

Avatars of the Collective: A Realist Theory of Collective Subjectivities*

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Let it be a network of voices . . . A network of voices that not only speak, but also struggle and resist for humanity.

Subcomandante Marcos

Durkheim, Weber, and Marx form a “canonical set.” By this I not only mean to say that the founding fathers are canonized and that their works are almost ritually invoked as a badge of allegiance to the discipline, but also that the positions, and the permutations of the positions they represent, form a coherent system of possibilities that defines the meta-theoretical space of social theory (Vandenberghe 1997–1998, I:249–266). In spite of Durkheim and Marx, who adopted a realist position, contemporary sociology is, however, continuously tempted and seduced by the sirens of nominalism. In order to avoid the fallacy of reification, sociologists routinely seek guidance in Weber and argue that, ultimately, only individuals, their actions, and their representations are real. References to social facts (systems, structures, relations, collectives, etc.) are accepted, of course, but merely as conventions, fictions, or representations that actors take for real. Weberian by conviction, Durkheimian by convention, sociological theory privileges the epistemological vector over the ontological one and typically proposes the following compromise formation as a “third way” (sic) between the Scylla of reification and the Charybdis of reduction (Archer 1995): Ontological individualism (Weber) + methodological collectivism (Durkheim).

Critical Realism and Collective Subjectivities

In this article, I propose to take up the difficult question of the ontology of the social world once again by focusing on the formation of collectives (categories, classes, communities, groups, networks, etc.). The position to which I am committed is inspired by “critical realism,” but extends it to the new domain of collective

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subjectivities. By “critical realism,” a denomination that arose by elision of the terms “transcendental realism” and “critical naturalism,” I mean to refer to the British-based antipositivist movement in philosophy and the human sciences led by Roy Bhaskar and inspired by his seminal books *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979). Critical realism is a version of entity realism. It focuses on ontology and is above all concerned with the reality of entities, generative mechanisms, deep structures, and causal powers. This not the place to present critical realism at length (cf. Archer et al. 1998; Benton 1977; Collier 1994; Outhwaite 1987; Sayer 2000), so let me just sketch out three of its main tenets that are relevant for a realist analysis of collectives.

First, in the same way that Bhaskar assumes nature exists independently of the conceptions, descriptions, and representations that the scientist may have of them, I assume that collective subjectivities exist independently of the conceptions that the analyst has of them, though obviously not of the conceptions that agents have of them. In other words, like Bhaskar, I distinguish between the “intransitive” or ontological dimension of knowledge and the “transitive” or epistemic dimension of science, and refuse the “epistemic fallacy” that systematically collapses the intransitive dimension of knowledge into its transitive dimension, thereby reducing reality to a representation of reality.

Second, following Bhaskar’s dispositional ontology, I conceive of the world as a set of real, transfactual, and causally efficacious structures and generative mechanisms that possess causal power. Causal powers should be analyzed as tendencies and potentialities. By virtue of their intrinsic structure, things possess causal powers. When the causal power of the thing is actualized, it can enter into action and function as a generative mechanism that may produce certain effects that are empirically observable in the life-world. In the social world, social systems, collectives, and individuals have emergent causal properties.

Finally, like Bhaskar, I analyze the world as a stratified reality, comprising the strata of nature, life, psyche, and society, whereby each higher stratum emerges out of the lower stratum and possesses its own irreducible causal powers. The highest stratum of reality, society, is itself composed of five dialectically interrelated and loosely coupled emergent orders (the social, cultural, institutional, interactional, and individual orders) and exists at three different levels of reality, namely micro, meso, and macro (Vandenberghe 2007b:503–07). At the highest level of society, we find the social order and the cultural order. Co-constitutive of one another, both are conceived of in relational terms as systems of paradigmatic relations between social positions (social order) or ideas (cultural order) that condition, but do not determine, the lower orders of reality that mediate and actualize the causal powers of the system in the life-world. At the meso level, we find the institutional order: society exists as a set of institutions, that is, repeated actions and interactions that are symbolically regulated and strategically coordinated. Organizations and corporations, created to realize a specific end in the most efficacious way, are a subtype of institutions. Finally, at the micro level of society, society exists both as a representation (the individual order) and as an intentional association of individuals who interact and are interconnected through a mental connection (the interaction order). Although I have presented the orders in a descending order, from extra large to small, they can also be analyzed in an ascending one (with emergence, upward and downward causation, multiple feedback loops, etc.). Society, culture, institutions, interactions, and individuals are mutually constitutive and

ultimately grounded in a hermeneutic ontology of *praxis* that generates the social world.¹

TAXONOMIC COLLECTIVES, STRUCTURED GROUPS, AND NETWORKS

The Structuration of Collectives

I assert that collectives exist in the same way as society does, though—and this is important, although I cannot develop it here—in society, and that they have causal powers.² In my opinion, it does not make much sense to oppose abstract categories to concrete groups. Instead of contraposing categories or “taxonomic collectives” to “structured groups,” suggesting as Rom Harré (1981) and others do, that the former stand for theoretical macrosociological fictions that do not exist, while the latter are real empirical institutional or interactional entities, I will argue: (1) that categories should be understood as potential groups that can organize and realize themselves; (2) that they are constituted and manifest themselves in the life-world; and (3) that we should investigate this passage from *potentia* to *actus*—the *passage à l'acte*—as an enfolding praxeological process of “structuration” whereby social categories are progressively organized into groups (Giddens 1980:105–17).³

Like birds, collectives come in many stripes and colors, from peoples, nations, races, genders, classes, parties, and status groups to humanity as such (and perhaps even beyond to interstellar cosmic associations of spirits). My entry into the question is via class and social movements, with a special focus on activist groups.⁴ Although I will refrain from talking about the proletariat, its very existence is at stake in this article, as well as that of new social movements and other presumptive successors of the working-class movements of the 19th century.

From a realist perspective, the ontology of collectives appears as a generic theory of collective action that distinguishes itself from other theories of collective action in that it attributes causal power to collective actors and conceives of them as transfactual generative mechanisms that can be active or not, but whose inaction can nevertheless produce social movement. In his theory of collective subjectivity, José

¹For an intriguing investigation of mutual constitution of the basic constituents of social life in and through action, see Glaeser's (2005) “consequent processualism.”

²Collectives are located and intervene in society; collective practices are mediated by society, reproducing or transforming it in the process. Following critical realism, I conceive of society as a complex system of relations between social positions and ideas that exists at the macro, meso, and micro levels. In extended conversations with the author, Michel Freitag has argued that the realist conception of society is too formal and he has proposed to envelop it in a more encompassing dialectical theory of society, which analyzes the latter, synchronically, as a transcendental totality that *a priori* forms, informs, and regulates the symbolic practices and, diachronically, as a historically evolving set of mediations that regulate practices and reproduce society (cf. Freitag 1986; see also Vandenberghe 2006).

³Giddens's famous concept of “structuration” finds its origin in the debate about class. Giddens coined the concept to connect Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of class, understood as an economic category that refers to a series of social positions that make up a social formation, to more Weberian analyses that conceive of classes as status groups of consumption that have differential access to the market. Before being generalized, reformulated, and inserted into an ontology of praxis that directly connects agency to structure (and indirectly agency to systems via the structures), the concept of structuration simply referred to “processes by which ‘economic classes’ become ‘social classes’” (Giddens 1973:105). In this article I focus on the structuration of collectives and do not pay much attention to the reverse process of their “destruction.”

⁴My interest in class, social movements, and humanity explains in part why my analysis is an upbeat one. Epistemological considerations cannot be disconnected from moral and political ones. If I were to focus on race, ethnicity, and identity, I would take a more deconstructivist line and analyze, like Brubaker (2000), the “declining curves of groupness.”

Maurício Domingues formulates the rippling effect of collectives in the following terms: “With their own, collective causality, collective subjectivities create movement in social life (regardless of being mobile or not), producing stability and triggering change” (Domingues 1995:137). Even without being active or mobilized, by virtue of their mere being, collectives have a real influence on the life-world in at least two ways: first, the mere fact that they exist has already an effect on other collectives. By registering their virtual existence, they are obliged to consider them and take them into account. Second, as potential collectives, they offer anticipatory sketches and glimpses of groups in formation.

Sociological “Personnages”

The realist idea that collectives exist in society as generative mechanisms that possess causal powers, which, even at a virtual state, can produce social movement in the life-world, clashes fundamentally with nominalist, analytic, constructivist, and deconstructivist theories on both sides of the Atlantic that seek to explain and interpret collectives away, or otherwise deny their existence, by reducing the collective to a representation of the collective. Convinced that collectives can only exist as groups, communities, or networks at the micro and meso levels of society, they accuse realists who introduce causal entities at the macro level of reality of hypostasizing their theoretical constructs. They confound “the logic of the things” with “the things of logic” (Marx 1976:216)—the charge that Marx directed against Hegel is now turned once again, by Bourdieu, for instance, against the realists.⁵ According to constructivists, collectives, starting with classes, only refer to theoretical and hypothetical entities. As ideal types, they represent conceptual utopias that do not exist as such in reality. The sociologist who constructs classes as analytical categories should no more be allowed to take his or her concepts for reality than his or her desires. It is not because actors take classes for real in their “folk sociologies” that sociologists should do so as well and cast them as actors in their theories. Rather than reinforcing the personification of categories that characterize common sense with a reification of groups in social analysis, sociologists should be methodological nominalists and eliminate collectives from their analytical toolbox. In an impressive critique of the tendency to reify categories into groups, Rogers Brubaker warns his colleagues against the fallacy of “groupism”: “the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis” (Brubaker 2002:164).

