

REVIEW OF REVIEWS

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„SYMBOLS AND IMAGINARY IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY”

The theme *Symbols and Imaginary in Contemporary Philosophy* of the second issue of *Dialogue and Universalism* (<https://doi.org/10.5840/du202434216>) in 2024 brings to the fore the interest for the meaningful game of meanings’ recognition, bringing order in human culture, in the world of thought and in the world, in general. Meanings make and unmake hierarchies, amend and restore orders, conserve perspectives and change the perspectives, too, in relating to the world and each other in times of turmoil, crises and propaganda.

Versatile and multivalent, symbols are vital for all varieties of thought and for human life. Making sense, as well in human abstract thought as in daily activities, relies heavily on symbols, logic, interpretation, „marks of recognition”, condensed values, assigned values and feelings, always in connection with the eternal fountain of the imaginary, as this is a timeless functional feature of human mind, culture, history and politics. As Lorena Păvălan-Stuparu, the invited editor, emphasizes “The different degrees of recognition of meanings in the signifier, starting from abstract concepts or from concrete experiences unfold in the perspectives from which the symbol can be studied: hermeneutics, phenomenology, anthropology, philosophy of religions, aesthetics, art theory, epistemology, logic, philosophy, of language, abyssal psychology, political philosophy, poetics, ethnology, semantics, etc.”

Alfred North Whitehead and the accent placed on the fundamental role of symbolism—linguistic, artistic, ritual, institutional—in the functioning of societies, maintaining identity and orienting progress towards freedom and rationality, Ernst Cassirer with his vision of the “symbolic system” specific to the human being, René Alleau with his contribution in the science of symbols and symbolic “metamorphosis”, Gilbert Durand in *The Universe of the Symbol*, tackling the idea of the “human symbolic apparatus,” Michel Meslin with his work on symbol as an expression of a “psychic totality” which “does not address a single faculty of man, his intelligence, but his entire being,” Cornelius Castoriadis with “the imaginary institution of society,” and Mircea Eliade with his preoccupation with the theme “*Man as a Symbol*” are some of the guiding milestones in approaching this topic, instantiated by the editor, since *Symbol and recognition in Mircea Eliade*, herself a contemporary notable researcher in this

domain. Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, Michel Maffesoli are provided as major contributors for the topic at the beginning of the 21st century.

In this significant issue, Bogdan Rusu argues in the study titled “Peirce’s semiotics and the background of Whitehead’s Symbolism” that Peirce had an important influence on the constitution of the doctrine of symbolism in Alfred North Whitehead, on symbolism, in general, and mostly on mathematical symbolism. Alfred North Whitehead first approached Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic doctrine, in comparison and contrast to that of and then through the American professors encountered at Harvard. Whitehead arrived thus at a position reacting to the realist doctrines and mainly Santayana’s doctrine, discussing their emphasis on the symbolic nature of perceptual knowledge, and proposing a theory based on “pansemiotism”, derived from Peirce. The study follows the influence of Peirce’s semiotics in Whitehead’s early doctrine of symbols (with the central idea that the symbol generates an interpretant in the interpreter’s mind), the reinforcement of the doctrine due to the Harvard philosophical environment, with the result of a mature doctrine of symbols, as well informed by Peirce’s semiotics and continuing his earlier doctrine of symbols.

Wilhelm Dancă investigates Mircea Eliade’s religious symbolism, in the study titled “Man as a symbol in the *Memories* of Mircea Eliade”, with a special attention for the anthropological aspects emphasized in his *Memories*. Via hermeneutics, the science of norms for the identification and interpretation of the authentic meaning, the double “existential and cognitive” function of the symbol becomes paramount in the description of the *homo symbolicus* in Mircea Eliade, with the particular deeper meaning of man as a symbol himself. This theoretical investigation gives way to the project of writing *Anthropocosmos*, a work approaching “the profound meaning and structural solidarity of all those symbols, rites, beliefs, in relation to the labyrinth, the mandala, the foundation of the city, etc.”, written but not published, and *Man as a symbol*, left at the level of the idea. The study argues that the imaginary universes of modern artistic creativity, preserve, in camouflaged meaning, the mythical-symbolic structures and mythical-ritual religious scenarios, which can be traced and understood via historical-religious hermeneutics. They are present despite the mark of nihilism recognizable in the contemporary horizon of Western humanistic research shaken after the tides of historicisms and the heralded collapse of the philosophies of history and man. Eliade is still a fertile theoretical foundation offering the concepts and perspectives to capitalize the mythical and symbolic meanings hidden in modern, literary languages and to capitalize upon the symbolic religious dimension.

