POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND POLITICAL EXPERIENCE: AN ESSAY ON POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Publicum ius est quod ad statum rei Romanae spectat, privatum quod ad singulorum utilitatem: sunt enim quaedam publice utilia, quaedam privatim

(Ulpianus)

Introduction

The simplest account of representative democracy runs as follows. On the one hand there is the citizen or the voter, on the other there is the State, and between the two you have intermediaries such as political parties, the media, public opinion etc. Admittedly, a most rudimentary model of representative democracy, but nevertheless neither false nor even only misleading. All that has been said on representative democracy by countless commentators since its emergence at the end of the 18th century can somehow and somewhere be fitted in this model, without upsetting it. Taking, then, this model as our point of departure, we can say that the citizen or the voter is presented in it as the political system's *most elementary unit*.

This notion of the model's 'elementary unit' is appropriate for several reasons. The notion correctly suggests that whereas the citizen or voter is truly the most elementary unit from the perspective of the political system, this unit may possess its own complexity, if seen from a different perspective. Next, though this unit's actual make-up may be highly relevant to its functioning in the system, this is nevertheless seen as a given rather than as a matter to be explored. Characteristi-

cally, in agreement with the etymology of the word 'individual', we ordinarily think of the individual citizen or voter as an entity that cannot be divided up into still smaller units. Think of our elections: the voter is asked to vote for a certain politician or party and emphatically not invited to explain the reasons he has for his choice. Clearly, then, 'sub-divisions' in or of the voter himself – such as what mental struggle may have led him to his political choice – are of no relevance from the perspective of the political system. The political system recognizes only individual voters and leaves no room for their 'insides', so to say (without actually denying the existence of this 'inside', for that matter, nor that what happens in these 'insides' will be of consequence for the actual outcome of the elections). The picture that comes to mind is that of the chemist: he is well aware that the numbers of electrons in an atom's outer rind is mainly responsible for its chemical properties, but will nevertheless accept this as a mere given and leave it to the physicist to investigate and explain it.

These introductory remarks may give an idea of what I shall do in this essay. I want to focus here on the individual citizen or voter and will try to show what is wrong with seeing the citizen or voter as the most elementary unit of the political system. Next, when dealing with the problem in this essay, I shall not discuss what sociologists or (socio-)psychologists have already said about it since the days of Tocqueville and the mass-psychologists of the the late nineteenth century. I'm primarily interested in what can be said about the problem from a more or less apriorist, philosophical point of view, since political philosophers have, as far as I know, rarely addressed it.

My claim will be that a philosophical analysis of the political system itself requires us to question the view that the individual citizen or voter should be seen as its most elementary unit. Hence, the idea is that the demarcation-line between the political system on the one hand and the individual citizen or voter on the other is more permeable than is generally recognized. The political system truly penetrates into the domain of the individual citizen or voter. Once again, this will not be new to sociologists, political scientists and (socio-)psychologists. But what this should mean to the political philosopher still needs to be worked out.

In carrying out this project, I shall focus on the distinction between the private and the public, since it will enable the political philosopher to penetrate the domain of the individual citizen or voter. More

specifically, I hope to show that we should stop associating this distinction with the distinction between what belongs to the political system itself (the public) and the citizen or voter (the private). Instead we should recognize that the distinction between the private and the public runs right across the domain of the individual citizen or voter himself and that, because of this, *the individual citizen or voter is already politicized by this opposition between the private and the public.*

My argument for this claim will take its point of departure in the notion of political representation; and what I shall be saying below on how the public and the private politicize the individual citizen or voter is best seen as an effort to deepen our understanding of political representation.

Political representation and the representation of politics

Political representation has been intensively discussed in recent years. Whereas Hanna Pitkin's classic[1] of some forty years ago did not receive the attention it deserved at the time of its publication, the issue of political representation is now fully back on the political philosopher's agenda. Undoubtedly, this has much to do with the voter's diminished trust in his national government that can nowadays be observed for almost all Western democracies. It seems to be a reasonable expectation, therefore, that a close study of the mechanisms of political representation may help us see how to reinforce the voter's trust in national politics and in his representatives.

If we recall the simplified model of representative democracy presented in the introduction, it will be obvious that political representation – as the notion is currently understood – should be related to the trajectory between the citizen and the State. It begins where the citizen 'ends' and ends where the State 'begins'. Our parliaments represent the electorate and the constitutional mechanisms we rely upon to choose our parliaments take their point of departure in the electorate's political preferences. Once again, the individual citizen or voter is the most elementary unit here. Within this picture the individual citizen or voter is a black box: the information about politics given to him is the black box's input, and his behavior at the polls is its output. But what takes place in the black box is outside the political system itself. Not only for theoretical or practical reasons, but for sound po-

litical reasons as well. For any attempt to enter the black box's interior soon becomes an attempt to interfere with it. And this might result in a return to totalitarian patterns of thought, insofar as for totalitarianism (as the term itself suggests) nothing - not even the voter's *forum internum* - is outside the sphere of politics. Hence, the voter's *forum internum* ought to be taken as a kind of *arcanum imperii* in a political philosophy of liberal democracy.