Analytic categories are not empirical and common sense concepts are not scientific. Categories should under no account be hypostatized and reified, transformed into living characters that act on the stage of history. Those theoretical collectives that regroup “pregrouped” social actors who occupy a similar social position within a social structure and whose involuntary placement explains why they tend to “resemble and assemble” in groups to defend their interests, share their ideas, or express their identities, exist only “on paper” (Bourdieu 1984:4). The result of this reification is a highly personified collective, endowed with causal properties, which acts

⁵Bourdieu, who is otherwise a fine dialectician and a realist, becomes a nominalist when it comes to collectives. His enthusiastic review of Denis Zaslavsky’s analytic decomposition of the category of Being makes clear that his nominalism owes more to the informal philosophical logic of Russell, Ryle, and Strawson than to Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (cf. Bourdieu 1982; Zaslavsky 1982).

and operates in society like a supra-individual. In fact, those macrocollectives that people the world are only meta-individuals that haunt the sociologist and perform their tricks on the theater of his or her mind. The sociologist who mistakes the word for the world makes a massive “category mistake,” and falls back into some kind of conceptual mythology (with Gods, spirits and spooks—hence a “hantology,” to borrow one of Derrida’s more felicitous *bons mots*). After all, “England,” “The United States of America,” “the Proletariat,” “the anti-globalization movement”—all these propositional subjects are only grammatical fictions, cast in the same mold as “the bald king of France” (Russell) or the “University of Cambridge” (Ryle).⁶

Categories and Groups

In a landmark essay on the philosophical aspects of the micro-macro problem, Rom Harré (1981; see also Harré 1979:83–97, 139–43, Harré 1997), the mentor and former supervisor of Roy Bhaskar, questions the ontological status of macrosociological collectives. In order to show that these are logical constructs that only exist in discourse and that their usage is, consequently, purely rhetorical and ideological, he introduces a clear and crisp distinction between “taxonomic collectives” (or categories) and “relational and structured groups” (or interpersonal networks). The former refer to “a set of individuals who form a group because each member has a property that is like that of each other member,” whereas the latter are “constituted by a structure of relations by which individuals come to have their defining properties” (Harré 1981:147). To the extent that the relations between the members of a taxonomic collective are logical relations (and not interactional or institutional ones), the taxonomic collectives exist only, according to Harré, in the mind of the classifier who subsumes them under the same category. The presumed similarities in beliefs, dispositions, actions, etc. that allow one to classify individuals in the same category, such as the Sunni Muslims, the Belgian expatriates, or the proletariat, are abstractions that are constituted by an observer, and only exist in his or her mind. Between the destitute shopkeeper in Fairfield who gets home late in the evening and the distinguished professor of Yale University who wakes up at 10 o’clock in the morning, there is no relation at all, even if they are both female, both Americans, and happen to live around New Haven. The same observation holds for the metalworker in Chicago, the sacked electrician who worked for General Motors in Detroit, and the exploited manual laborer in New York. There is no relation whatsoever between them, even if, presumably, they are all members of the exploited working class.

With structured groups, like football clubs, academic departments, local support groups, combat commandos, and other tightly bounded networks, the situation is entirely different. Connected through a common culture, shared norms of interaction, institutional rules and regulations, and perhaps even legal conventions, the members of a structured group have real relations with one another. Our distinguished professor, for example, has real relations with the colleagues, secretarial staff, and students at the department where she teaches. If she were to oversleep (once again), she could ask one of her colleagues to replace her or ask another to represent her at

⁶The tourist who visits Cambridge and asks to see the University of Cambridge after having seen King’s College, St. John’s, Queens’, the quads, and the mathematical bridge, makes a category mistake according to Ryle—“as if ‘the University’ stood for an extra member of the class of which these other units are members” (Ryle 1949:16). Passing from the substantive to the substance, the poor fellow commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness and does not understand that the university does not exist outside, next, or above its colleges, departments, and libraries.

the faculty meeting. In certain collectives, the relations can be so regular and regulated, dense and systematic, that even a skeptic like Harré would be willing to grant them causal power and consider them as genuine supra-individual entities and—who knows—perhaps even as quasi-persons with a life and a mind of their own.

Social Network Analysis

Harré's analysis is very insightful, but not helpful. If we want to understand how collectives are structured, we have to overcome the "anti-categorical imperative" (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994:1414) and analyze the interplay between categories and groups. As it stands, the distinction between taxonomic collectives, categories, and classes on the one hand and structural groups, communities, and networks on the other is overdrawn. My critique of Harré is twofold. First, he has confounded relational groups and networks, reducing the latter to the former; and second, he overlooks the fact that people belong to networks as well as categories, and that categories refer, in fact, to potential groups.

In spite of the fact that Harré insists on the interpersonal relations that make up the network, he does not draw on social network analysis and implicitly seems to assume that groups are small-scale, multiplex, densely knit, and tightly bounded unities, more akin to families, neighborhoods, orchestras, political parties, or contractually based businesses than to long distance relationships, diasporas, social movements, or transnational corporations. If each group is necessarily a network, not every network is, however, a group. Following "social network analysis," as developed first in British anthropology by the Manchester School of Social Anthropology and later also in American sociology by the disciples of Harrison White, we can define networks generically as a set of ties linking social system members (sometimes called "nodes" to avoid identification with individuals) *across* social categories and bounded groups.⁷ The definition of the network as a set of interconnected nodes leaves open the morphology of the network, the nature of its ties, and its boundaries. While network analysis insists on the structural interrelations that make up the network, it does not predefine its structure, which can be regular like a crystal, schizoid like a rhizome, or complex like a cloud. Similarly, it does not predetermine the boundaries and the nature of the ties, but conceives of networks as open structures that can expand, integrating new nodes as they spread out through space. Connections can be local or global, single-stranded or multiplex, densely or sparsely knit, tightly or loosely bounded.

Consequently, from the perspective of network analysis, the group appears as only a special type of social network, one that is densely knit (most people are directly connected) and tightly bounded (most relations stay within the same set of people). If one studies a group, for instance, a bunch of colleagues at the departmental New Year's party, as a network and follows the ties that connect the members wherever they go, one will quickly transcend the boundaries of the group and discover nonlocal ties that spread across the world. It is a small world indeed, and if we may believe

⁷Network analysis is a highly specialized form of structural analysis that gained prominence in the mid 1970s. The main figures in the network are Harrison White, Barry Wellman, Ronald Burt, Ronald Breiger, Mark Granovetter, Peter Marsden, Peter Bearman, and Edward Laumann. The abstruse terminology (structural holes, structural equivalence, strong, weak, and bridge ties, multiplex relations, etc.) and the heavy use of complicated mathematical models (graph theory, blockmodeling, and matrix analysis) are rather off putting for the noninitiated. For an excellent introduction to social network analysis that does not presuppose proficiency in mathematics, see Wellman (1988, 1999).

Stanley Milgram (Milgram 1967), it only takes five intermediaries to deliver a folder from Kansas to the wife of a divinity student in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or from Nebraska to a stockbroker in Sharon, Massachusetts. The topology of social networks is such that it links any two nodes in the entire world by paths of five indirect ties between acquaintances.

Networks not only cut across bounded groups, but they also cut across social categories. Although this might seem at first a concession to Harré, we can, however, also interpret it to further open and loosen up his concept of groups, and to interconnect different groups into an expanding network. Categorical membership can be considered as a proxy measure and an indication of a potential structured relationship between nodes. The nodes in the network are not necessarily individuals, but can be groups of all sorts, from cliques (people who all know each other) and clusters (people whose ties are relatively dense, but do not constitute a clique) to corporations, nation-states, and federations. Studies on interlocking directorates have shown the “strength of weak ties” (Granovetter 1973) that allows the interconnection of different networks. Nodes are indeed generally interconnected through individuals who belong to multiple social circles. When nodes are interconnected through ties that link members of different categories, the members become thereby potentially linked in a loose network. This will be more important at a later stage in the argument, but I introduce it here to point to the possibility of “reticulation” between groups that cuts across categories through the discursive “articulation” of their differences.⁸

Triple Morphogenesis

Harré asks a real question. But the opposition he establishes between groups and categories is too neat, and also too static, to be entirely satisfactory. What is needed is a more dialectical and dynamic approach that is able to track the immanent development of the categories (in the Hegelian sense of the term) and their transformation into groups. Taxonomic collectives and structured groups are not necessarily opposed to each other and do not always exclude each other, but they form a continuum: under certain conditions, which we will have to analyze, taxonomic collectives can be organized into structured groups and form organized networks that become more and more real as they structure themselves, realizing their potential in the process (from *dynamis* to *energeia*). To avoid the constructivist impression that taxonomic collectives do not exist in reality and that they are always and inevitably reifications that “float in the head of actors,” as Max Weber (1972:7) said, we should probably reformulate the issue and maintain that collectives are real, that they exist as virtual groups whose causal power manifests itself progressively as they are structured in groups that can produce social movement, sending ripples through the whole of society. To avoid the reification of collectives, we should, however, follow the constructivists and insist that they are not given as finished entities, but as social products that are always socially and locally constructed in concrete situations of action; that they are not things, but processes; not reifications, but realizations and concretizations of abstract categories. I offer those grammatical precisions not only

⁸Articulation is a central category of poststructuralist theories of identity. Articulation takes place when two externally related elements are interconnected through communication into a new identity. To articulate means to utter, but also to connect two elements that do not necessarily belong together. Stuart Hall (1996:141) gives the example of the “articulated truck”: “A lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another.”

to avoid “category mistakes,” but also to indicate that a realist ontology of collectives could easily integrate the performative ontologies of the constructivists, such as Randall Collins’s (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains or Bruno Latour’s (2005) actor-network theory, for instance, in a processual and dynamic analysis of the progressive structuration of collectives. Collectives can be more or less structured. They can wax and wane. Although I claim that collectives are real, I do not wish to deny that “groupness” is variable. Like Brubaker and Cooper (2000:28), I consider “groupness” not as given, but as an “emergent property of particular structural or conjunctural settings.”

