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DOSSIER EL HÁBITO COMO CONCEPTO POLÍTICO

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Constitución y costumbre en
Edmund Burke
por **Lorenzo Rustighi**

The Vital Habit in Kant's
Philosophy
por **Giulia Valpione**

Hegel: Habit, Custom, and
Government
por **Pierpaolo Cesaroni**

Montaigne e la potenza della
consuetudine
por **Paolo Slongo**

VARIA

El momento maquiaveliano
y la teoría política
por **Sabrina Morán y
Gabriela Rodríguez Rial**

Educación y política en
la modernidad argentina
por **Laura Pastorini**

Global Spaces/Global Times:
Reconsidering the History of
Political Concepts
por **Sandro Chignola**

RESEÑA

La correspondencia
entre Reinhart Koselleck y
Carl Schmitt
por **Damián J. Rosanovich**



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Habit as a Political Concept

The essays composing the monographic section of this issue of *Conceptos Históricos* result from a seminar that took place, in recent years, at the Doctoral School of the University of Padua. They are therefore driven by a common problem and by a common approach. For those who have been contributing to this work, the history of political concepts does not coincide with either the history of ideas or the history of words. What is at stake is rather the genealogy of modernity and, in particular, of the modern political form through the conceptual constellation that made the birth of the state possible.

This operation has to be understood in a twofold sense: on the one hand, it means accounting for the specificity of modern political experience, that is, of the revolutionary process that characterizes it as soon as concepts such as individual, will, decision, equality, sovereign political representation – literally unthinkable for ancient, medieval and pre-modern political thought – come into play as the foundation of the state; on the other hand, this is about attempting to take leave of the centrality of these concepts and to think beyond them, thus confronting the crisis that they have been undergoing in the contemporary age – an age that we may provisionally qualify as post-state or post-democratic.

In the latter case, it is a matter of removing the truth effect of modern bourgeois law, which takes the individual owner and her isolated will as the necessary parameter of subjectivity, in order to reactivate conceptual frameworks, categories and forms of thought that have been marginalized within the archive of modern political philosophy. Key to such an archive is indeed the continuity of the notion of sovereignty, whether it is intended as the irrevocable self-disposition of the individual will or as the political translation of this same will into the universal will of the body politic. In virtue of this concept, what is also crucial is the possibility of defining and constituting the general legal and institutional

framework to which both individual and collective experience are to be reduced, starting precisely from a sovereign decision as well as from the formalizing caesura between practice and theory that it presupposes. A whole series of authors and proposals, before, inside and beyond the threshold produced by this shift, engage otherwise with the space of the relationship and the bond between the living.

For this reason, practicing the history of political concepts means, first and foremost, to not yield to the hypnotic effect of the conceptual framework of the state. For centuries, even in the midst of its triumphant parabola, politics was not understood, practiced or communicated as a space for recomposing intrinsically irreducible or conflicting individualities. The concepts whereby modern law has codified the relations between subjects – and, even before this, established the sovereign will of the individual as the founding principle of legal subjectivity and as the key driving force for the formalization of equality between the subjects of law – have monopolized and significantly narrowed the range of expression of the system of relationships and forms of interaction to which it is possible to refer when talking about politics. “Habit” and “custom” (decisive signifiers for ethics, politics and law, provided that they are not reduced to their modern formalization) are political concepts that can be acknowledged to be pivotal for the circulation of an idea of practice and a practice of action which are literally untranslatable into the modern configuration of the Political.

Generally speaking, habit is a reiterative tendency of behavior contracted through the repetition of acts. Whether it is gestures, practices, behaviors or ideas, habitual actions are those that we perform thoughtlessly and almost mechanically for having contracted them, precisely, as habits. Hence the legitimate suspicion that “habit” represents an obstacle to freedom and, because of the comfort that it gives us by weakening our curiosity, even to the practice of philosophy. Philosophy, however, has been long dealing with habit by trying to meditate on the constitutive duplicity that characterizes it: a habit certainly expresses a sort of “automatism” – we perform the acts we are accustomed to without thinking about them – but at the same time provides us with the ease whereby we perform those same acts with *souplesse* and naturalness. Habit is a “second nature”, an *altera natura*, as it is said in the Latin definitions of *consuetudo* or in the lexicon of the Roman jurisprudential tradition.

To highlight the topic which the essays of this dossier focus on, it is perhaps worthwhile to recall the philosophical lexicon of habit by evoking some references that do not explicitly recur in them. In the main European languages the words “habit”, “hábito”, “abitudine”, “habitude” refer to the Latin *habitus*, which refers in turn – like the Greek term which

it translates, i.e. *hexis* – to the verb “to have” (Lat. *habere*; Gr. *échein*). The apparently dissonant German word “Gewohnheit” refers in fact, through the verb “wohnen” (“to dwell”), to the very same matrix (*habere, habitus, habitare*). In the habits that we “have” the singularity that we “are” is decentralized from the sovereignty of the will and appears to be irreducibly mediated by the set of relationships, affectivities and passions that characterizes the social environment of which it has always been an integral part. Habits and customs expropriate the subject of its sovereignty and are *acquired* in the field of immanence of relationships and regulation curves that do not find either their own foundation in the subject or the definition and the guarantee of individual liberty in mutual isolation.