I fully agree with this critique of totalitarianism. However, the obligation to respect the *forum internum* is not necessarily at odds with the claim that this *forum internum* is structured in a way that is political already. Put into one sentence, we do not enter the political system only when moving outside from the private into the public domain – rather, the sphere of the individual citizen or voter is an embryonic political universe already.

In order to see this, I wish to add a new dimension to the notion of political representation. Until now the notion has been used exclusively for referring to how our parliaments may represent the electorate or the nation. I propose to turn the notion upside down and ask how the individual voter represents the political system of which he is part. *We used to investigate the issue of political representation and I now wish to address the issue of the representation of politics.*

Of course, at first sight this must seem a fairly hopeless issue and impossible to handle adequately. For does this not confront us with the uninviting prospect of having to make an inventory of all the many ways in which voters have actually represented their political *Umwelt* in past and present, in order to see, next, whether perhaps any system can be discovered in this apparent 'madness'? And even if we were to have completed this huge and immense task – what conclusions would follow for how to improve our Western democracies? For we can never proceed from statements about how voters actually represent their political *Umwelt* to normative conclusions about how they ought to do this. Again, the sacred cause of political freedom firmly and unambiguously demands that this should remain an open question that each generation will have to address anew. So even if we succeeded in the task of making such an inventory, the inventory could and should not be of any use to us.

Nevertheless, there is one fact about how the citizen represents his political *Umwelt* that does give us something to go on – and this fact is to be found in the very notion of representation *itself*. As we shall

see below, there is a politically relevant dimension to representation *as such*; a dimension, moreover, that may help us understand why it is wrong to see the individual voter as the political system's most elementary unit.

In order for the reader to recognize this, I must start with some more general observations about the notion of representation. In the first place, we should be quite clear about the differences between representation on the one hand, and true description on the other. One of the main weaknesses of contemporary philosophy of language is that it has been largely oblivious of this fact. The word representation is ordinarily used there as being synonymous with true description.[2] However, by moulding representation on true description, philosophers of language have reduced representation to the traditional and well-known framework of a (mainly) scientistic epistemology, thus blinding themselves to how the notion of representation functions in art, history, politics and in large parts of daily life. Speaking more generally, most shortcomings of contemporary political philosophy, philosophy of history and of how we, as human beings, relate to our living environment, have their origin in a failure to see that it will need a philosophy of representation to deal with them. In this way all these disciplines are the victims of twentieth-century philosophy of language's stubborn blindness to the issue of representation. As Arthur Danto once put it, the human being is an *ens representans*;[3] and without a proper understanding of representation we can make no progress in grasping the main features of the *condition humaine*.

The crucial datum is that epistemology is, and even *ought* to be, blind to the categorical differences between a representation and what it represents. An epistemology that accounts for the difference between a represented and its representation fails to do what we expect from epistemology. Think of a landscape (a represented) and a painting of that landscape (its representation). Here the systems developed by epistemologists since Descartes and Kant ought to be just as valid (or invalid) for what they say about our experience and knowledge of either the landscape itself or of its representation. Both belong to what Kant would call phenomenal reality - and epistemology will either respect this fact, or fail as epistemology. It follows from this simple observation that epistemology is necessarily incapable of expressing or articulating the problem of the relationship between a represented and its representation – let alone of adequately dealing with the prob-

lem. When dealing with that problem we must therefore abandon the epistemologist's effort to develop schemata defining the relationship between a (transcendental) self or language user and what this self has knowledge of - and replace it by an analysis of representation that minimally respects the categorical differences between the represented and its representation.

Representation is a vast and quickly expanding topic, so I shall restrict myself to what is relevant in the present context. In his magisterial *The Transfiguration of the Common Place* Arthur Danto insisted on the intensionality of representation. We have to do with intensional contexts when the way in which a sentence is formulated is part of its truth-conditions. For example, the true sentence 'Jack believes that the water is boiling (p^1)' will only remain true in case we decide to replace it by 'Jack believes that the water's temperature is one hundred degrees centigrade (p^2)', on the condition that Jack knows that water boils at one hundred degrees centigrade. So it matters to the truth of what we say about Jack whether it is expressed by either p^1 or by p^2.

Next, Danto uses this to make us aware of an important property of representation. His claim is that when we represent the beliefs of others – as we do when writing history or when developing a representation of our political *Umwelt* – intensionality will separate ourselves from these beliefs - and from the people holding them. People whose beliefs we represent experience their own world directly, that is to say, in the light of the beliefs they hold to be true. They will typically not question their beliefs, since they believe them to be true – this simply is how the world is *to them*. They will not say: 'I believe that p', in the sense of ascribing to themselves a certain belief – this is something for the outsider to do. And if somebody were to say 'I believe that p', he takes a position 'outside himself', so to say; he looks at himself in the way that *another* person might look at him. So this is what happens when we represent the beliefs of others: we move outside the context in which they may directly relate to their world – that is, in terms of the beliefs they hold to be true. We have then joined their beliefs together within a representation of the world that we ascribe to them. And, again, this is something that these others could never do themselves without becoming an essentially *other* person, capable of objectifying their beliefs in a way they could never do themselves – that is, without ceasing to be themselves.[4]