In the remainder of this article, I will theorize the structuration of collectives as a triple morphogenetic process. Symbolic identification, technological mediation, and political representation will be presented as so many “moments” that dialectically transform and structure the collective into a symbolic community, the symbolic community into a quasi-group that can be mobilized, and the quasi-group into an organized group that can represent its members in their absence. What we will thus analyze through an investigation of these three (trialectical) moments of the structuration of collectives are the conditions of collective action, not the action in common as such.⁹

CATEGORIZATION, IDENTIFICATION, AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SYMBOLIC COMMUNITY

Persons of a Higher Order

So far, I have suggested that one should not oppose taxonomic collectives to structured groups. One should try instead to dissolve the opposition and integrate categories and networks into a more dynamic dialectical scheme that can analyze how collectives are actually constituted as a symbolic community through the mutual implication of performative descriptions of the collective in the first-person plural and structural descriptions of the collective in the third-person plural. In this realist-constructivist perspective, collectives lead a double existence. First, they exist objectively and virtually as categories that comprise members of a set because of the position that they occupy in the social structure and, second, they exist subjectively and intentionally as a symbolic community in which the members are directly interconnected through a mental or a spiritual link.¹⁰ If taxonomic collectives are constituted by alter-phenomenological categorizations of an observer who offers a structural description of the collective from the perspective of the third person, groups are constituted through an autophenomenological categorization, that is, a self-identification, by the members themselves. Unlike the former, the latter is not brought in from without to the collective, but it is applied by the members of the group themselves to the group, as well as to the members of the group, who are thereby constituted into an “us.” The “us” is a *Gesamtperson*, a social supra-individual subjectivity or personality that is intentionally and polythetically

⁹For an analysis of different forms of collective action, from violence (the mobs) and conventional actions (strikes, marches, and demonstrations) to symbolic disruptions (sit-ins and sit-down strikes), cf. Tarrow (1994:100–17).

¹⁰In the next section, I will bring in the notion of “imagined community.” We will see that the connection between souls can be either direct (mental connection) or indirect (spiritual connection). Making abstraction of the technological mediation, which I will bring in at a later stage, I will treat the symbolic community as an intentional group whose members are in direct contact with one another.

constituted as a living collective and experienced as such by all the members of the group.

Following the phenomenological description that Edmund Husserl (1973, II:165–230) has given of the phenomena of intra- and intersubjectivity, we can say that the group is intentionally constituted by the members of the group as a “person of higher order,” thanks to communication.¹¹ The communication that takes place between the members of a group follows upon the constitution of intersubjectivity by the transcendental ego. It presupposes the noetic and noematic syntheses of the transcendental ego, yet at the same time, it really overcomes the solipsism of the lonely monad through the establishment of a real, effective, interspiritual, and intercorporeal relation between the subjects that takes place in the life-world. The other is not constituted as an *alter ego*, but encountered as a *socius* with whom one can interact in real time. As intersubjective communication is intramundane, and not intrasubjective, Husserl’s analysis is perfectly compatible with Habermas’s theory of communicative action. In communication, Ego and Alter “give one another the spiritual hand” (1973:168), and really enter into contact with one another. Taking an active interest in one another, the actors not only have a mutual consciousness of their reciprocity, but the acts of the one also directly affect the other and become interlocked; the actors can unify their wills and mutually coordinate their actions into a single collective action. The whole operation, the collective work, is “my operation”; yet at the same time it is also his or her operation, specifically “in a foundational and superior sense,” because when we consciously, knowingly, and mutually coordinate our actions in a single operative chain, my action supports her action and becomes complementary to it. As my intentions, my plans, and my actions mesh with hers, we come to common action and form a collective subjectivity with collective intentionality. The result of our action in common is a common achievement, which we jointly and intentionally accomplish *together*.

If we now move up from the communication between two people to the association of minds and wills of several people, we can easily transfer Husserl’s communicative, proto-Habermasian analysis of the unification of wills and the social coordination of action by Ego and Alter into a collective subjectivity, to structured groups.¹² Through communication, the mind of persons is united in a “common stream of consciousness” (Husserl 1973:203). A supra-individual consciousness is formed. This consciousness lives in each and every person who participates in the group. It flows through them, yet at the same time, it emanates from them. As a complex unity,

¹¹Although Husserl already mentions “personalities of a higher order” in paragraph 58 of the *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1950), the idea will only be worked out in the phenomenology of intersubjectivity (Husserl 1973, especially texts no. 9 and 10). To foreclose the drift toward an ultra-Durkheimian position that shamelessly hypostatizes the objective spirit into a group mind, I will interpret Husserl’s analysis from a micro and meso, but not from a macro perspective. Such a microsociological interpretation corresponds to an interactionist reformulation of the project of the Fifth Cartesian Meditation.

¹²For a more fine-grained investigation that is more indebted to Schütz and Mead than to Husserl and analyzes the passage from a two- to a threesome in terms of the institutionalization of reciprocal typifications of habitual action, see Berger and Luckmann (1966:53–67); for an application, see also Berger and Kellner (1964). Surely, there are limits to social integration through collective intentionality. There are now 6 billion inhabitants of the planet Earth, and their actions cannot possibly be coordinated by means of communication. “Even if we take into account that conscious systems on the other side of the globe are sleeping and others do not participate for whatever reasons to communication, the numbers of systems that operate at the same time is so large that effective coordination (and thus also the constitution of a consensus in an empirical sense) is completely excluded” (Luhmann 1997, I:115). Luhmann is right on this point, but if the social systems globalize (globalization “from without”), so do the psychic systems (globalization “from within”). The emergence of a planetary consciousness can be considered as the subjective counterpoint of systemic globalization (from globalization “an sich” to globalization “für uns”).

this quasi-Durkheimian collective consciousness results from a collective act of unification. Founded upon the individual unifications, the collective act of unification is a synthetic act that polythetically integrates the individual syntheses into a superior unity that operates like a personal consciousness. “This common subjectivity,” says Husserl, “is a subjectivity with multiple heads, a form of the *ego-alteri*” (Husserl 1973:218). Distributed over all the persons that participate in the joint or shared action by mutually and spontaneously aligning their intentional actions into one single common action, this supra-personal consciousness seemingly forms the unique intentional correlate of the psychic community, even if each person necessarily conserves a certain amount of independence and the individual consciousnesses only partially coincide and overlap with the supra-individual consciousness of the collective.

Interaction Rituals

Husserl’s theory of intentional collective consciousness is essentially a cognitive one. In spite of its Durkheimian resonances, it discounts the fact that the emergence of persons of a higher order is not based only on a rational and conscious agreement between minds. Active communication is grounded in the mutual attunement of the participants and presupposes passive syntheses of a more diffuse, emotional nature that precede the cognitions in the order of foundation. Like cognitions, emotions are intersubjective, relational, and transactional phenomena (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005:483–93). Emotions arise not solely inside the heads and hearts of individuals (as “states of mind”), but also and primarily *between* actors. As transactional transient phenomena, they are passively constituted and emerge in and out of the situation of interaction. Following Durkheim and Goffman, we can conceive of communication as an “interaction ritual chain” (Collins 2004) that can be decomposed in the following ingredients: two or more people are physically assembled in the same locale, so that they affect each other in a situation of co-presence, whether it is in the foreground of their conscious attention (“active synthesis”) or not (“passive synthesis”). The situation of physical co-presence is spatially bounded and participants have a sense of who is taking part in the communication and who is excluded. The participants focus their attention to a common object or activity and, unified by a common intentional consciousness that is directed toward the same *noema*, they communicate this focus to each other so that each and every one becomes aware of each other’s focus of attention.

Moreover, they also share a common mood of emotional experience and are attuned to each other through synchronization of bodily movements, rhythmic entrainment, and mutual arousal of sentiments. The experience of heightened mutual awareness and common emotional attunement can occasionally be so intense that it transforms communication into a form of “communion, that is, a fusion of all particular sentiments into one common sentiment” (Durkheim 1960:329) that emanates from the collective, supersedes all the participants, and flows through each and every one of them. This experience of “collective effervescence” subsequently gives rise to sacred group emblems and other cathected markers of identity, like totems, flags, and leaders, but also slogans and words, which express, condense, embody, store, and prolong the transient feeling of unity in a material or ideational object that symbolizes the collective, even when the members are not assembled. Through a consequent microtranslation and secularization of Durkheim’s sociology of religion in terms of situated ritual interactions, the communicative situation can thus be approached and analyzed as a ritual process that produces collective subjectivities through mutually

focused attention, the synchronization of motion, and the sharing of emotions, which generate a sense of belonging and symbols of group membership.