Jean-Jacques Wunenburger studies the “Mythologies of times in the west: utopia, millennism and messianism” approaching the process by which cultural and political data often entered the sphere of the imaginary, then reflected in

religions, in utopias and in art, the author suggesting also this order for their transfer from the realm of imaginary into other, different realms. The first part of the study identifies three scenarios of universal history, correlated with the underlining mythology of a linear and irreversible time traceable back to origin and, from there, to the end as the root of all other imaginaries and the marker of our civilization and its achievements. Grand narratives are indebted to it, too, as is, directly, the myth of unique time. Monotheism narrates via the myth of the fall universal history as a story of redemption from the original corruption of the first man, either for the chosen people, or for several, or, for all mankind with several varieties. The second scenario embraces the millenarian short time enflaming the imaginary with the imminence of eschaton. The third scenario follows the undetermined time, in messianism, led by the alluring, utopian, alternative life, imaginative revolutionary glimpses of Eden. The significant myths of great narratives are express by religions, arts and political beliefs, which they set in motion via the effective matrices of mythemes: the revelation of history (Genesis), the apocalyptic times associated in variations with the myth of eternal return, and other mythical forms, swinging from the “mythology of de-symbolizing violence” to “a temptation of over-symbolizing irenicism”, back and forth. The problems of the myth of the single time concern historical transformations (progress, promotion of knowledge, individual destinies linked in globalization, post-humanism, deep ecology and the myth of Gaia, the communication society and the myth of Hermes).

Adriana Neacșu investigates the role of symbol in the expression of faith in Mircea Eliade (“Symbol and faith in Mircea Eliade”. In Eliade’s view, belief is a constitutive structure of the human being, as *homo religious* is a type of *homo symbolicus*, possibly, the clearest type. Faith is a constitutive given of the human being, structuring man’s consciousness via the value of sacredness as well as man’s life and the entire universe as meaningful, ordered and potentially knowable. Symbol is posited as form of autonomous knowledge and thus, its structure is generated by the generative function of symbolic thinking. In archaic societies religious mentality is exemplary and primitive man openly lives by symbols and their symbolic functions, based on archetypal religious symbolic images, in order to explain the world and relate to it. Within the symbolic complex, important elements are phenomena, processes and symbols of faith, of the sacred and the profane and of hierophany. The author emphasizes that in Eliade primitive man transcends the sphere of his/her immediate existence, via symbolic thinking, acknowledging the particular, the universal, and the hopeful possibility of becoming, rising from particular to the universal (and we can recall the idea of belief in becoming sacred in communion with the sacred present in the world). Symbol and faith rise man to the status of universal being, in a “natural” process since symbols are inherently part of the intimate structure of the human

being and the thought, actions and existence of man are now and eternally inextricably linked to symbolic thinking.

Ionel Bușe approaches in the study titled “On the androgyny of the cyborg – an anthropological difficulty” contrasting two visions of the integral hypercomplex human being: the inter- and transdisciplinary visions. The human being is captured in the perpetual hypostasis of self-poiesis via education, culture, science, technology reflected in utopian/dystopic visions, mythical forms of the future artificial being, a significantly augmented and improved man – the cyborg, an androgyne God-like figure with persistent influence in the mythical narratives along history. Mircea Eliade considers the androgynous a universal archetype, Plato involves myth of the androgyne in his ontology of Form (*Symposium* and *Phaedrus*), in romantic literature and the psychoanalysis of Freud androgyny is included among the great themes of thought. The study approaches also hyper-complexity of *homo sapiens* as *autopoiesis* (in Edgar Morin’s paradigm of the human), Gaston Bachelard’s individual reveries of androgyny and transhumanism, with an accent placed on the imagination of the techno-scientist utopia/dystopia engaging the image of the cyborg.

