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# Us, and its body

BY:  **Tarcisio Lancioni**

T his article is not the result of a fully-articulated research project but rather an attempt at exploration, still tentative, developed from some observations that Paolo Fabbri contributed to the *Matera capitale della cultura* project. His reflections have had several partial publications: a short article in Italian, a more elaborate version published in the Italian journal *aut aut*, another version in Spanish, and one in French.[1] But because Paolo never limited himself to repetition, each take contains something new.

All these writings are about "us/we,"[2] the first-person plural pronoun and the political implications of its uses. My exploration, based on these articles and some of Paolo Fabbri's references, can be considered as a preliminary reflection on the processes of constructing collective identities (*us*, in fact) – implied, or only suggested, by the pronoun's semantic organization – and on how these are manifested; how they become 'a body', i.e., something perceivable that one can identify with, in the discursive space.

Taking this path, I will rely mainly on the suggestions of two other authors. The first is a dual author, a *we*, a collective voice that is not only taken up and relaunched in the aforementioned articles but that has always accompanied Paolo's explorations. I am talking about Deleuze and Guattari, from whom, in this specific case, the concept of the *collective assemblage of*

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[1]  See Fabbri (2020a, 2019a, 2020b, 2019b).

[2]  Unlike English, in Latin languages there is no pronominal differentiation between subject and complement. So while English distinguishes 'we' from 'us,' Latin languages use only one term (noi, nous, nosotros). Although, they may use particles to specify 'us,' as a complement, particularly in reflexive expressions.

*enunciation* (*agencement collectif d'énonciation*)[3] is taken up. The second is Mikhail Bakhtin, an author Paolo Fabbri certainly loved less and whose recent revival he often looked with some suspicion. He is, though, a scholar indirectly summoned by Deleuze and Guattari, who cite him as one of the few, at the time of *Mille Plateaux* publication, to have dealt with the collective, supra-individual dimension of enunciation.

The concept of the *collective assemblage of enunciation* has been part of semiotic thinking for some time. It was, for example, employed by Denis Bertrand in his important article 'L'impersonnel de l'énonciation,' of 1993, where he proposed a reconsideration and fine-tuning of the concept of *enunciative praxis*. Some crucial reflections relating to this concept started to develop with *Sémiotique des passions* by Greimas and Fontanille, in 1991, regarding specifically the complex dynamics of the event "que constitue la rencontre entre l'énoncé et l'instance qui le prend en charge" (Fontanille 1998: 271).

Instead, Paolo takes up the concept of the *collective assemblage of enunciation* to suggest the transitive, provisional character of the identity of *us/we*. An identity that is taken and continuously transformed in the discursive flow, as indeed happens with all other pronouns, but with one crucial difference: plural pronouns do not limit themselves to having a purely positional value, since they always imply a further semantic dimension: *we*, or *us*, never indicates only the position, reversible, of the speaker.

The *collective assemblage of enunciation* is not an organically defined concept employed to explain a specific phenomenon. As often happens with Deleuze and Guattari (too often, their detractors would say), it is a concept-process, in continuous transformation, that takes shape in the discourse's flow that contributes to reshaping it. I will not try to give it the stability it does not have, but I will limit myself to making a few suggestions, as I believe Paolo used to do.

Deleuze and Guattari introduce the *collective assemblage of enunciation* when discussing what we might call the pragmatically constrictive dimension of language. Language presents itself as something that one is forced to obey and used essentially to make one obey. It is, in short, the area evoked by Barthes' aphorism about the "fascist character of language." While, however, for Barthes, it is the *langue* that is "fascist," on account of being an abstract system of rules, which necessarily imposes its constraints so that one can express oneself and speak in specific ways, for Deleuze and Guattari, it is instead a question of *discourse*, of the illocutionary implicitness of discourse, since generalized illocution constitutes for Deleuze and Guattari, at least in *Mille Plateaux*, where the theme is developed, the essential character of language. More in our semiotic terms, I would say that the question of the *collective assemblage of enunciation* places us in the realm of the implicitly manipulative dimension of meaning.

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[3] For the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari terminology, I will refer to Brian Massumi's translation of *Mille Plateaux* (University of Minnesota, 1987).