Plural Subjects

The introduction of emotive and kinesthetic components into Husserl's phenomenology of intersubjectivity allows us to understand the constitution of the group not just as a unifying community of minds, but also of hearts and bodies. A sense of belonging is essential for the constitution of a group, but so is its delimitation with regard to other groups. To show that the constitution of a group is coterminous with its identification against a third party, I now turn to Margaret Gilbert's analytical theory of "plural subjects" (Gilbert 1989, 1990).¹³ In her attempt to clarify common sense notions as "community," "group," "we," "common action," etc., the British philosopher submits ordinary common activities as "walking together," "dancing together," or "traveling together" to a detailed conceptual investigation. It takes at least two to "walk together," but simply walking next to one another will not do. It is necessary that each of the walkers overtly expresses to the other his intention to walk with her and that the walkers jointly agree to form an "ambulant we" unified by the common goal of walking together in the company of each other. In spite of the fact that walking together is an eminently kinesthetic experience, Gilbert makes abstraction of intercorporality and considers the unification of wills and consciousnesses that marks joint action as the crucible of society. This assimilation of sociability (*Geselligkeit*) and society (*Gesellschaft*) is problematic, however. Henry David Thoreau was perhaps a better sociologist when he suggested in an epigram that it takes three to form a society: "I have three chairs in my house: one for solitude; two for company; three for society" (quoted by Collins 2004:376, n. 8). Indeed, Gilbert does not only tend to reduce society to a *pas de deux*, but she also forgets that dyads (or triads, quartets, and quintets for that matter) always already have their location in society. This typical individualist abstraction of social structure and culture at the systemic levels of society explains why she can consider the joint action of "walking together" as a paradigmatic social phenomenon that offers a model for society at large. Following in the footsteps of Georg Simmel—who knew better and had such a strong "sense" of social structures that even Durkheim acceded to him—Gilbert thinks that the phenomenon of "walking together" marvelously illustrates what Simmel might have meant when he said that "the consciousness of constituting with the others a unity" is the necessary and sufficient condition of society.¹⁴

Reducing society to a collective, the collective to an association, the association to a dyad, and the dyad to a "we," Gilbert formalizes Simmel's proto-phenomenological analysis of association (*Vergesellschaftung*), and offers the following formula as a stenographic notation of her analysis of "plural subjects" that make up a collective:

¹³In analytic philosophy, the theme of collective intentionality and joint intentional action has also been taken up by John Searle (1995), Michael Bratman (1999), and Raimo Tuomela and Kaarlo Miller (1988). If I focus on Gilbert, it is because she deals most explicitly with the authors of the sociological canon. I think, however, that the critique I address to Gilbert also applies to her colleagues. Even if they rightly insist that "we intentionality" cannot be reduced to "I intentionality," they all have a rather limited conception of society, which they tend to reduce to Lewisian conventions anyway. All of the authors eliminate the "objective spirit" and forget that the symbolic mediations that allow for the coordination of action are not only intersubjective, but also properly social. Moreover, none of the authors does take into account that institutions and conventions exist in society. Like all hermeneutic reductions, this one makes abstraction of the system of material social relations at the macro level.

¹⁴For a more complex analysis of formal sociology, see my book on Simmel (Vandenbergh 2001).

“Human beings X, Y and Z constitute a collectivity (social group) if and only if each correctly thinks of himself and the other, taken together, as ‘us*’ or ‘we*’ (Gilbert 1989:147).¹⁵

Us Versus Them

The semantics of the “we” may successfully elucidate the grammatical conditions of the intentional constitution of the collective through self-identification of the members of a group to the group. It remains, however, rather limited. Gilbert does not see that the “we” always presupposes a “you.” Collectives are always related to other collectives.¹⁶ A collective constitutes itself as a symbolic community by distinguishing itself from another community from which it tries to differentiate itself. In order to constitute itself as a more or less unified “we,” the “us” presupposes a differentiation from a “them.” In other words: no identity without difference—and to avoid the suggestion that identities are unified, stable and homogenous, composed of a single rather than several, sometimes conflicting identities, we might perhaps add with Freud that there is no identity without identification and no identification without differentiation.

To the extent that the constitution of the identity of a “we” presupposes its differentiation with respect to another “us,” the categorization of the “others” is mutually implicated in the identification of the “we.” It follows, as Stuart Hall (1996a:3, 1996b:608) has correctly noted, that identification is a construction, a process that remains always incomplete, which is “always ‘in process.’” To consolidate the process of construction of the collective as an autophenomenological group, identification needs an “other,” an “outside” that is “constitutive” of the group’s identity. Identities are never completely unified, however. They are decentered and dislocated, made up of different strands that are provisionally “stitched” or “sutured” together through the “articulation” of differences into a common cultural identity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). As they construct themselves by reference to representation of a difference, of an “other,” of a “constitutive outside” that is always already inside the collective and affects its identity from within, the symbolic frontiers between the groups are necessarily leaky (even if the borders are closing fast). To arrive at a closure that, by definition, can only be provisory, identities are continuously constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Even if I do not wish to endorse at this point poststructuralist and postmodern theories of identity and difference, I wholeheartedly accept their ontological conclusions (and given the recent upsurge of rampant Islamophobia, also their political conclusions).

The opposition between “us” and “them” is not identical to the opposition between friend and foe, and should not be identified with it. Whereas the distinction

¹⁵The asterisk refers to the advanced analysis of the semantic “conditions of felicity” that have to be satisfied for a collective to exist as a plural subject that corresponds to the strong sense of the first-person plural as a full-blooded “we.”

¹⁶Drawing on ethnomethodology, one of the anonymous referees of *Sociological Theory* questions this affirmation. He or she argues not only that there are social practices that endogenously create their unity from within, but also suggests that the analysis of groups can dispense with the symbolic altogether. “Take Baseball for instance. The only thing required is that one could get it wrong.” This is right, but the reviewer forgets that the bat-and-ball game is a team sport in which a pitcher “pitches” the leather-covered ball toward a batter on the opposing team. Moreover, the game actually has to be learned (“This is how we do it”) before it can be played as a baseball game (as opposed to, say, a cricket game), and that learning presupposes a language, rules, symbols, and membership categorization devices (Sack’s MCDs). Thus understood, pitching is a bodily symbol that directly performs membership *in actu*.

between “us” and “them” remains relatively porous, the distinction between friend and foe rigidifies the categorizations and transforms diacritical cultural markers of relative difference (nation, language, ethnicity, race, religion) into absolute oppositions of kind. In *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt insists that the enemy is “in a very intensive sense existentially another,” a stranger who is “naturally and essentially different” (Schmitt 1933:8).¹⁷ The Schmittian binary functions as a conceptual war machine. As the enemy cannot be assimilated by the group, he or she has to be expelled and eliminated, and if necessary, exterminated. The designation of the other as an enemy realizes the most extreme degree of unity and separation, and of association and dissociation. When the group closes the ranks from within and unifies itself against the external enemy, the boundaries harden and lose their fluidity to the point that they can no longer be crossed by individuals on either side of the boundary.

The crucial question is not whether collectives always have to be constituted against other collectives, but whether antagonism is inevitable.¹⁸ Although the political logic of sovereignty somehow forces communities to define themselves as a *demos* by distinguishing between “us” and “them,” *Wir und die Anderen*—that much should perhaps be granted to Schmitt¹⁹—the normative question is really how identity and difference can be articulated into open and flexible collectives that do not *a priori* exclude the inclusion of outsiders within its bounds. Zooming in on the boundaries and opening up the imaginary line that separates communities, we can investigate the social construction of the boundaries and find out how they are opened or closed, and how they can be crossed. To avoid the closure of the collective and circumvent the fatal implications of Carl Schmitt’s ultrapolitics, two intellectual strategies seem to be available. One can either redraw boundaries (“boundary shifting”) or, alternatively, maintain boundaries, but allow for interchange of personnel across the boundary (“boundary crossing”).²⁰

Boundary Politics

The first strategy comes in two versions, a universalist one and a more differentialist one.²¹ Habermas’s (1997) procedural cosmopolitanism and his spirited defense of

¹⁷In the Nazified version of 1933, which is not the one that has been republished in German or English, Schmitt leaves no doubt that it is “not the soldier but the politician who determines the foe” (Schmitt 1933:17). By designating the other as an alien enemy, the politician (the *Führer*) effectively transforms cultural (ethnic/racial/religious/linguistic) markers into mortal divisions between the in-group and the out-group. For a bloody application of Schmitt’s theory to the civil war in former Yugoslavia, see Vandenberghe (1996).

¹⁸In his analysis of personal pronouns, Benvéniste (1966:225–36, 251–57) confirms the universality of the personal pronouns. The first, second, and third person occur in all 64 languages he has analyzed. I and You form a couple. The fracture intervenes with the third person, which refers, as he says, to a “non-person.” Interestingly, he suggests that the “We” can be constructed in two ways: an inclusive one that refers to “I + You” and an exclusive one that refers to “I + Them.”

¹⁹Even Habermas concedes that there’s no democracy without citizenship and no citizenship without exclusion: “Any political community that wants to understand itself as a democracy must at least distinguish between members and non-members” (Habermas 1998:161).

²⁰For a convergent analysis of the modalities of incorporation of the other into the societal community, see Alexander’s (2006:409–57) discussion of assimilation, hyphenation, and multiculturalism.

²¹The texts I mention propose different approaches that deal with different collectivities and different issues. Habermas and Benhabib are concerned about citizenship and civil rights. Laclau and Mouffe deal with class and new social movements, while Barth, an anthropologist, analyzes ethnic groups in polyethnic communities that are not multicultural societies. In the following discussion, I make abstraction of the differences between the authors, and pretend that they all deal with the same question to which they offer complementary answers.

“constitutional patriotism” probably provides the best-known contemporary example of the modernist strategy of universalist reconstruction. It aims to include the other as a citizen into the community through a progressive enlargement of the bounds of the collectivity. In her remarkable book on the rights of aliens, Seyla Benhabib (2004) has recently applied the discourse theoretical principle of justification D (according to which all those who are concerned or affected by the consequences of the adoption of a norm should have a say in its formulation) to issues of immigration. The problem is that immigrants, who are by definition noncitizens, are initially excluded from the social covenant. Concerned about the inclusion of the other into the polity, Benhabib has suggested that the tension between the exclusionary logic of politics (sovereignty) and the inclusive logics of morality (human rights) can be negotiated through “democratic iterations” whereby the collective periodically reconstitutes and redefines itself so as to enable the extension of the democratic voice to new members of the polity who were excluded at the time of the initial articulation of the identity. Through “democratic iterations,” the alien others are progressively included in the polity, while the acknowledgment of the other as other becomes a feature of the common identity of the people.