Gabriela Goudenhooff explores imaginary constructs of nation, as well as the legitimation of political authority through hermeneutic analysis in “Imagining power: hermeneutic insights into imagined nations and the legitimation of political authority”. Political discourse describing and capitalizing upon the concept of nation is enhanced via symbolic, mythic, and narrative elements rising to legitimacy and power. The investigation provided an understanding of the mechanisms creating national identity in their capacity as mechanism of political legitimacy. This hermeneutic approach to national identity, as social and discursive construct, implies addressing the realm of social imaginary, populated with symbols and myths that describe nation as a paramount symbol. Via symbolic representations national identity is constructed and its discursive evolutions involve shared beliefs, symbols and narratives with power legitimating role, insinuated through communicational constructs such as “the real nation of citizens”, which obturate nations as “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson) and convey beliefs (reshared and reinforced beliefs) creating the actuality and “naturalness” of the nation, based on a shared belief in a common origin, as well as on an inclusive-exclusive game process with deep symbolic roots. Nations use foundational myths, rituals, specific actions, and heroes constituting the perennial imaginary of power enforcing and reinforcing social and legal order, legitimacy and power.

Bogdana Todorova investigates “The role of political symbolism in constructing a national Iranian identity” via the symbolism identified at the heart of the political process. The conceptualization of the Iranian nation is studied as a “positive symbol” generated through the functions and actions of the symbolic

forms of ideas and values. There are two types of symbols on which the constitution of Iranian identity is predicated *symbol signifiers and integrating symbols*. Therefore, the argument tackles Corbin's *mundus imaginalis* and its paradoxical efficacy in actualizing concepts such as national identity, and, in this case, Iranian identity, via "symbol-strategy," and symbolic actions. The main condition of possibility on this route is the very status of man as *animal symbolicum* (Cassirer) the vital significance of symbolic forms for human being's existence and the inherent creation of the social and personal space as a symbolic space expression of a symbolic interiority of man. Nowadays, in contrast, we have thinkers such as Anthony Giddens who radically negate the imaginary, versus, thinkers such as Cornelius Castoriadis, who absolutizes the imaginary within a concept of radical human reflexivity, or Chalz Taylor who thematizes the imaginary via the concept of culture and cultural theories, as the symbol triggers, focus, attention and imagination. The "imagination" of a nation does not imply the lack of reality for the concept of nation but the symbolic force of this socio-historical and cultural product in describing social reality (Anderson). The role of political symbolism in the construction of Iranian national identity is central via the "symbol-strategy" identified and analysed in the study.

Cătălin Avramescu authors the study titled "Flags of shame. Politics and symbols in contemporary debates" starting from the observation that although this is a relatively recent phenomenon, however "flags have become a battlefield of choice in politics". The argument states as a first element of the analysis the process of the desacralization of the U. S. flag, which has been taking place since the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in the case *Texas v. Johnson* (1989). Other factual pillars with political and symbolic significant weight are the nineteenth-century controversies around the Confederate flag, the symbols of the revolutionary Left, the contrast between "shame cultures" and "guild cultures" (Ruth Benedict) topical in the conceptualization and understanding of the symbolic actions, determinant for the desecration of the national (U. S.) flag. Against this background, "shaming the flag has become part of the narrative of political polarization in many democracies worldwide". Banning the rainbow (LGBT+) flag and the "pride flag" capture attention in newspaper titles, in debates that seem more "shouting matches" on the public agenda of the ultra-liberal U. S. state. The elimination of the gay community, flag while the flags of the associations of veterans and the Olympic flag benefit from exceptions is as much political as it is symbolic and provided a reading of one polarization in a rather disunited U. S. society. For political leaders like Vladimir Putin the interpretation of "rainbow" as harming propaganda of nontraditional values, while for the conservative U.S: is a symbolic deterioration of the meaning of the national flag: a difference of nuance and a clear-cut expression of how "political passions are weaved" and speculated and transformed in a process of symbolic actualization of