Supposing Danto's argument to be valid, we might add one more consideration. As noted a moment ago, we can properly say 'I believe that p'; by doing so we will step out of a former self and move on to another and different self that objectifies our beliefs by a representation of them. *We then look at ourselves as another might do this; we move out of our own private world in which we experience the world directly through the beliefs we hold to be true. We have then taken up a position in the public domain inhabited by our fellow human beings (who also see us from the outside) that we share with them, insofar as they also have this capacity of moving from their private world to a representation of it.* Hence, the faculty of representation makes us into the inhabitants of *two* worlds, the *private one* (that we possessed already) and the *public one* (to which we can get access thanks to this faculty of representation). In this way the distinction between the private and the public is not to be identified with the distinction between the human 'individual' (as the most elementary unit of the political system) and the political system itself as a 'collective' or 'holist' entity. Instead, even though the distinction between the private and the public can satisfactorily and convincingly be defined in terms of the notion of representation, it will be impossible to define it in terms of the distinction between (either ontological or methodological) individualism and holism. *For the distinction between the private and the public is part of the individual already.* And, hence, insofar as this distinction is crucial for an adequate understanding of the political system, the individual citizen or voter could not possibly be seen as its most 'elementary unit'.

These are, admittedly, highly abstract observations. How can they help us understand politics? Let me start with one example. Think of Machiavellism – the claim, disputed so hotly for five centuries, that history or politics may sometimes compel the statesman to sin against the requirements of ethics. Two possibilities present themselves. The first being that we may, after some very hard thinking, conceive of some more sophisticated ethical system than those we presently possess, a system that might succeed in endowing the problematic action with the sanction of ethics after all. If so, our problem would have disappeared, of course. The other being that this conflict between ethics and 'the thing to do for the statesman' stubbornly persists, in spite of all our strenuous efforts to reconcile ethics with politics and history. The latter option is, of course, the one that Machiavelli put on the agenda – and that has worried us ever since. But why did only

Machiavelli saddle us with this most unpleasant legacy? For surely this conflict between ethics and history and politics must be as old as politics itself? So why did not some deeply religious Christian medieval philosopher already throw it in the teeth of the most Christian kings of his day?

The explanation is that in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance the Stoic and Christian order encompassing both the individual and the political system had broken into two incommensurable worlds. In the Middle Ages it still made no sense to distinguish between public and private morality; the one and only God had given us the one and only Christian morality - and this morality was as true for our public as it was for our private behavior.

But then Machiavelli came along with his discovery that we may have duties to our country superseding those that we have, according to Christian ethics, to God and to our fellow human beings, and, worse still, that these duties only too often are radically incommensurable with each other. The individual now became a battlefield between these two moralities; and it was precisely this fact that made the notion of the individual into the indispensable one that it has been ever since. The discovery of the individual thus was the result of an ethical aporia; and it was added to the standard Western view of politics precisely because it was this perennial battlefield and emphatically not some neat, coherent unity. This, then, is what we, since Burckhardt, refer to as the Renaissance's 'discovery of the individual'; and where we should take special note of the surprising, if not paradoxical, implication that this Renaissance individual was not 'discovered' in the object of Christian ethical legislation, but in the domain of the duties that we owe to the world, to the nation, hence to politics. It was not the 'inside' of Christian morality, but the 'outside' of politics, that gave us the idea of the individual. But what politics gave us never forsook the nature of the giver. For politics may well aim at the unification of groups of individuals, but it also split up the individual into a private and a public self, of which each has its own morality and where both moralities are radically incommensurable with each other.[5] This is why the original sin of Machiavellism would stick forever to the West's notion of the human individual.

In sum, the Renaissance discovery of the individual gave us the distinction between the private and the public as the indestructible foundation of civil freedom – but the price we had to pay was that our

political universe broke in two and that we are condemned to always attempt to reconcile the public and the private, while knowing – with Rousseau and Freud[6] - that such a reconciliation can never be wholly successful.

Finally, then, it may well be that the account given in this section of how the distinction between the private and the public originates from the notion of representation elevated us into the highest spheres of political speculation, but as my exposition of Machiavellism suggests, this also gave us access to one of the most basic facts about our political existence. It has taught us that politics is truly part of what it means to be a human individual in our contemporary Western democracies.

An empirical confirmation of the foregoing

Even if the reader were to agree with my argument about how representation links the public and the private, he will probably still welcome an empirical confirmation of it. All the more so since only such an empirical confirmation may suggest how to apply the very abstract insights developed above to actual political reality.

An empirical confirmation of this 'personality split'[7] between the private and the public in the citizen's own mind is to be found in Diana Mutz's thesis of the 'compartmentalization of personal and national judgment':

> it is a mean and scary world out there. But in reality this social fact is not as bad as it seems because none of us live "out there". Instead we live in local and personal worlds that are not continuous in our minds with the larger impersonal one. Thus, we can think crime is on the rise yet not necessarily experience greater personal-level fears. At the polling place, however, we may in fact behave quite differently because of these impersonal perceptions. Yet another, broader consequence that logically follows from this state of affairs is the sense that the larger world in which national politics transpires is quite distant from one's own experiences. This sense of distance inevitably contributes to the sense that politics is a "spectator sport".[8]

And Mutz goes on to say that this often takes on the character of an 'I'm doing better than we are' that has so surprised political scientists when finding in their polls that citizens are systematically more optimistic about their own private situation than about that of the nation. Mutz presents two explanations for this 'personality split' in the citizen and for what might be behind the 'I'm doing better than we are' mechanism. According to the former theory personal pessimism would threaten our feelings of competence and self-worth, so that we all tend to be more optimistic about ourselves than about what happens 'out there'. The second theory argues that cognitive errors are responsible for the phenomenon. We tend to see others, and especially politicians, as prototypical high-risk individuals with the result that we compare ourselves favorably to them. Both theories indisputably have the aura of idle (socio-)psychological speculation – and Mutz admits as much.