If the strategy of universalist reconstruction aims to transform strangers into friends, sojourners into residents and citizens, the strategy of differentialist deconstruction of the boundary aims to convert enemies into adversaries who share a common allegiance to the principles of liberal democracy, but struggle to affirm their differences against their opponents without the possibility of ever coming to a rational consensus. The deconstructive strategy is perhaps best represented by Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) influential formalization of the differential logic that animates postmodern identity politics. In spite of the difficulty of the prose, the basic message of the neo-Gramscian poststructuralists is relatively simple. Every order is political and based on some form of exclusion of the other. There are, however, always other possibilities that have been repressed through hegemony and that can be reactivated through counterhegemonic practices of articulation. To reactivate these repressed possibilities, the extant hegemonic identity has to be deconstructed by democratic struggles. Deconstruction problematizes the unity of the “us” and the otherness of the “other” by questioning the radical separation between the two that makes the opposition possible in the first place. Deconstruction does not destroy the boundary between insiders and outsiders, but it dislocates it. It decomposes and recomposes, disarticulates and rearticulates identities. As lines of connections are multiplied and alliances are shifted, identities are continuously made and unmade.

Thinking “with Schmitt against Schmitt,” Mouffe (1999a:6, 1999b:52, n. 2) revisits his sulfuric writings and revises them for the context of pluralist societies.²² Challenging Schmitt’s bloody insistence on the homogeneity of the demos, she argues that there are no fixed identities and no absolute enemies either. In a pluralistic society, there are only adversaries who clash to affirm their differences and forge new identities. The constitution of the collective is agonistic, based on democratic struggles, not antagonistic and existential, as in Schmitt’s bloody decisionism. As the collective is continuously redefined through hegemonic and counterhegemonic struggles, the boundaries become arbitrary and contingent. The “frontier is an internal one,” not

²²Thinking with Schmitt, the fascist philosopher, against Schmitt, the philosophical Nazi, is always a risky enterprise (see how *Telos*, the journal of the New Left got dangerously entangled via Schmitt with the New Right). Instead of thinking with Schmitt, I suggest we think with all the others (Habermas, Derrida, Althusser, even Lacan if necessary) against Schmitt.

an external one. At the end of the day, it is no longer clear who is in and who is out.²³

If the strategies of re- and deconstruction blur the boundaries, the strategy of personnel interchange maintains them, but allows members of different categories to cross the boundaries and change identity. This strategy is adopted by the social anthropologist Frederik Barth (1969, 1994) in his path-breaking fieldwork on boundary maintenance and the social organization of cultural difference among the Swat Pathans. Working in the European tradition, Barth is a social, not a cultural, anthropologist. He analyzes the social organization of cultural difference and regards identity as a feature of social organization rather than a nebulous expression of culture. The basic premise of his approach is that ethnic groups are dialectically constituted and socially constructed through practices of autophenomenological identification (“self ascription”) and alter-phenomenological categorization (“ascription of others”). It is not so much the group that defines the symbolic boundaries, but it is the ascriptive practices of social boundary making that define the social groups. Instead of focusing on the cultural stuff that the boundary encloses, we should focus on the boundary and the processes of boundary making that defines the group. Barth does not deny that boundaries can shift and change. He also recognizes that the cultural characteristics of members may be transformed. But he insists that in spite of all the practices of articulation, the dichotomization between insiders and outsiders, strangers and familiars, kin and akin, is somehow bound to stay. What can change, however, are the personnel and their identity. The interchange of personnel leaves the categories intact (though it affects their numbers), but recategorizes aliens into members, strangers into friends. The boundary between the in- and the out-group remains in place, but outsiders are allowed to cross the boundaries and eventually accepted and identified as members of the in-group. By changing their identity, they can “pass” and become full members of the community.

Dialectics of Identification and Categorization

Now that we have given an overview of the different theoretical-cum-political strategies that aim to overcome the Schmittian closure of the collective and keep its boundaries porous, we can return to Rom Harré’s distinction between taxonomic collectives and structured groups. We know that the philosopher from Oxford opposes categories to groups, but I believe that if we follow through Barth’s insights about the constitutive implication of self- and other ascription, identification and categorization, we can dialectically dissolve the opposition between categories and groups. Identity formation is “joint work” (Barth 1994:16). Groups are not only constituted by identification as an “us” posited against a “them,” but they are also, and perhaps as importantly, constituted as a group *by* the categorizations of the others (in the etymological sense of “public accusations,” though we should not exclude *a priori* more affirmative ascriptions). The autophenomenological identification of the collective by the members of the group and the alter-phenomenological categorization of

²³The clash between Benhabib’s “cosmopolitanism” and Mouffe’s “cosmopolitics” may not be as radical as the one between Schmitt and Habermas—after all, “left-wing Schmittists” are “left liberals” of some sort (Mouffe 1999a:4)—but it is nevertheless a serious one and concerns the place of humanity (or “bestiality,” as Schmitt would say), and thus of ethics, in politics. My own position is a humanist and cosmopolitan one: the boundaries between particular collectives have to be deconstructed and make way for the largest collective that we can possibly imagine. Through intercultural and intercivilizational communication, the articulation of differences is teleologically driven by the constitution of a larger collective subjectivity (humanity) of which every extant collective represents only a particular instantiation.

the collective by an external observer do not exclude each other. Both processes of identification of collectives are dialectically implicated in the double morphogenesis of collectives as groups and categories: “First, categorization—external definition—is basic to internal definition. The process of defining ‘us’ demands that ‘they’ should be contrasted with ‘us’. Group identification is likely to proceed, at least in part, through categorizing others, positively or negatively. Second, external definition—by others of us—effects our internal definition(s), not least because it will influence how they orient their behavior towards us” (Jenkins 2000:9). The implication of this course of argumentation is that collectives become groups by being constituted as categories, and that taxonomic categories refer to potential groups that can transform themselves, or be transformed through pressure from without, into structured and organized groups, endowed with a collective consciousness and a will to act that is distributed over the members of the group.

TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION, IMAGINED COMMUNITIES, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE QUASI-GROUP

Mediations of the Collective

To constitute itself as a structured and unified group, capable of collective action, more is needed than a collective identity. It is not enough for the members of the group to identify with the in-group and to differentiate themselves from the members of the out-group. Two other conditions have to be satisfied: first, the presumed members of a potential group have to be able to enter into contact with one another and to form a virtual communicative network and, second, they have to be represented by a spokesperson who speaks in their name and actualizes the collective as an organized group that exists in space and persists over time. For collectives to pass from potentiality to actuality and exercise their causal powers, they have to “structure” or, as Domingues (1995, 2000) says, “centre” themselves.²⁴ The self-identification of the members is a necessary, but insufficient, condition of the structuration of collectives. A collective that wants to act and intervene in the life-world to change the system (or oppose its transformation), needs the intervention of a “technological mediation” that transforms the symbolic community into a quasi-group, as well as of a “political representation” that transforms the quasi-group into an organized group.²⁵

Following Régis Debray’s (1991) grandiloquent attempt to found “mediology” as an encyclopedic science that studies the sociologistics of cultural transmission and political organization, I conceive of technological mediation and political representation as two sides of a single process of mediation that organizes people and things, humans and nonhumans, to speak like the followers of Michele Serres, into a heterogeneous association. Mediation has two sides—a logistical side that has to do with the technological organization of matter and a strategic side that relates to the organization of people into a network (Debray 2000; see also Vandenberghe 2007b). To diffuse a message through society and organize the members of a category into

²⁴Collectives can be diluted (as classes) or centered (as groups). Domingues (1995:110–26) distinguishes two dimensions of the process of centering that can vary independently: identity, which refers to the degree of self-awareness of the group, and organization, which refers to its capacity of decision.

²⁵With some goodwill, one can consider the three moments of identification, mediation, and delegation as three modalities of representation: symbolic representation (Stuart Hall 1996a, 1996b), technoscientific representation (Latour 1987), and political representation (Pitkin 1967).

a “triple I group” that successfully defends its “ideas, identities, and interests,” one must not only ensure the material and technological conditions of the transmission of ideas through society, but also organize and mobilize the members into a tightly knit corporate group that can represent the multitude and act “like one man.” Unlike communication studies, mediation studies is not transfixed on newspapers, color televisions, and internets, but analyzes all the possible vectors of transmission that allow for the transport of messages through space and across generations—from roads and canals, ports and portals to monuments and documents. Without waves of sound, vocal chords, and the larynx, there is no voice and thus no communication; without the bikes of the suffragettes, feminist ideas would probably not have spread through the English countryside. But even if the material world is technologically organized in such a way that individuals can be successfully interconnected in a network of communication—and thanks to the modern technologies of information and communication (TICs) people can nowadays communicate “without propinquity,” that is, without being physically co-present—one still has to organize the individuals into active political groups, like parties, unions and cells, schools, academies and institutes, or sects, chapels and churches, which can represent all the individuals who adhere to the ideals, identities, or interests of the group and speak in the name of the larger collective. In any case, symbolic identification, technological mediation, and political representation are the three moments of the structuration of the collective that propel the progressive actualization of the causal power of the collective.²⁶ Symbolic community, mobilizable quasi-group, and organized group, those are the three avatars of the collective that correspond to the three moments of its structuration.²⁷

Mass-Mediations

To form a structured and unified group, the collective needs a cultural (national, ethnic, linguistic, class, etc.) identity that symbolizes and represents the unity of the group. Poststructuralists, postmodernists, and psychoanalysts know that the identity of the group is largely imaginary: it presupposes a symbolic representation of the group within language that projects the unity of the group outside of itself and allows it thereby to overcome its “lack” and resolve its differences through an imaginary identification with the totality (Hall 1996b). In modernity, the symbolic representation of the collective is almost invariably fragmented and fractured. It is composed by collages and montages of multiple alter-phenomenological descriptions that offer multiple autophenomenological descriptions of a potential identity with which the group could identify itself and constitute itself as a symbolic community. Nowadays, symbolic representations of groups are predominantly carried, expressed, and diffused by mass media in the form of commercial images, cultural products,

²⁶Causal powers can be exercised without being realized. This is the case when other causal powers, such as the ones of the state, for instance, intervene and block the actualization of the powers of the generative mechanism at hand. In the following I make abstraction of the external “opportunity and liability structures” in the environment, such as massive political repression exercised by the state, which systematically block the actualization of the causal powers of the collective.

