolstoy. Just as Tolstoy denied that the Russian campaign could be reduced to the decisions of Napoleon and Kutuzov, Latour denies that Pasteur alone can explain the scientific institutionalization of microbes. This was due to an uncountable list of actors – Pasteur himself, the French Academy of the Sciences, the new scientific instruments, the preexisting scientific theories, a series of pamphlets through which Pasteur tried to promote his ideas, not to mention the vast army of *microbes themselves*. This is Latour's comment on *War and Peace*:

In that book, Tolstoy summons up hundreds of characters to give depth to what for him is the essential question: What can one man do? What does a great man like Napoleon or Kutuzov really do? It takes Tolstoy some eight hundred pages to give back to the multitude of Microbes the effectiveness that the historians of his century placed in the virtue or genius of a few men. Tolstoy succeeded, and the whole of recent history supports his theories as to the relative importance of great men in relation to the overall movements that are represented or appropriated by a few eponymous figures. (Latour [1984]: 13-14)

ANT forbids reducing the fate of a collective to the deeds of actors endowed with titles like «great men», «geniuses», or «world souls». Such actors, like all others, have a limited agency; heroization is not only explicatively fallacious (no actor is ever really in control of the whole), but also politically dangerous, because it turns minute actors into leviathans whose «potency» absorbs the agency of other actors. (We may add that heroes, being human, always run the risk of making mistakes that could damage their reputation and that of the cause they are associated with.) The reason why Latour does not appreciate Bertold Brecht's

Life of Galileo is not only that he charges Galileo with the modern «bifurcation of nature», but also that Brecht presents Galileo as *a hero* against obscurantism – Galileo’s «unhappy the land that is in need of heroes» after he recants might well be the most famous line in the play (cf. Aït-Touati & Latour [2022]: 82-84). When he replaces Galileo with Lovelock – both names are used «to summarize a much longer line of scholars» (Latour [2017a]: 75) – as the scientist who represents the return to the centrality of the «sublunar world» in an ecological epoch, Latour warns against this mistake. He does not want to make Lovelock a hero to whom the ecological movement can be reduced. To respect ANT’s commitment to «irreducibility», symbolic engineering must not clothe a preexisting actor in symbolic garb but *create a brand-new actor*. The more atopic, dispersed, and impersonal this new actor is, the less danger there is of it becoming a leviathan. The more abstract a symbol, the more concrete its functioning, because its agency does not run the risk of being converted into domination.

Grouping does not occur through identification with a hero, but through the circulation of a symbol. The symbol of the ecological movement is not Lovelock, but the abstract actor he introduced into our collective: «We have no heroes, but we have Gaia» (Aït-Touati & Latour [2022]: 83). Gaia is a symbol because she is not a totality or a scientifically established certainty but a circulating agency with which many other actors associate: «For Lovelock, Gaia possesses no omnipotence; it is a “mental picture”, a convenience (“easy to invent”), a comparison (“something like”) made in an effort to conceptualize, in the manner of an inventor – inventors being better gifted, according to him, at understanding than scientists how things really work» (Latour [2015]: 132). Latour salutes Lovelock not as a hero but as the *mythologist* whose fabulation heralded the symbol that would gather the ecological «people to come» under a single banner. The following passage demonstrates how the present situation, in which Gaia is contested and does not yet define our common world, calls for a struggle over symbolic representations:

So far Gaia has no legal form beyond that of addressee. While it has no sovereignty, it may at least have what the Romans called *majesty*. One can address Gaia, not *as one addressed* Nature, as an impersonal but nonetheless personalized entity, but rather directly, naming it as a configuration of new political entities. To live in the epoch of the Anthropocene is to acknowledge a strange and difficult *limitation of powers* in favor of Gaia, considered as the secular aggregation of all the agents that can be recognized thanks to the tracing of feedback loops. Here, just as with the earlier invention of the political personification of the State, both thought and practice need fiction. (Latour [2015]: 283)