But, as we saw in the previous section, a more adequate explanation of Mutz's 'compartmentalization thesis' is to be found in how the representation of politics by the citizen necessarily divides him into a public and a private self. So that explanation may show us how to reconcile theory and empirical fact.

Next, Mutz emphasizes that the citizen's tendency to 'compartmentalize' his political psychology functions as an amazing check on the citizen's alleged tendency to take his own private interest as his guide when deciding about matters of public interest. As becomes clear from her argument, when 'the national judgment' is at stake, citizens tend to be surprisingly open-minded and are rarely led by their own personal interests. At this level 'republicanism' seems to be innate in us, so to say, insofar as we almost naturally tend to privilege the public interest over our own. Of course, we may have political preferences that agree with our own private interests – but it would be stupidly dogmatic to see this as decisive proof that our opinions about the public interest should always be mere masks of our private interests. We *can* discuss the public interest from the perspective of the public interest only - and if Mutz is right, we do so far more often than the Marxist in us would have us believe.

We can rephrase Mutz's argument by saying that for the citizen there truly is a *conflict* when he has to weigh his private against the public interest. Self-evidently, there would be no conflict if the 'Marxist' were right – for then the private interest would meet with no op-

position in the citizen's political psychology. Marxism, and our (in this case Marxist) intuitions about how the voter decides about political issues tacitly assumes that there should be a continuum between the private and the public – and that the private interest always makes use of this continuum in order to overrun its public rival. With the result that there should and could be only conflict *between* citizens and not *within* citizens themselves. (So this is where even Marxists are more 'individualist' than one should be.) But there is no such continuum, since the domains and the public are truly incommensurable in the voter's mind; this is why the voter always finds himself confronted with the impossible task of making *one person* (the one who will cast his vote in a certain way in the ballot-box) out of *two fundamentally different* persons (his private and his public personalities) and why conflict is truly permanent. So, if we move downwards from the State, via the political party, to the voter, our terminus cannot be the individual voter himself (who is a mix of incommensurable components) but only his private and his public personality. And, again, it was *representation* that divided him up in these two components. Indeed, in this way the voter can be seen as the arena of the primal political conflict. And conflicts *between* voters belong to an essentially *later* stage – though these will be moulded on the most elementary one identified here.

Having arrived at this stage, we would do well to remember Schattschneider's thesis that 'at the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict'.[9] *Politics is, basically, about conflict.* Of course, the reverse does not hold: not all conflict is political. Nor is it true that politics is *only* about conflict. Politicians also have to assemble data, appoint people, implement decisions reached, talk to their electorate etc. – and, moreover, they will even agree amongst each other about a host of things, such as the basic rules of democratic government (as we may hope). Nevertheless, conflict is at the basis of all politics: take conflict out of politics and all political action becomes meaningless and nonsensical theatre. So my account of politics is, admittedly, of the 'foundationalist' type (in the sense meant by Rorty); but it is a somewhat deviant kind of foundationalism, since it is a *conflict* and not some indubitable *certainty* (as with Descartes) that gives us the foundation of all politics.

Next, when elaborating his claim about conflict being the foundation of politics, Schattschneider insists that the opposition between

the public and the private will give us the substance of all political conflict.

> a look at political literature shows that there has indeed been a longstanding struggle between the conflicting tendencies towards the privatization and socialization of conflict. On the one hand, it is easy to identify a whole battery of ideas calculated to restrict the scope of conflict or even to keep it entirely out of the political domain. A long list of ideas concerning individualism, free enterprise, localism, privacy and economy in government seems to be designed to privatize conflict or to restrict its scope or to limit the use of public authority to enlarge the scope of conflict. A tremendous amount of conflict is controlled by keeping it so private that it is almost invisible. (…) On the other hand, it is easy to identify another battery of ideas contributing to the socialization of conflict. Universal ideas in the culture, ideas concerning equality, consistency, equal protection of the laws, justice, liberty and civil rights tend to socialize conflict. These concepts tend to make conflict contagious; they invite outside intervention in conflict (…).[10]

So, in fact, political conflict always has a double edge. On the one hand, there is conflict itself, such as between a capitalist entrepreneur and one of his workers (or between us and the state). Next, there is the conflict about whether this conflict will be allowed to stay there, or whether it will be generalized over all the workers of this entrepreneur, over, perhaps, all of the nation's working proletariat or even, with Marx, over all of social history. It will also be clear – as Schattschneider much emphasizes himself - that the stronger party in the conflict will prefer to keep it private, whereas the weaker party will be in favor of socializing it. So, in this way the conflict between the public and the private in the individual voter has its resonance in all that we find in newspapers and in history books informing us about the nation's political history.