²⁷I borrow the notion of “quasi-group” from Lord Dahrendorf (1959:179–82), who actually got it from Ginsberg, but I give it a slightly different meaning. Quasi-groups are potential groups, midway between classes and interest groups. The members of the group are related to one another, but only potentially and indirectly, by virtue of their common appurtenance to a class and thanks to the media. To the extent that the quasi-groups do not yet possess an organization or a center of decision, their capacity of action is real, though still virtual. To actualize that capacity and transform the quasi-group in a mobilized group, an organization and a spokesperson are needed.

and ideological discourses. The discursive practices of mass media propose “subject positions” that project cultural identities onto collective screens that function as Lacano-Althusserian mirrors in which collectives are represented and addressed, “hailed,” to recognize and articulate themselves as collective subjects.

Mass media are not only machineries of symbolic representation, however. They are also machineries of sociotechnical mediation that interconnect the members of a symbolic community, who would never be integrated into a potential quasi-group without their intervention, into a network (Calhoun 1991, 1992). As technologies of representation and mediation, the technologies of information and communication are technological vectors that “project articulations of actions across time and space” (Glaeser 2005:25–26), allowing thereby for the “distanciation” (Giddens) and “compression” (Harvey) of time and space. Disembedding the relations of co-presence, the media recompose and distribute the interpersonal relations in such a way that persons who are separated in time and space can nevertheless enter into contact with each other, virtually or actually, directly or indirectly, and form a virtual social network that can, if needed, be activated and mobilized to defend common interests, collective identities, or shared ideas. Even if people do not encounter each other directly or communicate face to face, they know that, thanks to various media, they could do so if they wished. In line with the realist conception of society, we could say that it is the relations between the social positions that condition and make possible the emergence of collectives, understood as generative mechanisms that produce social movement. But to appear in the life-world as structured quasi-groups that can be mobilized to reproduce or transform the structure and the culture of society in accordance with the interests, the identities, and the ideas that correspond to their social positions, the collectives first have to constitute themselves as symbolic communities whose members are virtually interconnected by the media.²⁸

Media function like “generalized symbolic media” (Parsons-Luhmann). In theory, they allow us to think together “social integration” and “systemic integration” (Lockwood 1964). As conveyer belts that link the global system to the local life-worlds, they are the ideal tools to construct systematic linkages between systemic relations between social positions and ideas on the one hand, and interpersonal or intergroupal relations on the other. To the extent that they mediate interpersonal relations and allow people and groups that are not physically co-present, but who share convergent interests, identities, and ideas by virtue of the position they occupy in the system, to enter into contact and communication, media essentially function as sociotechnical systems of social integration that allow the actors to coordinate their action by means of communication, even outside of situations of interaction.

Imagined Communities

Borrowing a concept that had quite an impact on the emerging field of cultural studies, we could say with Benedict Anderson (1983) that media produce and project “imagined communities.” Imagined communities are not imaginary communities, like the ones that analytic philosophers like to invent, but taxonomic collectives that

²⁸When the members of a symbolic community are “interspiritually” connected through the media, they form a public, as defined by Tarde (1901:VI and 2): “The public is a dispersed crowd, where the influence of the minds of the ones on the minds of the others has become an action at a distance. . . . The public is a purely spiritual community, a dissemination of physically separated individuals whose cohesion is entirely mental.” When they are interconnected by media that allow for one-to-one communication, publics become virtual networks.

refer to possible communities composed of people who share a common diacritical characteristic that differentiates them from other communities. In his reflections on the origins and the diffusion of nationalism, Anderson makes it quite clear from the beginning that imagined communities, such as nations—but one can easily extend the concept to classes, ethnic groups, sexual minorities, and other political and cultural groupings—are not groups, but quasi-groups. “The community is imagined,” he says, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1983:6). Reinforcing his point, he immediately adds: “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (Anderson 1983).

Anderson finds the model of the social construction of nations in the constructions of classes; not in the working classes, however, but in the bourgeoisie: “In world-historical terms bourgeoisies were the first classes to achieve solidarities on an essentially imagined basis” (Anderson 1983:77). It is thanks to the images and the discourses that were published in newspapers and journals that the bourgeois have been able to visualize the existence of thousands and thousands of property owners like themselves. Thanks to the printing press, potential relations, say between a factory owner in Manchester and one in Rochester or Leeds, could be imagined. Later, when the owners of property would organize themselves into the Confederation of British Industry in order to defend their vested interests, the relations they had anticipated in imagination would, in effect, be realized. If I invoke this historical example, it is to make two theoretical points: first, the passage from categories to structured groups presupposes the establishment of imagined relations between people; and, second, the relations between people do not have to be direct, but can be indirect and mediated by technologies of communication, information, and transportation, from the voice to the taxi and the mobile phone to the plane.

Relations between people are always mediated by a technical interface, which is itself the result of the metabolism of man with nature, and has its own history. Mingling the material, social, and cultural aspects of the transmission of ideas, identities, and interests, Régis Debray (1991) has introduced the notion of “mediasphere” to analyze the ecological interchanges between the medium and its environment over the ages. Media are not just technological vectors of cultural transmission; they impose a certain worldview, configure a certain way of thinking, condition the possible forms of sociability, and shape the politics of the age. Each epoch has its own dominant medium, which conditions the form of the dominant ideologies, practices, and institutions of its time. The medium is the messenger, the messenger is the message (to unpack McLuhan’s famous one-liner). The invention of the printing press (medium) in the 15th century shifted the locus of power from the church to the intellectuals (messenger) and this tectonic shift led to the emergence of the public sphere in the 17th and 18th centuries; similarly, the invention of the television (medium) in the first half of the 20th century shifted the locus of power from the intellectuals to the journalists (messenger) in the second half of the century, with the decline of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) and the emergence of publicity as a consequence (message). The invention of writing, the printing press, and closer to us, the radio, the television, and the Internet have dramatically altered intellectual life, public opinion, and politics. Debray discusses at length the “logosphere,” the “graphosphere,” and the “videosphere,” but has little to say about the “hypersphere”—which may be due to the fact that he does not use the computer and still writes his books by hand.

Networks All the Way Down

As the Internet has made possible new forms of loose association that allow for the coordination of collective action on a global scale, the hypersphere deserves, however, more attention. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has not only enabled the transmission of information and communication across technological, social, and geographical boundaries at the speed of light and given rise to new kinds of identities and communities, but, and perhaps more importantly for the topic at hand, mobile phones, streaming technologies, the Internet, and wireless networks have also stimulated the emergence of a global network of networks that interconnects NGOs and INGOs, advocacy networks, social movements, grass roots organizations, churches, unions, intellectuals, and journalists into globally oriented social movements that have led to episodic mass mobilizations of resistance (Bennett 2003, 2005; Langman 2005).

“Seattle,” or the organized response to the Multilateral Agreement on Investment that aimed to subordinate the politics of the nation-states all over the world to mercantile interests of transnational grand capital, proves, if necessary, that under the pressure of circumstances computer-mediated communication can diffuse militant discourses and action plans that make the interconnection of activists who are dispersed all over the world possible. The “battle of Seattle” was not a spontaneous event, but the highly organized and highly publicized end-sequence of months of intense Internet networking among a multiplicity of (national) social movements and (transnational) networks at different scales and levels.

High-level spectacular protests like Seattle, or those that now accompany the “summits” of the world leaders, catch the attention of mass media and the imagination of sympathizers around the world. Metaphorically speaking, such protests at the summits are like a well-attended rave party that occurs on the top of a mountain under a sunlit rainbow flag (that embodies, expresses, and symbolizes the “unity in diversity” of the collective movement). Underneath the flag, but still above the clouds, we find a much larger configuration of more dispersed and less publicized practices. While thousands of activists and loony ravers were battling in Seattle and appearing on TV, concurrent mass demonstrations were taking place in more than 50 cities all over the world, from London to New Delhi and Seoul to Manila.

Further down the mountain, underneath the clouds, we find the camps and the tents of the social movement organizations, the SMOs of resource mobilization theory (Zald and McCarthy 1987) that have organized the demonstrations (and the counterdemonstrations that take place simultaneously on the other flank on the mountain).²⁹ This is the level of the “social movement industry” that organizes the campaigns, recruits the “adherents” (sympathizers), and mobilizes the “constituents” (activists) into action. That is where we find a great variety of organizations and activist networks that mobilize and control resources, especially money, time, and labor, but also the social capital of connections they can activate, and their spokespersons (see *infra*). It is also where the linkages with other social movements, groups, associations, and networks of all stripes are established through continuous practices of “reticulation” and “articulation” between the activists. Unlike the old social movements of the past, like the worker’s movement, the new social movements

²⁹The mobilization of a network is almost always accompanied by a countermobilization. The antinomial dynamic (Us/Them) that we analyzed earlier in terms of the opposition between identification and categorization reappears here as antagonistic interlocking of movements and countermovements in the multiorganizational field of the social movement industry (Klandermans 1992).

of the present form a heterogeneous group, a kind of rainbow coalition that cuts across categories (the workers, the farmers, the indigenous, the lesbians, etc.) and boundaries (local, national, transnational, global). Members often belong to different networks. Cross-linkages between groups at different levels and negotiations between their spokespersons form the structural basis of global coalitions. When the networks are interlinked in coalitions and the collective action of the coalitions is in turn coordinated at a higher level, a “scale shift” occurs (Tarrow 2005:99–140). Social movements today are loosely integrated in an expanding network of networks, glued together by the multiple belongings of its members and the articulatory practices of its spokespersons.³⁰

Finally, at the base of the mountain, we find the millions, if not billions, of sympathizers and adherents who believe in the goals of the movement and support its actions.³¹ They have not joined the protests, at least not this time, but as a critical mass, they constitute a reservoir of capillary forces the movement can tap into and that can be occasionally mobilized to defend the general interest, ideas, or identities that the movement vicariously represents. Dispersed like a rhizome, the adherents form a “submerged network” (Melucci 1989:70–73) in everyday life that can occasionally emerge from the underground and form a dense “group in fusion” (Malraux-Sartre) to confront a public authority on a given issue and defend the interests, ideas, and identities of the movement. Following Sartre (1960:381–431), “groups in fusion” can be conceived of more generally as practical and intentional communities that are mobilized around the collective project of common struggle against the “pratico-inert” structures of domination.