Gaia is not yet an established actor; she is simply the name for the family resemblance between beings who, without constituting a unified system, cannot dissociate themselves from each other. Gaia is a «power [that] acts everywhere at once, but [that] is not unifying. It is political, yes; but it is not statist. It is,

literally, atmospheric» (Latour [2017a]: 93). She is necessarily atopic, because she condenses the ways in which all *topoi* are intertwined; in the words of Aït-Touati and Coccia, «this atopic nature of Gaia is what makes her the actor *par excellence*, since she can be incarnated in the most diverse kinds of appearance and let herself be carried by the most diverse kinds of beings» (Aït-Touati, Coccia [2021]: 10).

For this reason, Latour's characterization of Gaia is never univocal. The difficulty of finding a satisfying figuration is such that he is tempted by a form of «negative geology» (Latour, Lenton [2019]: 2) that would just say what Gaia *is not* – she is not a Leviathan, not a Globe, not a new name for the Quest for Certainty. However, his symbolic engineering is at its best when it follows Lovelock's example: Lovelock's method of preventing Gaia from becoming a transcendent and totalitarian whole was to «anxiously revise the description so as to make sure the loops upon loops are not added to one another as if they were one Whole above the entities you started with» (Latour [2017b]: 72). Similarly, to prevent Gaia from degenerating into a totality, Latour *multiplies* metaphors rather than seeking an ultimate definition. «Gaia has a thousand names» (Latour [2015]: 82): the Earth, the Terrestrial, the Anthropocene, the New Climatic Regime, but also the playful Out-of-Which-We-Are-All-Born and the many tentative metaphors – Gaia-Sympoietic, Gaia-Thousand-Folds, Gaia-the-Recalcitrant, Gaia-the-Incomposable, Gaia-the-Uncommon-Commons – explored in *Why Gaia Is not a God of Totality* [2017]. Rather than negative geology, this is an attempt at a radically *equivocal* (or compositional, or piecemeal) definition of Gaia. In Latourian terms, symbols should not be subjected to *iconoclasm* or *idolatry*, but rather to *iconoclash*, the attitude of seeing the value of images not in the images themselves, but in the continual *passage* from one image to another, in their continual reprise and adjustment (Latour & Weibel [2002]).

A symbol must circulate through a number of actors without totalizing their agency. It must be general and vague enough to hold many of them together; at the same time, in order not to degenerate into symbolic reductionism, it must maintain an internal relationship with the issue it stands for, and the actors through which it circulates must not become so attached to it that they are unwilling to revise it if necessary. Latour's equivocal figurations of Gaia fulfil these conditions. However, this «muddle» may be difficult to visualize. A symbol must also be intuitive and memorable if it is to capture our heart and gut. This is why Latour gives Gaia a feature that is supposed to move people to the ecological cause by appealing to affectivity rather than description, to emotion rather than metaphor. This feature is *fragility*.

This is a feature that the inventors of Gaia denied her. Lovelock wrote a paper entitled *The Earth is not Fragile* (1992), and Lynn Margulis ridiculed the idea that she needs to be protected: «Our self-inflated moral imperative

to guide a wayward Earth or heal our sick planet is evidence of our immense capacity for self-delusion... Far from being fragile or consciously petulant, planetary life is highly resilient... Gaia, a tough bitch, is not at all threatened by humans» (Margulis [1998]: 143, 149). Lovelock and Margulis emancipated the image of the Earth from that of an abstract totality, but they are guilty of the «political crime» of «anesthetizing the actors» (Latour [2005b]: 85): either Gaia is fine on her own and needs no care – why get involved in ecology then? – or it is too late to prevent her self-regulating system from eradicating the «human illness» that afflicts her.

