1 What Is the Symbolic?

To say that the symbolic is an important dimension of politics is uncontroversial for many historians and anthropologists. They write about the ways in which power is staged in ceremonies and rituals, so as to appear self-evident, natural, or good whilst dissent is discouraged. They analyse how stories, images, objects, music, and gestures are strategically used to impress the public and to involve it in supporting order. For instance, Kantorowicz explains how conceptions of the King's 'two bodies' were used to smooth the transition after the death of a French monarch, the physical corpse of the deceased separating from the body politic of France, which would be passed on to his proclaimed successor (Kantorowicz, 2016). In a very different context but in a very similar way, Balandier writes about the staging of political power in traditional African kingdoms (Balandier, 2006). Ethnographic and historical accounts, photographs, and paintings depict the impressive spectacles of coronation ceremonies or of royal courts, where the powerful receive marks of honour and respect, and where sometimes decisions are taken. These representations (both as lived events or as depictions of them) present the actors in action and define their public, whether it is pictured or implicit, the audience being constituted by the readers, viewers, or listeners.

Let's imagine a scene, a council in which the main character is sitting (whilst the others are standing), wearing a peculiar cloak, speaking, surrounded by others. We would recognise her a leader taking a decision awaited by a public. The meaning of the scene can be deciphered by the audience. What the central character holds, and what and who surround her reveal where her authority emanates from; the crowd assembled represents the people upon whom she exercises power. Every detail carries meanings. All these are symbols, and symbols, anthropologists argue, are essential to human communication. Douglas goes further when she writes that 'it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts' (Douglas, 2002, 62). In this section, we define symbols and the symbolic and show how taking it into account sharpens how we can make sense of power, politics, and policy in contemporary societies.

1.1 What Are Symbols?

Symbols include a wide range of 'things' (Y) that a social actor or group of actors (A) uses to convey meanings (X) to another social actor or group of actors (B). This is possible because the meanings X that A and B ascribe to Y are co-constructed through agreements and disagreements (Wodak, 2009: 11). They are not an essential property of Y, but they are known by A and B and this knowledge is socially transmitted (through socialisation or education). By

contrast, private symbols such as in dreams cannot be understood by others. Y is used in social interactions, and sometimes in everyday life as well, and there are moments when the use of Y evokes X for A and for B. This is particularly the case in social practices – ways of doing things that are socially transmitted and that structure social lives everywhere and every day. In these moments, recognising Y as a symbol is like an epiphany (Durand, 2003: 13) that marks connection with those who share such an understanding. Many other onlookers are oblivious to the messages that A and B understand thanks to Y. Symbols thus create boundaries in social time and space, boundaries that define communities of individuals – 'Not to know them is not to belong' (Hunter, 1974: 67) – who believe they share something, be it religion, cultural practices, abstract values or even the imagination of shared experiences (Anderson, 1991). However, symbols can also be missed, or misinterpreted: indeed, A may use Y to convey X to B, but B may for reasons of her own fail to read (or 'decode') it appropriately, whilst C, on the contrary, recognises it as a symbol but, unanticipated or hoped by A, she interprets it as Z.

The meanings X that A seeks to associate to Y belong to the realm of ideas and imagination: they are abstractions and concepts, some of which would be difficult to fully define (Godelier, 2015), such as state or nation. Because there is often more than one meaning attached to Y, its use in any given context is ambivalent and sometimes it is plural (polysemic). For instance, the colour red is, for obvious reason, often associated with blood. Henceforth, it has also come to be associated with life, strength, joy, power, force or, in a rather different vein (no pun intended!), with menstruation, wounds, impurity, violence, death, or revolution (amongst other things). Is the red robe worn by a character referring to her power, to joy or death or to her gender? Or does it evoke several of these meanings simultaneously? Thus, while symbols are convenient ways of communicating mental images, their meanings are often ambiguous, plural, and complex (Turner, 1970: 27). They require an interpretation, which is contextual and often influenced by the presence of other symbols (Deflem, 1991). These qualities make symbols creative resources for artists. Symbolism, in art or in politics, refers to the deliberate and systematic use of symbols with the intention of communicating a message.