One more reason, then, to be open to how political conflict is prefigured in our minds as individuals and to the fact that conflict is a reflection of what happens in ourselves. It is not the other way round, as we so often assume. The political conflict has its ultimate origin in how *we* – as individual citizens or voters - represent political reality; and the incommensurabilities arising from *this* do *not* have their counterpart in political reality. For we can say all kind of things about

political reality – but *not* that it somehow achieves a representation of political reality. You really need citizens or voters for that, and without citizens or voters you can have no representations.

Sublime political experience

I now wish to discuss one last feature of how the political system is represented by the citizen. At first sight it must seem wholly unproblematic to say that the citizen is here the subject of representation. Surely, if we have representations, there must necessarily be *someone* who represents (part of) the world. But it's not as easy as that. For if we divide the citizen as expounded above into these two mutually incommensurable entities of the private and the public – having neither overlap nor common ground – where, then could we situate this subject of representation? There simply seems to be no place left for it. And insofar as we still go on to think of it, it will be impossible to hook it somehow to any real process in the citizen's or the voter's mind. It has then become a useless redundancy. So all this seems to require us to abandon the idea that there should be a subject of representation and to embrace the apparently impossible paradox of representation, without there also being a subject of representation. Yet, this is the view that I defend and that inevitably, whether we like it or not, follows from the account of representation given above. So, how to deal with this?

The question was never addressed more successfully and forcefully than in 'The Truman Show', a fascinating movie of some ten year ago. The hero of this film, Truman, finally discovers that his life has all along been the subject of a lifelong soap story broadcasted on TV since his birth. The (private) world in which he had been living his life was, in fact, separated from the real (public) world in the way that a theatrical scene is separated from it. But the real drama of the film is the ultimate destruction of this separation. For at the end of the film Truman is sailing with his boat on the sea after a terrible storm. In a supremely arresting moment his boat hits a cardboard wall, painted in the colors of the sky and enclosing the world in which he has been living all his life. He then finds a jetty somewhere along the cardboard wall, gets out of his boat and discovers a door allowing him, for the first time in his life, to move outside his private world into the public

world of 'real life' (and of the public who has been watching on TV the story of his life for as long as he has lived). This surely is one of the most stunning moments in all of contemporary film-making and must come as a profound shock to anyone seeing it. It is a moment that truly is both transcendent and transcendental. Transcendent, since Truman now meets his Maker, the director of the soap story. And transcendental since Truman with his boat literally collides with the conditions that have made his world possible. The blue cardboard wall is a kind of materialization of what Kant had in mind with the transcendentalism of his categories of the understanding. In fact it would be even more appropriate to label the moment as 'sublime', in agreement with Kant's analysis of the sublime in his *Third Critique*. Kant describes here the sublime as a momentary experience not of the world, but of how we *relate* to the world.[11] And, obviously, this is also at stake when Truman realizes what is happening to him when his boat hits this quasi-transcendental piece of cardboard. It is as if the Kantian philosopher were suddenly to discover himself looking at the categories of the understanding instead of at phenomenal reality.

Truman's sublime moment is a most suggestive depiction of political experience. Truman suddenly finds out at that moment that his private world has always been a pre-eminently public world, a world broadcast all his life on all the TVs throughout the world. The privacy of the story of his life has now suddenly been transformed into the publicity of an endless TV soap. What was previously in Mutz's 'personal judgment' compartment has suddenly been shifted wholesale to the 'national judgment' compartment. A most dramatic rearrangement of the private and the public has thus been effected in his mind. And the moment all this dawns upon him he momentarily lives in the no-man's-land between the private and the public. But at that moment itself he is briefly subject-less – a pure experience without a subject of experience – since these subjects of experience exclusively have their habitat in either the domain of the private or that of the public. At that moment he belongs to neither.

In the case of Truman this shift comes about as a sudden revelation of the un-reality of all that he had hitherto unproblematically taken to be real. But in our lives these shifts between the private and the public, or the 'national' as Mutz prefers to call it, do not announce themselves so suddenly and dramatically, as when Truman sails his boat through the stage scenery separating his private world from the real world

'out there'. Normally, this is a complicated and ongoing process without any very clear and decisive turning-points – though the major political events of our lifetime may sometimes pull us 'through the stage scenery of our previous private life'. Events such as the French Revolution may make us enter a new political reality with a new equilibrium between the private and the public – as was brilliantly argued a generation ago by Richard Sennett in his *The Fall of Public Man*. But even when rearrangements in the relationship between the private and the public have the character of processes rather than of events, this dimension of making a discovery - so wonderfully captured by Truman's boat getting stuck in a piece of stage scenery - will be preserved.

Our present political melancholia

A moment ago I mentioned the French Revolution. And if any historical event matches Truman's sublime experience of a rearrangement in the relationship between the private and the public, this must undoubtedly be the French Revolution. From almost every perspective the Revolution was a major event in the history of the West, but it surely was *the* major event in the history of the West's experience of the relationship between the private and the public. As nineteenth-century legal historians never tired of pointing out, the French Revolution announced the final end of feudalism and, hence, of the system defining all public relationships in the terms of private law. Feudalism had no public law in the modern sense of the term, because public competencies typically were private property. Offices such as tax-receiver, public servant, judge or army-officer could be inherited, put up for sale and sold as if they were private possessions in the way that a house or a stretch of land can be owned. By taking all these competencies out of the hands of those whose private possession they had been, and giving them to the people or the nation, the public domain came into being. This was a tremendous rearrangement in the relationship between the public and the private and it had, in the collective political experience of the time, an effect much similar to what Truman must have felt when hitting the boundary of his (private) world and discovering the public world hidden behind it.