Humanity in Action

The linking of the base and the summit is greatly facilitated by computer-mediated communication. In the same way as the press of the 18th century was instrumental in overcoming the episodic and localized character of popular protest and facilitated the formation of coalitions on a national scale (Tarrow 1994:48–61), the mass media of the 20th century, and above all the television, made a massive synchronization of minds possible and played a major role in the formation of global imagined communities, like McLuhan’s global village that includes all inhabitants of the planet into a self-conscious community of fate. If television makes the synchronization of minds possible, the Internet allows for the efficient coordination of collective actions across space. Electronic networks link individuals to movements, and also movements to each other. E-mail lists, for instance, allow for an instantaneous interconnection of minds (“online”) that may occasionally lead to a massive congregation of bodies (“offline”) in a protest demonstration. “It is the capacity to move easily between on- and offline relationships that makes the scale shift to transnational activism possible” (Bennett 2005:205).

Compared with the more centralized movements of the past, Internetworked social movements display a remarkable degree of organizational flexibility and

³⁰Different groups can be linked to each other through common members who act as spokespersons, mediators, and translators of their respective groups. In his popular essay on the stranger, Georg Simmel (1995:764–71) pointed to the fact that strangers often function as diplomats who establish “foreign relations” between the different groups to which they belong. This insight has been worked out and formalized by social network analysis (Breiger 1974).

³¹Protesters at one of the countersummits against the G8 were carrying a banner with the slogan: “You are 8, we are 6 billion.”

structural fluidity. At the very extreme, they may even dispense with leadership altogether, although probably not with spokespersonship. Negri and Hardt, the talented spokespersons of the anarchocommunist fractions of the direct action networks, have suggested that the new struggles of the multitude take the form of a distributed, or full matrix, networks that are at once fluid, collective, and individualistic, and do not display a hierarchical command organization: “There’s no center and all nodes can communicate directly with each other. . . . The distributed network might be imagined like a swarm of ants or bees—a seemingly amorphous multiplicity that can strike at a single point from all sides or disperse in the environment so as to become almost invisible” (Hardt and Negri 2004:57). Based on communication between nodes without hub or center, the swarm intelligence of the multitude can be characterized as polycephalous (though not exactly in the sense that Husserl meant when he said that collective intentionality of the personality of the higher order was multiheaded).

The new media contribute to the organization of different social movements (anticapitalist, ecopax, feminist, gay and lesbian, etc.) and help them to gather in a single, but loosely connected, global social movement that counterfactually represents humanity and vicariously advocates its interests (Brunkhorst 2002). From this point of view, the so-called antiglobalization movement of the 21st century appears as the legitimate successor of the working-class movement of the 19th century, and perhaps even of the proletariat as the “identical subject-object” of history. Although it speaks in many voices and possesses many heads, it may well represent the contemporary incarnation of the *Weltgeist*. It is no longer seated on a white horse that triumphantly enters the city of Iena; it now manifests (itself) in the streets of Seattle, Davos, and Genoa and makes episodic appearances at the World Social Forum in Porto Allegre, Mumbai, Caracas, and Nairobi. Interconnecting all the individuals who feel concerned by the state of the world (the planet) in a hidden, dispersed, and virtual network that can occasionally center, actualize, and manifest itself as a “group in fusion,” the global network of networks works as a powerful medium that can liquidate the “seriality” of the collective and interconnect the individuals in an action group, conscious of itself and capable of common collective action, now or in the future. The “collective effervescence” that marks groups in fusion engenders a strong feeling of unity that energizes its members. The emotional energy, stored in sacred symbols, objects, and slogans, but also in the memory of a shared experience, can be reactivated and released when the situation demands it, motivating the members to gather again, if necessary. “We are here now, we were there then, and we will be together in the future. We are a movement” (Eyerman 2006:196).

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND SPOKESPERSONSHIP

Catnets and Spokes

If the representation and visualization of the collective by the members of the group transform the collective into a symbolic community, the technological mediation that potentially connects the members of a community in a latent and dispersed network transforms the latter into a serial quasi-group that can at times manifest itself as a group in fusion. Symbolic representation and technological mediation are two necessary, albeit insufficient, moments of the structuration of collectives. To become a real “triple I group” with interests, ideas, and an identity that persist over time, the quasi-group needs a more or less permanent organizational structure that transforms

the mobilized group into a mobilizable group that can act “as one man” and make decisions that commit the group as a group.

By organizing itself, the group stabilizes, canalizes, and externalizes permanently the fused energies in a social institution that keeps the causal power of the group on standby and guarantees, almost at every moment, the possibility of a future collective praxis directed against the reified structures of society. “Against the seriality that threatens to dissolve it,” Sartre (1960:440) suggests, “the collective has to create an artificial inertia that protects it against the threat of the pratico-inert.” This artificial inertia that protects against inertia is the organization. Sartre thinks of the organization as an entity, but it can also be conceived of as a process that increases the common identity of the collective at the same time as it unifies its structure. Organization (dis)solves Harre’s problem: it effectively transforms categories of people who share some common characteristic into networks of people who are linked to each other, directly or indirectly, by a specific kind of interpersonal bond. Taking up a suggestion of Harrison White, Charles Tilly (1978:62–64) has introduced the exotic concept of “catnets” into research on social movements to refer to the set of individuals comprising both a category and a network. Catnets are strong when they combine a high degree of common identity (“high on catness”) with a high degree of interconnectedness (“high on netness”).

I have already analyzed the social construction of categorical identities that wed the collective into a symbolic community (high catness), as well as the technological mediations that allow for the coordination of dispersed actions into a quasi-group (low to medium netness). I now want to conclude this article with some final considerations on the role of the spokesperson in the organization of collective (high netness). The notion of spokespersonship does not serve to rescue the Leninist vanguard party, representing the interests of “a class that cannot represent itself and has therefore to be represented” (Marx 1960:198), but is meant as a modest theoretical contribution to resource mobilization theory.³² Borrowing freely some ideas from Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour on the role of spokespersonship (Pels 2000), I would like to defend the thesis that the transformation of the quasi-group into a tightly organized “triple I group” that exists empirically as an institution, organization, or corporation at the meso and macro levels of society is the result of the work of political representation of the collective by “the spoke.”³³

The Voice of the Network

The power of the spokesperson is largely metonymic, as Keck and Sikkink (1998:207) have correctly observed: “The network-as-actor derives a great deal of its effectiveness from the network-as-structure.” The spokesperson condenses the network. Speaking in its name, she—let’s assume, for once, it’s a black woman—gives it a voice. Networks are communicative structures. Although they need a minimum of consensus to coordinate the actions of their different members (or “nodes”—members can also be groups), they should not be thought of as old-fashioned Habermasian jukeboxes

³²In spite of its promising title, *Silence and Voice in Contentious Politics* (Aminzade et al. 2001) has not much to say about spokespersons. It aims to highlight the “silences” in RMT and to give “voice” to neglected topics in research on social movements, such as space, personality, emotions, or religion.

³³The representative activities of the spokesperson and its multiple analogues (the actor, the factor, the agent, the trustee, the guardian, the procurator, the deputy, the attorney, the lieutenant, the vicar, the delegate, the ambassador, the commissioner) boil down to essentially two: delegated by the collective, the spokesperson “acts for” the group and in its name; symbolizing the group, he or she “stands for” it and makes it present in its absence (Pitkin 1967:60–112).

with only one tune on record. Communication does not exclude, but presupposes and includes the articulation of differences in a search for a common language and position. The critical pursuit of “what is identical in seeming diversity of form and of what is distinct and even opposed in apparent uniformity” ensues in “formulae of unity and federation” that “organize and interconnect closely what is similar” (Gramsci 1971:190–91). Much of what goes on within networks concerns the formation of a workable consensus through the articulation of differences and similarities. When a divergent position between the members emerges, the discussion aims to enlarge the framework so as to progressively encompass the point of view of the dissenter into a new consensus. In research on social movements, such interpretative practices that interactively link divergent positions into congruent and complementary positions that overcome the “differend” (Lyotard’s *différend*) and can, consequently, be defended and assumed by all of the constituents, are called “frame alignment” (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986).³⁴

To “frame” an issue, an event, or an experience differently is to categorically define, redefine, refine, or smooth it in such a way that the elements eventually “con-spire,” breathe, and hang together, in a relatively unified and meaningful fashion that can be accepted as a working consensus by the protagonists without compromising their moral standing or draining their emotional energy. “Frame bridging” (linkage of two or more ideologically congruent, but structurally unconnected, frames, such as deforestation and regional development, for instance) and “frame extension” (extension of boundaries of primary framework to “hook up” different issues and encompass other constituencies) are the principal routes that lead to the realignment of the protagonists. Processes of negotiation and articulation that aim to realign the protagonists and their discourses do not only take place within networks, but also between networks, that are thereby welded into a new “bloc,” that is, “a unity of opposites and of distincts,” to speak like Gramsci (1971:137).