Thus, symbols are 'evocative devices' (Turner, 1969: 42): they guide perceptions and understandings; they evoke ideas. As such, they are resources for power and power struggles, and are thus intrinsically political. They present a 'reality' that appears as self-evident, and behaviours that are appropriate to the circumstances. Furthermore, symbols articulate the realm of the imaginary (abstractions) with emotions connected with the socialisation into their meanings: they touch and move those who recognise them (Turner, 1970); they carry

evaluative judgment and emotional attachments (Göhler, 2013: 104). They combine two dimensions that may greatly influence the audience: a cognitive content on the one hand (expression of ideas that cannot be easily spelt out) and a physical or embodied register on the other hand, that stimulates emotions (like empathy, fear, or anger) and entices the public to act or react (Turner, 1970). As a consequence, symbols are often seen as prescriptive and generally as restricting critical inquiry or the expression of dissent. Finally, symbols are rarely used on their own but combined, such as in rituals. This can facilitate the interpretation of the meanings they are carrying. Now that we understand better what symbols are and how they convey messages, notably messages about power and the social order, we turn to contexts more familiar to us – contemporary liberal representative political systems, and we refer to 'the symbolic' as symbols and their meanings taken together.

1.2 Thinking with the Symbolic

Many people may consider that the symbolic plays an important role in the politics of traditional societies but still dismiss it as irrelevant to understand today's world because they associate it with magic or with religion. There are several reasons for this. First, contemporary societies of the Global North think of themselves as rational and modern and reject what philosophers of the Enlightenment deemed superstitions and obscurantism. The world we live in may thus appear as 'disenchanted' and secular, material and knowable through analytic and scientific enquiry. For people suspicious of religious beliefs, which Marx famously described as the 'opium of the masses', the symbolic is seen as something used to manipulate people – to lure them into acting against their best interest. Second, democratic governments hold their power thanks to legal rational procedures and the freely expressed electoral choices of citizens. The dominant argument is that there is no need for coded messages to lull people into submission. Third, the idea that there are fundamental differences between 'our' societies and 'others' is constitutive of much social scientific enquiry, including anthropology. Fourth, social and political scientists often embrace an approach that considers social facts as objective, objectifiable, and quantifiable. In so doing, they have invariably focused on eliciting causality links between them. Symbols are not easy to integrate into such approaches: the meanings they convey are context dependent and, as the effects they produce are about how messages affect the ways in which audiences understand and respond to them, they are difficult to assess or demonstrate. As many social scientists are uncomfortable about analysing this aspect of policies and of politics (Kertzer, 1989: 7–8), they have ignored the symbolic.

Yet, following in the path of Berger and Luckman, social constructivists argue that the symbolic is an integral dimension of all social life: the world we wake up in everyday is meaningful because of the collective representations we acquire during our lives, through socialisation and through social interactions (Luckmann and Berger, 1991). A few political scientists consider that 'there can be no politics without symbols' (Kertzer, 1989: 181), and thus are particularly interested in political rituals (Lukes, 1975; Abélès, 1992; Faucher, 2025). Some have even turned their gaze to mainstream political institutions, like the British House of Lords (Crewe, 2005), political parties (Faucher-King, 2005) or the parliament (Rai, 2010), to consider them in such a way. Moreover, political theorists are now paying growing attention to the connections between political claims, performance, and the political imaginary (Saward, 2010; Disch, Sande, and Urbinati, 2020; Rai et al., 2021). They also bring to the fore the multiple understandings associated to central notions – like the one of 'representation' – and the challenges of translating them (Diehl, Hayat, and Sintomer, 2014). Thus, although they remain a minority, contemporary authors in the social and political sciences question the social categories that structure and guide our thinking, and the symbols associated to them. Indeed, 'how can we possibly think of ourselves in society except by using the classifications established by our institutions?' (Douglas, 1986: 99). What should be clear now is that the symbolic is always involved in politics because symbols are inherent to communication within a social group, and therefore contribute to map social reality and power relationships within it.

1.3 The Symbolic as a Tool of Communication

Research on frames (Benford and Snow, 2000) has shown how social movements, the media and political actors shape perceptions and understandings (Hay, 1996). Thus, although political cultures are often assumed to prevent or slow down change, the social categories with which we think are not fixed. Migrants were for instance 'guest workers' in post WW2 Europe, but they are now often seen as economic, political, or cultural threats: access to social rights is restricted to specific groups and asylums claimants are detained in camps or on boats while their files are examined. As a new frame becomes accepted and established, it contributes to creating the realities to which it applies, because people conform to them and therefore behave differently (Becker, 1997; Hacking, 2000). Symbols play a role in framing activities because they participate to the creation of concepts and the naturalisation of modes of thinking in discourse. As such, they contribute to shift perceptions and conceptions, such as the boundaries of social groups. For instance, the