On the other hand, fragility is one of the most recurrent words in Latour's vocabulary. Gaia as he pictures her has much in common with Roger Dean's drawing of the Earth for Yes's 1971 album *Fragile*: a seemingly solid and spherical globe on the front cover that breaks up as soon as you look at the back cover. Only, this is no child's dream, and no cosmic glider will save us from ecological collapse. Latour hopes to make care for fragile beings, whose instauration must be sustained and protected, the defining affect of the ecological movement: «Matters of concern... have to be kept up, cared for, accompanied, restored, duplicated, saved, yes, saved» (Latour [2005c]: 49). The feeling that Étienne Souriau called «solicitude», the effort to help fragile beings to establish themselves in a manner that is appropriate to them, is generalized by Latour and ascribed even to the apparently largest and solidest actor. Gaia will not be fine by herself. This is why she can act at once as the symbol that brings an ecological public together and as the actor that should be placed into being by a renewed ecological mobilization.

This is where the role of performance, in a univocal sense that condenses its political and artistic meanings, comes in. It is by performing the affects associated with Gaia that the elected symbol of the ecological movement can effectively collect a public and mobilize people, as Latour makes clear when he defines the gluing role of the concept of performance for art, science, and politics in the Anthropocene:

This other meta concept [performance] does not simply mean the older arts of dance, music or theatre but a much larger set of transdisciplinary skills that provide players and audience with a sensitivity for situations where there was none before. What I have called the «political arts», is a way to explore the three aesthetics of arts, science and politics, where aesthetics is understood as gaining a sensitivity for the new planet on which we are supposed to land – sensitivity which is gained by scientific instruments, by political representation but also by what the arts have to offer. Performances have the crucial advantage of allowing the *dramatization* what is at issue, but also the *dedramatization* of issues since they are artificially staged. No politics of the Anthropocene is possible as long as its players are paralyzed and inarticulate. Without the arts, people will remain stuck in the old planet without moving an inch, terrified by guilt and willful ignorance. (Latour [2016]: 10)

4. Conclusion: political pragmatism beyond populism

In this paper, we have traced the origins of ANT's perspective on identification and group formation (Tarde, Durkheim, Dewey, Lippmann) and accounted for the symbolic engineering through which Latour tried to collect a public around a symbol, Gaia, that was capable of soliciting the affects necessary for a global ecological mobilization. A symbol is something that «circulates» without becoming totalitarian, tying a collective together without degenerating in a «leviathan». This is also why Latour carefully detaches symbols from heroes who might capitalize the potency of the whole collective by themselves.

In conclusion, let us address a question that may have arisen while reading this actor-network account of political identification: what is the difference between this account and the new forms of populism, especially the «left populism» of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, which demonstrates how populism does not have to be conservative? Consider Laclau and Mouffe's Gramscian account of the conditions of hegemony, that shares many similarities with Latour's view of the way symbols circulate: hegemony occurs when «a *particular* social force assumes the representation of a *totality* that is radically incommensurable with it», an account that Laclau and Mouffe distinguish both «from analyses in which universality finds in the social field a direct, non-hegemonically mediated expression, and those in which particularities are merely added up without any mediation between them being thinkable – as in some forms of post-modernism» (Laclau & Mouffe [1985]: x). Or consider the agonistic view of democracy they embrace (see especially Mouffe [2005]), according to which politics requires the identification of an «enemy»: this has much in common with one of Latour's definitions of politics, according to which politics amounts to «the shaping of a boundary between “us” and “they” through the performative use of “we”» (Latour [2005a]: 28). In *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik* [2005], Latour construes *demon* and *demos* as two etymological counterparts, pointing respectively to the unification of a public and its opposition to other publics; but it is well known that *symbol* is the primary etymological nemesis of *demon*: *sym-ballein*, the symbol, gathers by pointing to a common origin, whereas *dia-ballein*, the devil, tears apart and divides. Just like Mouffe's agonistic view of democracy, Latour's account of symbolic identification draws on Carl Schmitt's view of politics as built around the friend-enemy opposition.