In both cases the experience was traumatic – and we may well see the term 'traumatic 'as the psychological equivalent of the philosophical or aesthetic notion of the sublime. In both cases the experience resists being taken up in the kind of narrative used for telling the history of one's life and giving meaning to what has happened or will happen in it. Next, both traumatic and sublime experience involve a loss of a former self. In the case of Truman and of the French Revolution it is not hard to spell out what this former self must have been: in both cases a private world was suddenly transformed into a public world. And as we know from both psychology and history, only an endless telling and re-telling of the traumatic or the sublime experience may finally succeed in dissipating its threatening and overwhelming incomprehensibility and allow us to subsume it in the narrative of our lives. This is what the psychoanalytical treatment of trauma is all about; and we need only think of the libraries of books written on the French Revolution in the nineteenth century to see that it is much the same with history. Under such circumstances historians truly are the nation's psychoanalysts.

However, our contemporary situation is a wholly different one and, in fact, the very mirror image of the French Revolution. The pendulum now moves in the opposite direction. We now live in a time when the public domain has been privatized again (as so much else in our contemporary societies).[12] Think of the privatization of former parts of the state or the policy of hiving them off as semi-independent, so-called Quangos.[13] Think of the effort in most states on the European continent to cut down the size of the welfare state, and to shift back to the citizen many responsibilities that the state had taken on itself after World War II. As will be clear, this is the unmaking of the regime of the public and the private that came into being with the French Revolution and that was elaborated by liberals,[14] socialists and Christian Democrats in the almost two centuries after 1789. What makes our own age unique in the history of the Western State is that now for the first time in more than half a millennium the State is on the way out again. This is where our contemporary political challenges are without precedent in the West's history and why it is so very difficult to develop a consistent and workable response to them. Surely, there is no lack of political philosophies, ranging from Bodin, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau to Hegel, Marx, Hayek or Rawls, all investigating the possibilities - and the dangers! - of an ever-increasing

State and public domain – but the problem of the *shrinking* State is a wholly new one; and the contradiction of sovereignty wiping itself out (the annulment of competencies is only possible for someone actually *possessing* these competencies!) has, until now, not attracted the interest of political philosophers. This issue, to be placed at the top of the contemporary political philosopher's agenda because of our present political realities, still awaits a painstaking and adequate analysis. The only thing we can be sure of is that the problem will have to be analyzed in terms of the notions of the private and the public, since only these notions allow us to properly conceptualize the political realities that have come into being during the last two to three decades.

When attacking the problem (with the help of these notions), we had best start with the observation that it must confront us with the very opposite of Truman's predicament, as sketched in the previous section. When Truman struck the cardboard sky with his boat, his world was suddenly enlarged immeasurably; it now came to comprise all of the 'real' world unknown to him before his sublime experience. And this must have had a tremendous impact on his identity: he must have realized that he now belonged to a world in which the life as he had lived it up till now, had never been more than the *representation* of a life - *his* life. He was thus compelled to undergo the transition that Danto had in mind when explaining what happens when we enclose a person, ourselves, or a historical period in a representation of them. If this happens to us (as was the case with Truman), we become an essentially different person. And in Truman's case the transition is all the more dramatic since he had, as yet, no indication of his identity in his new world. Who or what would he be there; and what did he have to go on to answer this all-important question? Just nothing. It was as if he had returned to the state of a new-born baby and been compelled to start from there again.

Our current political experience is the reverse of Truman's: it's the experience of an implosion of our public into a *new* private self. I emphasize that this certainly is a *new* private self; for these drastic rearrangements in the relationship between the public and the private cannot leave these compartments of our political selves unaltered. Truman's private self was annihilated by his entry in the 'real' world; and so our new private self has swollen up beyond measure by having to absorb in itself large parts of the public world. It certainly will be no easy task for us to digest all this new and often dishearteningly

alien material. All the more so, since by subsuming the public world into our private self, we have also had to internalize all the frictions and conflicts that existed in the (formerly) public world. Our political minds have become the battlefields of all the forces fighting each other in 'the real world'. This fact may explain the amazing volatility of the contemporary voter: whereas until a few decades ago political issues divided the electorate – think of the clear opposition between socialist, liberal and Christian Democratic parties – now these conflicts have been internalized and have effected a division of the citizen against himself. With the predictable result that the citizen may change his political allegiances from one day to the other.[15] It is as if politics and political strife has moved from a realist to an idealist world.

But there is still more to this rearrangement in the relationship between the public and the private. This is best explained in terms of the venerable and ancient topos of 'the demons of noontime'. The topos exemplifies a sudden caesura in the meaningful relationships we entertain with the world outside ourselves. And that such a loss of meaningful relationships is at stake when (part of) the former public world is internalized in the private self, will need no elucidation. Nor that this absorption of (part of) the former public world will result in (1) hostility between the new private self and the much reduced public world (still stubbornly resisting absorption in the private self) and (2) the emergence of a circle of emptiness around the private self.