“the narratives of national identity”, and “[t]he symbol is consumed in the performance of the shaming of the Other.” Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu and Michael Paul Pilani provide a symbolic view for understanding Africa in “Semiotic hermeneutic of ‘new wine, new wineskins:’ symbols, philosophy of development and Africa,” with a starting point in the biblical parable in Matthew 9:17 about “new wine and new wineskins,” a metaphor for the (appreciative) regard for “progressive values and philosophies so as to break free from its developmental shackles.” The paradox of the underdevelopment of the African continent despite the considerable human and natural resources is undeniable. The authors emphasize specific socio-political and economic impediments of African development the conflicts of interest, the resistance to change, the dictatorial leadership, the outdated policies, the endemic corruption, and lack of ethical grounding feeding a “vicious cycle of poverty, hunger, disease, poor education, and insecurity.” The new wine/wineskins image become a metaphoric paradigm to symbolically explore Africa’s underdevelopment challenges. New ideas are trusted to reform obsolete and rigid old structures: forward-thinking policies and governance models, governance transparency, accountability, and inclusive participation, innovative socio-economic frameworks for entrepreneurship, technological progress, and sustainable practices, an ethical social activity and sociality basis promoting integrity, justice, and environmental stewardship.

Hardiyanti, Hastanti Widy Nugroho approach the topic of “heteronormativity” in relation with the debate on the Indonesian unity, interpreted in symbolic terms and provided the status of “sacred” in “Heteronormativity: contentious symbol of belonging in Indonesia from the pluriverse perspective”. The perspective opens the apparently paradoxical perspective where national unity becomes a national problem. The underlining problem is the symbolic equation of “unity” with “uniformity”, interestingly, at odds with the national motto “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*” (Unity in Diversity). However, the symbolic versatility and ambiguity of the symbol subversively allows for the differentiation between acceptable diversity (as seen by the New Order regime) and unacceptable diversity (of the marginals). Unity is prioritized over diversity and other floating signifiers are suppressed. The overestimated universalist pretension of “unity” sustains the equivalence of “State” and “family”, and the oppression of non-conforming subjects. Hence the authors’ idea of “pluriverse” as a new and renewing “ontological alternative”. The pluriverse perspective values different ontologies each as unique and comparably valuable in relation to others, the ethics of moral cosmopolitanism with an impact in meaningful societal transformation.

Krzysztof Przybyszewski investigates “Contemporary autocratisation of democracies in the context of ‘a paradox of democracy’”, which can be seen as a symbolic confrontation between freedom and order. Democracy itself is in this

study “a symbol of human aspirations to establish justice and equality in a world full of uncertainty”. Considering the framework provided by Francis Fukuyama for the defining values of liberal democracy seen as victoriously hegemonic worldwide, a framework consisting mainly in the freedoms of speech, thought, worldview, press etc., a few decades later, the crisis of liberal democracy is clear and the assault of populist movements, far right movements seem to describe the sense of history very differently than what has Francis Fukuyama announced. Which is the precise hierarchy of values and which compromises should be encouraged or merely accepted in defending these values in their order of priority is a challenging question. We witness the rise of the autocratic governance model concomitant with the persistence of formal democracy ostensibly adhering to the rules of formal democracy, as Hannah Arendt has shown, especially multi-party system democracies, which is counter-intuitive. The “paradox of democracy” concerns the limit of tolerance the liberal democracy in allowing also thoughts, attitudes, actions and words substantially opposed to democracy, which, although it may be reasonable, it may lead to autocracy. The militant democracy theory, by Karl Loewenstein... The study analyses this theory and rise suggestions of modification describing a neo-militant model of democracy, with the evaluation of possible safeguards, counter-measures to defend democracy from the undesired effects of digital revolution, in strengthening rightwing populism, leading to authoritarianism.