New Labour governments of Tony Blair, in Great Britain, relentlessly promoted the notion of the citizen-consumer, which infused their policies and contributed to change how British citizens understood their role in the polity and how they related to policy (Faucher-King and Le Galès, 2010). This influence of symbols on perceptions can also be more implicit, through staging and performance (Wodak, 2009: 31). One can think for instance of the turning point created by German Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling when paying homage to victims of WW2 in Poland in December 1970: the event was a routine ceremony but the performance, which appeared as an unplanned gesture, transformed German identity and collective memory as it challenged the narrative of a country victimised by Hitler. The apparent spontaneity and the absence of a speech were important in creating the social reality of an acceptance by the federal government of responsibility and collective guilt (Rauer, 2006). In this case, the categories with which Germans could think about their collective past shifted because the performance conveyed messages that were commented in the media and received by the public. National narratives associating modern France and technology facilitated transitions towards a 'greener' society (Bess, 2003; Malone et al., 2017) whilst a discourse of accountability and transparency, associated with public choice ideas contributed to the emergence of an 'audit culture' affecting social and political trust (Strathern, 2000; Hay, 2007). Although less obviously, numbers and statistics are also often used in contemporary politics to construct evaluative judgements, associated with benchmarks and goals, such as concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. CO2 emissions graphs and the thresholds identified by scientists as climate tipping points 'make as real' trends that publics can understand as incoming and potentially apocalyptic climate change requiring urgent political action.

These examples show that public policies include a communicative dimension that involves mobilising social categories that shift or shape collective representations. It is a resource for institutions and collective actors as well as for politicians, whether they are addressing their audience as groups or as individuals. Let us unpack this further: the symbolic is a means to communicate with or within a social group, whose members can understand what is referred to. It makes parsimonious communication easier because ideas can be expressed simply and quickly. For instance, pictures of the White House prompt American audiences to think of the office, the officeholder, and the institution of the Presidency (Druckman and Jacobs, 2015). The symbolic contributes to modes of thinking about politics that are intuitive rather than deliberative, and as a consequence faster and possibly politically expedient, but uninformed (Stoker, Hay, and Barr, 2016).

Yet, the symbolic is not a straightforward tool for communication between a communicator and her audiences. Symbols convey implicit, elliptical, and ambiguous messages that are interpreted by those who receive them – and liable to be misinterpreted. Using a symbol inappropriately may have consequences: when a tourist wears an orange scarf on the street of Glasgow, her choice of clothing may be interpreted as an overt assertion of her religious (protestant) affiliation. A Celtic Football Club fan may take this as the provocation of a Ranger FC supporter, exciting her anger against the nemesis of her favourite team and forget in the forceful expression of her sporting passion that it may also signify personal taste, an homage to Buddha's enlightenment or a reference to the 2014 Ukrainian revolution. Because symbols are context dependent, the mistake may not happen if the situation is contextualised by our hypothetical Celtic fan: the Dalai Lama, or the Dutch football team, is visiting the city. The ambiguities of symbols can also be strategically used. Let's imagine a politician wearing or uttering something that is likely to be interpreted as an invitation to violence or hatred by a social group but is devoid of any such meaning for others. If criticised, the politician in question can claim ignorance of the norms, claim innocence, and argue that her behaviour has been misinterpreted.

We have seen in this section that symbols are ever present in contemporary politics even if they have been neglected or dismissed by social scientists; that they are important means of communication between an actor and her audience ; that, to be felicitous, such communication requires that both share an understanding of the implicit as well as of the explicit meanings conveyed; that the use of symbols triggers emotions and reactions at the individual or the collective level; that there are many opportunities for such communication to go wrong because the meanings of a given symbol need to be interpreted by the audience and there is an inherent interpretive ambiguity in a symbol – it can symbolise different things and be associated differently; that it is not quite enough for actor and audience to share the knowledge about the symbol and its meanings. A sickle and a hammer appearing together may invoke little more than manual work for many observers most of the time. But at other times, or to others, particularly if they form a cross or if they are associated with the colour red, it is a reference to the Soviet Union. Read as such, the symbol is likely to stir evaluations and emotions, which can be contradictory: nostalgia or pride, hopes in a communist future or oppression, equality, or the opposite of freedom, good or evil. If so, it can also trigger different reactions, such as a call to arms to defend the country or the ideals of international solidarity between working classes, on either side of the Cold War front and in countries that have been within the sphere of influence of the USSR. Finally, it is quite possible that the

meanings associated to the symbols used by A are, most of the time, not deciphered by the majority of lay audiences or are only partially understood. They may require an explanation that is nowadays likely to be provided by commentators, journalists, etc.