The new political experience that I have in mind here can, indeed, best be clarified in terms of the experience of noontime in Mediterranean countries. Think of what happens when in these countries in summertime the sun reaches its highest point at noon. The sun then comes close to being right above us – which has the effect that trees, houses and rocks tend to coincide with their shadows. At other times of the day both these things and their shadows, as well as these shadows themselves, will tend to intermingle with each other; and it is as if they then define together a shared 'public' reality enabling them – and us - to entertain meaningful relationships with each other. At noontime, however, things return within themselves; they leave us alone in an alien world that momentarily became indifferent to us. Since Antiquity this fascinating experience of nature has been described innumerable times; we find references to it in Sophocles's *Antigone*, in the Bible, in medieval authors writing on *acedia*, in Nietzsche's *grosser Mittag* and in the paintings Van Gogh made during his stay in Arles, to mention just some examples.

The following lines taken from Leconte de Lisle's poem 'Midi' will give us the most important elements of this experience of nature:

> Homme, si le coeur plein de joie ou d'amertume,
> Tu passais vers midi dans les champs radieux,
> Fuis! La nature est vide et le soleil consume;
> Rien n'est vivant ici, rien n'est triste ni joyeux.[16]

The poem marvelously expresses how nature presents itself as locked into itself in the experience of noontime; nature no longer wishes to partake in our feelings or function as their self-evident sounding-board. We are excluded from the world (forced to exchange the public world for a hopelessly barren private world, so to say). Nature's supreme indifference to us extinguishes our moods and feelings, whether of joy or sadness. We feel utterly dehumanized by the experience, as if all that makes us into human beings has been taken away from us - not by an act of aggression, but by a confrontation with cold 'nothingness'. This loss of the possibility of meaningful contact with the world outside ourselves provokes in us the feeling of 'melancholia'. I should immediately add that there is something profoundly misleading about the words 'us' and 'ourselves' used in the previous sentence. *For, in fact, there is no 'I', no 'me', no 'you', no 'us' and no 'we' here anymore.* As I have argued elsewhere, moods and feelings like 'melancholia' reduce us (sorry about the 'us', again!) to a state preceding a division of the world into a self or subject on the one hand, and the objects in and of this world on the other. This is the state in which experience will (re)claim all the rights denied to it in the empiricist tradition. But all that we do and think as individuals aware of their own selfhood and identity is embedded in and colored by these moods and feelings. Even sensations such as sadness or joy – that always have been or are occasioned by identifiable objects or events - belong to a fundamentally later dispensation. As Bollnow puts it:

> als die unterste Stufe liegen dem gesamten seelischen Leben die "Lebensgefühle" oder "Stimmungen" zugrunde. Sie stellen die einfachste und ursprünglichste Form dar, in der das menschliche Leben seiner selbst – und schon immer in einer gefärbten Weise, mit einer bestimmt gearteten Wertung und Stellungnahme – inne wird.[17]

And he then goes on to quote Strasser:

> es erscheinen in den echten Gestimmtheiten überhaupt kein Ich, kein Gegenstand, keine Grenze zwischen Ich und Gegenstand. Man müsste im Gegenteil sagen: die Grenzen des Ichs verschwimmen und verschwinden in eigentümlicher Weise. Ich und Welt werden in ein ungeteiltes Totalerleben eingebettet. Stimmung ist Ich- und Weltgefühl zugleich.[18]

The insight is captured well in the lines I quoted from Leconte de Lisle, when the poet insists that sensations of sadness or joy evaporate when we (sorry, again!) are afflicted by the 'nothingness' of the 'demons of noontime'. We (sorry, again!) are then carried back to a state in which these sensations and the objects and events that may occasion them have lost their character of being objective realities, realities outside ourselves (sorry, again!). *In that state, subject and object have not yet come into being*. And, as we have seen when discussing representation, this state will announce itself at those moments when a former self is enclosed within a representation of that former self. In these rare moments of sublime experience the frontiers between self and not-self dissolve and the familiar and always inevitable notions of self and the world have momentarily lost their meaning.

From a political perspective we have no reason to exalt these sublime experiences into something that we should strive for – supposing that the experience could be deliberately provoked at all – *quod non*. Obviously, there is nothing particularly attractive about Truman's experience – and we know from the history of aesthetics that this is true of sublime experience in general. This is no less true of the melancholic variant of sublime political experience that we discussed in this section. For, as Hegel already pointed out most perceptively, melancholy may typically provoke in us the reaction of a 'Panic' fright. Hegel refers here to how the Arcadian shepherds reacted to the experience of the 'demons of noontime':

> das liegt z.B. in der Vorstellung des Pan; es ist dies das All [Hegel obviously refers here to the meaning of the Greek word 'pan' (F.A.)], nicht als ein Objektives allein, sondern zugleich als das wodurch ein Schauer erweckt wird (…) In Griechenland ist er [i.e. Pan (F.A.)] nicht das objektive Ganze, sondern das Unbestimmte, das dabei mit dem Momente des Objektiven verbunden ist.[19]

Obviously, a passage fully agreeing with the quotes from Bollnow and Strasser given a moment ago. Anyway, a 'Panic fright' is certainly something to be avoided in a world that is out of joint because of so many panic frights already, such as the one triggered by 'nine-eleven'. Hence, a 'melancholy' electorate uncertainly hovering on the brink between a former self and a representation of that former self, may be a serious threat to the health and stability of a representative democracy. All the more so if such a representative democracy is ruled by irresponsible politicians ready to stimulate and exploit private fears for ill-considered public purposes. The 'Panic frights' resulting from this may well set the globe afire.