Spokespeople that represent, formulate, and translate the positions of their respective networks often have to articulate and negotiate, reframe and rephrase their position before they come to agree on a common platform of action. As collating devices, the discourses of human rights or, more recently, those on global justice, have been quite instrumental as “master frameworks” that are sufficiently broad to gather different movements championing women, gays and lesbians, the disabled, ethnic minorities, indigenous movements, and exploited workers of the “third world” under a single umbrella and to align them into a rainbow coalition that speaks with one voice. “The ‘voice’ of the network is not the sum of the network components, but the product of an interaction of voices (and different from any single voice of a network member)” (Keck and Sikkink 1998:207).

Compared with the old and new social movements of the last century, the transnational networks of today are much more heterogeneous, flexible, and fluid in their infrastructure (“distributed networks”) and much more open, inclusive, and tolerant in their identities (“unity in diversity”). Differences are now accepted and fostered, reframed as an asset and no longer as a liability. They are also more democratic, individualistic, and anarchistic. Contrasting the first generation of transnational activism

³⁴Inspired by Goffman, frame analysis has brought back cultural analysis in resource mobilization theory, but it still shares the latter’s utilitarianism and mentalism (Cefaï and Trom 2001). It sets forth a powerful conception of strategic interaction, but it tends to reduce frames to instrumental cultural tools, conceiving of the latter as cognitive representations and undervaluing their pragmatic and affective dimensions. Moreover, it often refers to a social psychology of internalized states of mind, while frames provide a “vocabulary of motives” that are part of public cultures available in social situations.

described by Keck and Sikkink (1998) with second-generation direct activism, Lance Bennett argues that loose activist networks that adopt self-organizing computer-mediated communication technologies, advocate multiple issues and flexible identities not only challenge previous organizational forms of transnational activism. “These networks also challenge social movement theories that focus on brokered coalitions, ideological framing, and collective movement identities fashioned around national politics” (Bennett 2005:213). However much they mistrust authority and distrust leadership, they cannot, however, I contend, avoid spokespersonship altogether. Spokespersonship is inescapable, but it can be democratized so as to allow for more flexible forms of consensus building. Communication is not just a procedure (as in Habermas) for arriving at a consensus; it is also an art and a technique. Activist networks have now devised a whole gamut of innovative techniques and instruments, such as spokescouncils, break-outs, fishbowls, and vibe-watchers, for example, which facilitate consensus formation without stifling dissenting voices.³⁵ Although spokespersons are now multiplied and can speak with many voices, they still have to aim for the moral high ground and aspire to a form of consensus that is more than of particular interest.

Performing the Collective

Representation is largely metonymic, condensing the network into the person who embodies it. It also has a strong performative effect that adds its own symbolic power to the power of the group.³⁶ The very act of representation is also an act of transubstantiation—by invoking the group, the spokesperson seeks to evoke it and bring it into existence. Representing the group, standing for it, and acting in its name, the spokesperson calls it into being. When she addresses the members of the group, all attention is focused on her and, aware of the common focus, the members are unified by a common intentional consciousness and a shared experience of togetherness. Occasionally, when the spokesperson is charismatic enough to energize the members, communication can become effusive and may even take an ecstatic form. When this occurs, “[i]t is no longer a simple individual who speaks, but a group that is embodied and personified” (Durkheim 1960:301). As a living symbol of the group, the spokesperson embodies the unity of the group and condenses its energies in material form. When she speaks in the absence of the members of the group, she represents them, acting and speaking in and on their behalf. As an official representative of the group, the spokesperson produces and realizes the group that

³⁵Just a couple of examples from the anarchist toolbox: “Spokescouncils are large assemblies that coordinate between smaller ‘affinity groups.’ Each affinity group (which might have between 4 and 20 people) selects a ‘spoke,’ who is empowered to speak for them in the larger group. Only the spokes can take part in the actual process of finding consensus at the council, but before major decisions they break into affinity groups again and each group comes to consensus on what position they want their spoke to take. . . . You can ask for a brainstorming session, in which people are only allowed to present ideas but not to criticize other people’s. . . . A fishbowl would only be used if there’s a profound difference of opinion: you can take two representatives for each side—one man and one woman—and have the four of them sit in the middle, everyone else surrounding them silently, and see if the four can’t work out a synthesis or compromise together, which they can then present as a proposal to the whole group” (Graeber 2002:71–72).

³⁶Following speech act theory, I stress the ontological effects of performances. For a more dramatic approach that stresses the histrionic aspects of performances that successfully “fuse” the spokesman and the group he represents, see Alexander (2004, especially p. 549): “Successful performances overcome the deferral of meaning that Derrida recognized as difference. In a successful performance, the signifiers seem actually to become what they signify . . . The actor seems to be Hamlet; the man who takes the oath of office seems to be the president . . . The performance achieves verisimilitude—the appearance of reality.”

delegates and authorizes her to represent it in the form of institutions, organizations, and corporations that exist in space and last over time. The spokesperson who represents the group “in person,” as phenomenologists like to say, acts as a mediator between the members of the group and the group: in their absence, she acts and speaks in their name and makes them present; by representing them, she “presentifies” the group (if you allow me this Heideggerianism). By delegation, she makes the collective visible, almost tangible, and asserts and defends its ideas, interests, and identities in public. This representation of the group by its representative gives a permanent visibility to the group and actually brings it into existence, not just for the members of the group, but also for those in other groups.

Following Luc Boltanski’s (1982) important analysis of the formation of the category of the “cadres” (executives), we can use the polysemy of the notion of representation fruitfully to theorize the power of delegation. The visibility of a collective, like the “cadres” or other groups that are designated by a single substantive, is the end result of a long and patient work of objectivation that finally channels the mental, social, and legal representations of the group into its political representation by delegation: “[The cadres] are the product of a social effort of representation which is applied not only in the realm of mental representations (categories of thought and schemes for perceiving the social world) and in that of social representations (in the sense which American social psychology gives to the concept of ‘display’), but also in the realm of political representation in the sense of ‘delegation’, whereby a group equips itself with official spokesmen authorized to speak and act on its behalf, to embody in the struggle with other groups and other classes” (Boltanski 1984:484).³⁷

Thanks to the delegation of the speaker, who personalizes the collective and represents it politically and legally in situations of interaction, the collective manifests and realizes itself not only *in rerum natura* as a supra-individual, but also as a personified entity that is not just a collective fiction existing only somewhere in the heads of individuals. Authorized by the members of the group she represents, the spokesperson objectivates the group and transforms it into an organization or a corporation (the *universitas personarum* of Roman law). Legally recognized by the state that recognizes the organization as a moral person, the organization becomes an authorized social agent that can act as a supra-individual person.

If collectives exist *in potentia* at the macro level, organizations exist *in actu* at the meso level. Offices, secretaries, desks, telephones, mailboxes, official paper with letterhead, mailing lists of members, regular meetings, regulated discussions, and so on—just like the spokeswoman herself—all those material indices of the organized group are available for inspection and can be seen and inspected on the spot. Nobody, not even the radical positivist or grant-funded empiricist, would deny its existence—which does not mean, of course, that its legitimacy has to be accepted at face value. As a representative of the collective, the spokesperson acts in micro situations, but mandated by the organized collective, her actions can indeed have considerable impact on the macro level. The spokesperson is therefore a “mega-actor” (Mouzelis 1995:16–18), that is, a corporate individual who can mobilize important organizational resources and whose decisions on the spot transcend the local situations of action, affect the organization, and can even transform the social system. It is because the speaker is an intermediary between the group and its members that

³⁷For a social constructivist analysis of socioprofessional categories that is indebted to Boltanski and emphasizes the interplay of social, scientific, and political representations, see Desrosières and Thévenot (1988).

she can function as a mediator between the micro and the macro level of society. As a personification of the causal power of the collective, she embodies and represents the organization of the collective and, speaking in its name, she represents, realizes, and performatively reifies the collective. It already existed potentially and virtually, but now, thanks to her actions, the potential is actualized. Appearing in society as an organized community that can be mobilized occasionally and can mobilize its members as a group in fusion, the collective now appears “as if” it had always existed as a corporate body capable of collective common action.

Conclusion: History and Sociology

Unlike philosophy, sociology cannot write history with capital letters *modo futuri exacti*. Sociology can no doubt propose developmental ideal types of universal history (see Max Weber, for example), but it cannot introduce a collective subjectivity—be it the proletariat or humanity itself—as the “identical subject-object” (Lukács) that embodies the *logos* of history and realizes its *telos*. A dialectical philosophy of history comprehends sociology and totalizes its results in an encompassing vision that spells out the internal logics of the development of reason that drives history forward to its full realization (conceived of not just as a regulative ideal, but as a living *logos* that is immanent in reality). Sociology cannot be that speculative and has to limit itself to research. Its task is *Forschung* (research) not *Darstellung* (dialectical presentation of research), but it can nevertheless offer its modest contribution by analyzing how collective subjectivities are actually constituted.

In this article, I have presented a realist theory of collective subjectivities that spans the gap between categories and networks. Categories are conceived of as virtual and potential groups. The structuration of collectives that releases and realizes their causal powers has been analyzed as a triple morphogenetic process that comprises three “moments” (symbolic identification, sociotechnical mediation, and political representation) and produces the three avatars of the collective (the symbolic community, the mobilizable quasi-group, and the organized group). At the end of this analysis, groups that counterfactually represent humanity and are represented by their spokespersons, who vicariously advocate their interests in the real world, appear on the scene of history as collective actors. Philosophers may now resume their work and speculate on the ends of history, but whether collectives realize those ends or not does not depend on them. As Marx said, it is not the philosophers who make history, but the actors themselves, and they do it in circumstances that they have not chosen.

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