In this Element, we talk about the symbolic more than symbols *per se* because we refer to the vast array of objects, words or phrases, images, gestures, etc. that are deployed (deliberately or more inadvertently) politically and we want to avoid a restrictive understanding, which would limit symbols to the most obvious ones, from flags to buildings. We contend that we need to include myths, narratives, cultural practices and so forth, which also carry meanings that are intentionally included by social actors and are usually adequately interpreted by their audience. For instance, Indian Prime Minister Modi carefully adapts his wardrobe to specific public occasions, always wearing a traditional Indian, sometimes regional, attire and carefully chosen colours; Macron invited Putin to Versailles and Trump to the Eiffel Tower. We also want to highlight the combinations of symbols, such as in rituals, and how it helps the audience interpret meanings.

We talk about symbolic policy because every policy has a symbolic dimension and because we emphasise how policy makers work to shape the perceptions of their audiences and frame the interpretations of their actions, using the symbolic to convey meanings that are both cognitive and emotional. Section 2 argues that the symbolic has been neglected in public policy analysis and makes the case for taking it seriously. Section 3 shows that it is embedded in the claims to legitimacy that are made by political authorities, whether they invoke their roles as representatives, the process of policy-making or the outcome of their actions. We then take 'crisis' as a magnifying glass to analyse how the symbolic plays a part in reassuring the population (Section 4) and nurturing feelings of belonging and solidarity (Section 5). While we use many examples from widely different contexts, we also use our own research on responses to terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 and to the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 in four European countries (France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom). These two cases are a leitmotiv through the Element. The two following sections analyse what can affect symbolic work and policy: Section 6 addresses the question of time and timing whereas Section 7 makes the case for the existence of national repertoires of symbolic actions and the agency of leaders in the selection of symbolic policy instruments. In Section 8, we explore the ways in which the effects of the symbolic in policy can be assessed. Lastly, Section 9 summarises the argument of the Element and its contribution to the literature on public policy and our understanding of contemporary politics.

2 The Symbolic: An Overlooked Dimension of Policy

Three days after the terrorist attacks that struck Paris on 13 November 2015, the French President addressed the two houses of Parliament gathered in Versailles. He announced his intention to change the Constitution to allow the withdrawal of French citizenship from dual nationals convicted of terrorist offences. Such a measure was quickly criticised as 'symbolic'. As noted by the French Council of State in its December 2015 published position, removing citizenship would have 'limited practical relevance'. The public debate asked indeed how terrorists could be dissuaded from acting when even death does not stop them. Furthermore, from the Government's perspective, the measure changed little since, although not enshrined in the Constitution, the practice of the withdrawal of French citizenship was already legal. So, the policy, which was perceived as having few practical implications, was 'symbolic' in the common-sense understanding.

Nevertheless, as seen in Section 1, 'symbolic' also refers to the power of symbols, and the proposed reform, by catering to several distinct audiences, illustrates this perfectly: it was a concession to the Opposition designed to bolster wavering political unity in the face of the second major attack within a year; it was also a message addressed to the entire population, whose cohesion needed to be reinforced. Repeated surveys conducted during the year had shown high rates of approval for this hypothetical policy. Public support for the measure was interpreted at the Élysée as an indication that the population considered that individuals who attack the country do not deserve to be French – since they have *de facto* already excluded themselves from the national community: 'we are in a logic of deciding who is included in the Republic and who no longer belongs (. . .). The Republic itself defines the shape and the limits of our Nation' (interview May 2016).

Public policies impact more than just the material world: they are symbolic because they shape cognitions, values, emotions, and beliefs. This analytic shift is at the core of this Element. Indeed, despite the assertion that policymaking involves the manipulation of symbols (Laswell, 2011), and although the founding fathers of the discipline recognised the importance of rhetoric, and of what governments say alongside what they do (Dye, 1987; Laswell, 2011), 'the study of policy has, for the greater part of its history, been neglectful of this absolutely crucial aspect of public policy' (Parsons, 1995: 178). Besides, for a long time, most policy science textbooks did not address the topic or presented it in a reductionist way: symbolic policies are policies that fail to solve problems, they are acts of political manipulation (Goodin, 1980). This section provides a survey of the public policy literature and identifies two explanations for this