Conclusion.

All that I've been saying here is pure nonsense from the perspective of (contemporary) political philosophy. I have no problem with admitting as much. I am well aware that my proposal to see the citizen or voter as an uneasy mix of two incommensurable components – without there being a sovereign political self arbitrating between the two – will be decried as odd and profoundly counter-intuitive. Aren't we all convinced of being ourselves the supreme master of how the public and the private are related in our (political) selves? I shall be the first to admit that ordinarily there is a great amount of stability in how we strike a balance between the two that may give the impression of resulting from rational and well-considered decisions. Stability, yes; but this stability is not the result of some well-considered decision consciously taken by ourselves. It may look as if it is, but appearances betray us here; for such sane and secure regimes in the relationship between the private and the public are, in fact, the results of 'mere custom operating on the mind', to quote Hume. Our political self is 'compartmentalized', as Mutz put it, and there is no 'higher self' regulating the relationship between the two.

Certainly rearrangements in this relationship do occur - either favoring the public (as was the case in the two centuries after 1789), or the private (as in our own age of political melancholia) – but they are not the result of choices consciously and deliberately made by an either private or public self. For, as we have seen in Danto: in such rearrangements we find ourselves in the no-man's-land between a former

self and a later representation of that former self – *and then there are no selves and, hence, no choices to be made.*

NOTES

1. H.F. Pitkin, *Political representation*, Princeton 1967.
2. As was, for example, the case in the discussion of so-called 'representationalism' provoked by Davidson's philosophy of language.
3. A.C. Danto, *Connections to the world*, New York 1989; 249.
4. Danto makes this claim when arguing what happens when we move from one historical epoch to a later one, where this shift is identified with moving from one epoch to a *representation* of it. It is this transformation into an object of representation that marks off a previous epoch from a later one. As Danto put it: 'And something of the same sort is true for the historical period considered as an entity. It is a period solely from the perspective of the historian, who sees it from without; for those who lived in the period it would be just the way life was lived. And asked, afterwards, what is was like to have lived then, they may answer from the outside, from the historian's perspective. From the inside there is no answer to be given; it was simply the way things were. So when the members of a period can give an answer in terms satisfactory to the historian, the period will have exposed its outward surface and in a sense be over, as a period.' See A.C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Common Place*, Cambridge (Ma) 1981; 207. This insight is the basis of my argument in this essay.
5. F.R. Ankersmit, *Political Representation*, Stanford 2002; 5–8.
6. 'The tension between the harsh superego and the ego that is subject to it, is called by us the sense of guilt; it expresses itself as the need for punishment. Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city.' See S. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents. Newly translated from the German and edited by James Strachey*, New York 1961; 70, 71.
7. D. Mutz, *Impersonal Influence. How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes*, Cambridge 1998; 131.
8. Mutz, *op. cit.*; 131. Reference to SCP report of 2005 which confirms these findings.
9. E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People. A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, New York 1960; 3.
10. Schattschneider, *op. cit.*; 7.
11. I dealt with the issue in F.R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, Stanford 2005; 336 ff.
12. A striking illustration is the 'privatization of the past': we used to define our relationship to the past in terms of large collectivities, such as the people, the nation, a social class etc., whereas nowadays the monument, the commemoration, the 'lieu de mémoire' (all focusing on the individual's relationship to the past) best characterize the contemporary historical consciousness. See F.R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, Stanford 2001, Chapter 5.

13. Privatization and quangocracy should certainly not be confused with each other. A privatized former part of the State is subject to the discipline of the market; whereas Quangos lead their lives in a foggy world between State and market, often acquiring the weaknesses of both without sharing their strengths. One is reminded here of Margaret Thatcher's remark about Quangos that they are like mules on which one has painted stripes, in the hope that they will now behave like zebras.

14. One should avoid the popular mistake of identifying liberalism's effort to clearly distinguish between the private and the public (with which liberalism pronounced the death sentence over feudalism and the Ancien Regime) with the attempt to reduce the size of the State. In fact, as Guizot already emphasized, liberal democracy reinforced the state more than any other political philosophy. And the horrors of totalitarianism were not the excesses of too strong a state, but of abandoning the liberal credo of the strict distinction between the private and the public.

15. F.R. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic politics. Political philosophy beyond fact and value*, Stanford 1996; 360 - 368.

16. Quoted from 'Midi' in C.M.R. Leconte de Lisle, *Poèmes Antiques*, Paris 1872.

17. O.F. Bollnow, *Das Wesen der Stimmungen*, Frankfurt am Main 1956; 33.

18. Bollnow, *Stimmungen*; 40, 41.

19. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Band II – IV*, Hamburg 1976; 235.