Thus, considering also his opposition to technocracy, Latour's proposal might well be framed as a populism of this kind, a sort of «ecological populism» that puts affects and symbols at the service of the ecological cause. However, there are also significant differences. For instance, Mouffe would have rebutted Latour's critique or heroization, revaluating the possibly virtuous role of charismatic leaders for the left (Mouffe [2018]: 70). Above all, however, there seems to

be a crucial difference between Latour's symbolic engineering and what Ernesto Laclau (2005) calls a «tendentially empty signifier», the object around which left populism is supposed to rally a public. The tendentially empty signifier is characterized by increasing extension but decreasing, almost evanescent intension: «popular identity becomes increasingly full from an *extensional* point of view, for it represents an ever-larger chain of demands; but it becomes *intensionally* poorer, for it has to dispossess itself of particularistic contents in order to embrace social demands which are quite heterogeneous» (Laclau [2005]: 92). The ways in which such views can be put at the service of the worst kind of post-truth politics need hardly be remarked.

Latour's concept of symbol follows a different lead. Given its Dewey-inspired character, we may define it as a *pragmatist* concept of symbol. Pragmatism has been framed as a third way between technocracy and populism by Matteo Santarelli and Justo Serrano Zamora [2020]. The authors show how Laclau's intensional emptying of political symbols can lead to post-truth populism by using the example of the empty signifier «Italians first». Laclau's skepticism of conceptual determination ends up removing the boundary between conceptuality and affectivity, making affects a mere supplement to rhetoric. Santarelli and Serrano propose an alternative account of the emotional dimension of politics inspired by Dewey's theory of emotions, according to which affectivity is never pure but includes two more inseparable moments that take emotions beyond themselves: a pragmatic one (emotions contain conceptual content, i.e. they convey something about experience, especially as articulated through bodily movements) and an objective one (they have an epistemic function, relating to the objects of experience through the practice of inquiry). By being given cognitive content, affects become means of *reaching* reality rather than ignoring it. This is the difference between populism, which clings to empty signifiers and replaces the objects of experience with emotional surrogates, and pragmatism, which includes emotion in politics but ties it to the other irreducible dimensions of experience. The authors conclude: «The main differences that separate a pragmatist from a populist account consist of understanding the emergence of popular identities as processes of collective inquiry. According to a pragmatist view, the agglomeration of heterogeneous political demands does not require a process of condensation of the kind Laclau describes but can be explained by pointing to activities of inquiry of political actors» (Santarelli, Serrano Zamora [2020]: 258).

Much more could be said, but we can safely state that Latour recognizes the need to condense identities around symbols, while also keeping track of the outcomes of collective inquiries. If the scientific basis offered by climatologists is «to gain consistency and autonomy and be translated into a historical momentum comparable to those of the past, it must recognize, em-

brace, understand and effectively represent its project by bringing together all these conflicts in a unity of action understandable to all» (Latour & Schultz [2022]: 12). It is no coincidence that he wanted to be portrayed as a political pragmatist in the tradition of Dewey: «Pragmatism... is the political philosophy that has developed the tools to follow the *consequences* of actions when these are unknown or when they overflow the boundaries of routines» (Latour [2007]: 814-5). In this process, scientists play a role just as do artists and «mythologists». ANT politics does not abandon the intensional aspect of symbols, their internal relation to the issue they stand for. It is this internal relation that Latour's insistence on representation seeks to preserve, and this is possibly the most important part of the symbolic engineering that can be drawn from his texts. Symbols must not be deprived of a referent, nor must they replace what they stand for; rather, they must be *articulated* with the complicated reality they are meant to condense: ecologists must learn to represent their attachments and interests in a way that is general and intuitive enough to gather many people, but that does not cut off the concrete issue they face. *Ecological pragmatism* rather than populism is the direction in which ANT politics pushes us.

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