Ioana Constantin-Bercean proposes the investigation of “otherness” in “(De)constructing the ‘otherness:’ a debate on Edward Said’s legacy”. In question along with otherness is always placed also the topic of social and cultural diversity problematic and rather unresolved throughout human history. The same-otherness equation is specified in Edward Said’s work through the lenses of Western imperial/colonial outlook toward the Orient. The issues of post-colonialism and nationalism still trigger interesting debates and theoretical approaches. The Oriental other is built in the Middle East mostly around the variable constituted by the predominant religion of the region, Islam. In general, the Orient is the “other” of the West defined in subjacent perspective to the West, as the author shows interpreting Said, via Western learning, Western consciousness, and Western empires. “The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed *by and in* relation to the West”, the author shows, while investigating Said’s perspective on “colonial discourse” and its “deconstructionism.”

Mihaela Czobor-Lupp analyses “Art and humanism in the work of Tzvetan Todorov” against the facets of totalitarian frame of mind (scientism, Manicheism, and aestheticism), as described by Tzvetan Todorov engages in his project of rethinking humanism. Within such a project, the artistic gaze, as a gaze of truth capitalizes upon the ambiguity of individual presence and does not operate the political or moralizing reduction to doctrine of being. The aesthetic experience is

central to rethinking humanism and (the modern project) via the individual life project and its moments of plenitude aesthetically achieved, once equipped with the aspiration toward the beautiful life, brought by the “transcendence of love” and the “humanism of the other” (Todorov, Levinas, Czobor-Lupp). This way, individuals can bring together “the sublime and the quotidian, being and existence, heaven and earth,” in the words of the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva. Rethinking humanism is rethinking human condition, impoverished only by narrow, superficial, interested relationships, mis-communication and individual representations deprived of meaning and completeness acquired via the other.

Henrieta Șerban tackles in “The Golden Age of the virtual realms, right now” the symbolic and mythical dimension of man encountered or prolonged like a alter of the human environment into the virtual realm, where dreams and myths populate the daily virtual encounters. However, this phenomenon expresses human craving for meaning, the human being living by symbolic operations (Mircea Eliade, Raoul Girardet, Lucian Blaga, Camil Petrescu, Ernst Cassirer), among the uses and abuses of the referential and condensed symbols (Murray Edelman), acknowledging and constructing realities by symbolic forms, multiplied, by metaphoric forms and by the phantasy-reality inter-relations. Roaming the virtual spaces, people are both themselves and their aspired, cosmeticized persona, aware or not of their “image campaign management”, as if against the magic mirror of the fairy tales (or, *almost* like in the experiential machine of Nozick). So much is possible, interpretation and perspective are the limit in the virtual sphere, hence individuals are hopefully constructing, defending and construing their golden age mythology, a narrative of *hic et nunc* well-being.

Lorena Valeria Stuparu proposes the title “On the clarity, ambiguities and interpretations of the symbol” investigating the dynamics of the symbolic order as an order of recognition. The approach on symbol as “substituted entity” brings more clarity to the research as a principle of symbolization shows that placing the being in the order of recognition is opening a path to knowledge. However, ambiguity is still at play within the symbolic horizon of recognition and remembrance unfolding the symbolic meaning according to specific symbolic laws. The symbolic universe is structuring a relation of interpretation, direct and rather indirect order, visible and invisible, discovering and veiling the selves in the other (practical) facet of the symbolic order, namely, the conflictual order of the interpretations. Although the symbol genuinely concentrates knowledge, truth and meaning (message) for everyone, within sort of pact of lawful meaningful interaction, interpretation always brings a tension or a particularity in the three-folded relation among law (which, the author shoes “can be the god, the ancestor, or any court in whose name the symbolic pact is concluded”), the transmitter and the receiver. “Symbolic exchange” is an “admirable trade” only between God and man, and this only under the “eminently objective law” of the symbolic order

predicated upon in Christian religious symbolism. Outside this sphere, common man navigates rather in ambiguity and negotiation of meaning, encouraged at times by the hopes brought along by the poet, the artist, as prophetic messengers of an elusive truth.

Henrieta Șerban