A second, equally decisive characterization must be added to this first one. A particular form of action is expressed as a habit. To contract a habit, as we saw earlier, means to repeat a sequence, but this sequence, once acquired, “frees” the act from the coercion that characterizes the process of its acquisition and enables the individual who has contracted the habit to make a much more flexible and spontaneous “use” of her faculties. A piano virtuoso repeats the gestures that have marked her technical learning every time she sits at her instrument, but precisely because they are now at her disposal, precisely because she has perfectly acquired them – and, therefore, she somehow “has” them – she is not just able to perform a score mechanically but to fully express the power of her free interpretation. The particular form of “having” that resonates here does not end in a definitive possession but establishes a virtually ever-present disposition that qualifies the subject as a form-of-life – in this case, being a pianist – and consequently also disables or un-determines the gap between necessity and freedom, between the latent faculty (being able to play) and its realization (playing now), between power and act.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle employs two terms to designate “habit”. The first one, *ethos*, corresponds to the process of contraction of a habit, which obviously does not coincide with a natural foundation but depends on a continued exercise over time that sets in motion both somatic and cognitive components. The second one, *hexis*, to which we have already referred, indicates precisely a disposition; a qualitative disposition that can be indifferently ethical (habitually behaving generously or according to justice, for instance), cognitive (a mental state) or technical (the *hexis* whereby a single person is inclined to a specific form-of-life that expresses itself as a *habitus*: knowing how to play, how to build or how to think as the “second nature” of the musician, of the architect or of the philosopher), which is acquired through the repetition of experiences and is experienced as one’s fluid mode of belonging to oneself. A subject is not but rather has the set of

practices that have formed her, and stands by them as by the system of conventions, rules and modes of action that characterize her belonging to a determinate field of relations.

This determination, however, is not rigid. There is nothing mechanical to it. On the contrary, it repeats itself, while differentiating and multiplying itself, precisely because the energy that repetition contains and reproduces does not run out and the habitual action – knowing how to play, once the technique has been acquired and we are trained to place our hands on the keyboard, to reiterate the aforementioned example – traces a disposition that bestows upon the subject an inexhaustible virtuality: a pianist – but also a philosopher, a prudent man, an architect – does not cease to be such when she does not play (or think, or act, or build). One continues to “be” the disposition towards the action that one “has”. Gabriel Tarde, one of Deleuze’s references, highlights how an “*echologie*”, i.e. an ontology of *having* and not of *being*, ought to be established in order to produce a different image of reality and politics. A “metaphysics of mutual possession” is the necessary premise for a sociology of the trans-individual.

Hence a series of consequences. “Custom” and “law”, two keywords of the Western political lexicon, can be indeed understood in a very different way with respect to the formalism of the modern concept of law. The law sterilizes action by empowering a definitive orthopedics of both individual and collective behavior. An action shall be called lawful or unlawful, acceptable or prohibited, in virtue of the sovereign decision that forestalls its executive procedures. The whole system of relationships between singularities is trapped into the formal scheme that constitutes it, thus enclosing it within the hierarchy of normative sources. The mechanics of the collective body – from Hobbes through the French revolutionary constitutionalism to modern democratic constitutions – is that of an *automaton*. The constituent action wears out once the machinery of the state is organized and its project is implemented. The continuity between Absolutism and the French Revolution, which Tocqueville was the first to speak about, emerges as a logic of sterilization of customs (the logic that directs, from a historical point of view, the process of institutionalization of the absolutist monarchy) and as a neutralization of differences made possible by a geometry of action that translates, as in the case of Sieyès, the equality of subjects into the equidistance from the center, namely the Law, which guarantees their distribution. There is no constituent dynamic that can be preserved, once the static of the constitution has been achieved. The aporias and ambivalences of this logic clearly emerge in the Revolutionary threshold. This is what the essays dedicated to Burke and Kant, written respectively by Lorenzo Rustighi and Giulia Valpione, focus on.

As always, Hegel provides a further level of complexity. Pierpaolo Cesaroni focuses on Hegel – a “Deleuzian” one, so to speak, and precisely on the premises that I mentioned earlier – to highlight how the topic of habit enables a definitive denaturalization of ontology. Unlike animals, man, the social being *par excellence*, has no “instincts” but a paradoxically “institutional” nature in which she continually reweaves her bond with herself as well as with others. It is the modalities of such an irreducible “texture” that Paolo Slongo reconstructs through a Nietzschean archive that includes French moralists and Montaigne, aiming at a different genealogy of modern subjectivity.

A few decisive elements come into play here to outline the key motivations shared by the surveys of the history of the (political) concept of habit conducted in this dossier. The first one concerns the processes of formation of customs. A habit – as well as its political translation, i.e. custom – has nothing natural or necessary. To the contrary, the distinction between nature and artifice, between necessity and freedom, becomes indeterminate and is revoked. “We are rooted into outside things and melt away into them, nor can any man say he consists absolutely in this or that”, writes Samuel Butler in 1878. And he goes on: “We are no longer, so to speak, under the Law, but under Grace”.¹ The use of oneself and of the conventions after which the self gets modeled and transformed commits the subject to a constant variation; it dispossesses her of the illusion of having a conclusive sovereignty over herself or an identity perfectly corresponding to the mask that modern law puts on her face. What the theme of habit makes available to us is a different genealogy of subjectivation, irreducible to what Foucault called the “Cartesian moment” of philosophy. Moreover, the trait of innovation and variation that traverses the subject – when it is deformed and dealt with in accordance with the process, i.e. the rhythm, that is inherent in it – is what the most recent neurobiology highlights when it engages with the question of the brain’s “plasticity”. Making the genealogy of modernity – and determining its limits, in this case – allows us to thematize the actuality to which we belong.

I take the liberty of introducing a further element. Not only do the processes of contemporary cognitive capitalism exploit and valorize precisely such a “plasticity” – it makes sense to speak of biopolitics, I contend, only in this sense – but they are also reproduced through schemes of juridical regulation that only to a hasty gaze may appear to be the same as in the age of the modern state. What has blown up, together with the 20th-century Fordist compromise between capital and

¹ Samuel Butler. *Life and Habit*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, [1878] 2009, p. 11.