Discourse, say Deleuze and Guattari, is interwoven with "order-words."[4] Under the guise of information or referentiality, *order-words* (or "watchwords") circulate continuously through discourse, constantly taken up and repeated by it. We can understand *order-words* in a double sense. On the one hand, as a motto condensing a vision, and, thus, constitutive of a suprapersonal order, what 'must be respected and kept in mind,' to which one must conform. It is the widespread discourse, made of sentences already given and continuously repeated, in which any semblance of 'subjectivity' dissolves. It is the kind of discourse that Heidegger would consider inauthentic because it relieves the *Dasein* from the burden of choice. It is the same kind that preoccupied Paolo Fabbri in his reflections on chatter and gossip, and that, in general, cannot fail to interest semiotics, decidedly less interested in authenticity than in the social and collective dimension of every life-form.[5]

On the other hand, the *order-word* is also the word in which one recognizes one's self. Therefore, it no longer appears as the expression of the impersonal 'one,' but instead, like that of a collective 'us/we,' recognizing themselves in the same order-words, as their bearers. Through their diffusion, they serve to differentiate 'us' from the Other.

This circulation of order-words from one saying to another, which for Deleuze and Guattari constitutes the *collective assemblage of enunciation*, within which the order-words make 'plot' and constitute 'regimes of signs,' seems to open up two dimensions: one of *neutralization*, through which the impersonal 'one' is expressed – the *Monsieur-Tout-Le-Monde* summoned by Eric Landowski (1987) – and one of *complexification[6]* through which a defined collectivity is expressed – an 'us/we,' in which the Ego and the Other recognize themselves in a shared environment built in opposition to a different, further estranged Other. Picking up again the reference to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, we might suggest that the 'one' is not necessarily the first form through which Being-ness, the *Dasein*, recognizes itself in the world. As Heidegger notes, "the Self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self,* which we distinguish from the *authentic Self*" and "if Dasein is familiar with itself as they-self, this means at the same time that the 'they' itself prescribes

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[4]  This is the expression chosen by Brian Massumi to translate the original French *mot d'ordre*. In the footnote, the translator adds this explication: "Mot d'ordre: in standard French, 'slogan', (military) 'password'. Deleuze and Guattari are also using the term 'word of order' literally, in the double sense of a word or phrase constituting a command and a word or phrase creative of order."

[5]  I think it is fair to point out that Heidegger does not attribute an explicit negative value to this way of being-in-the-world, which is, moreover, impossible, since it is the average, habitual, typical condition of being-in-the-world, and indeed constitutes its primary mode, from which the others, and therefore also authenticity, can derive.

[6]  On the semiotic square:
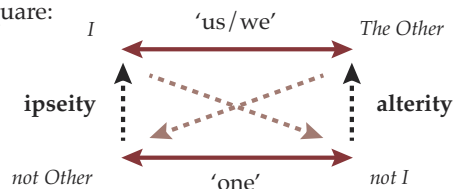
that way of interpreting the world and Being-in-the-World" (Heidegger 1962: 167).[7]

The Dasein can instead be given, and perhaps this is indeed its primary form, precisely as 'us' starting from what is close and defines a 'we' that takes shape through the order-words, through the 'identity signs' of what appears closer in the "letting something be encountered in circumspective concern," to which Heidegger links the theme of affectivity constitutive of being-in-the-world.

We can illustrate the distinction between these two poles of collective enunciation in terms of a different tensive structuring, where 'one' would correspond to a low-intensity extensional circulation, whereas 'us/we' would involve a reduction of extension and an accentuation of intensity.[8] In both cases, the semiotic field, although tensively articulated, presents itself first and foremost as the place of an 'already said,' of an impersonal that dominates over any effort at subjectification, which, we might add, is also characterized as the way of generating new order-words whose success is determined by the extent and intensity of their recovery, and in which the semiotic praxis is always primarily and essentially 'social.'

It follows that the 'us/we' always comes before the 'I': every voice is already full of other voices, Deleuze and Guattari suggest. Indeed, the primary form of discourse is the free indirect discourse, which always assumes a previous enunciation that merges with the 'I.'

Although, as mentioned above, the theme of the impersonal dimension of enunciation, starting with the idea of an enunciative praxis, has been widely incorporated into semiotic discourse, a certain gap seems to remain; a difference that we need to take into account in further developing the forms of impersonality.

Despite accounting for the presence in discourse of semiotic forms deposited in culture by use and designed precisely to account for the impersonal dimension of enunciation, enunciative praxis continues to isolate a singular instance from the discursive flow to make it the implicit center of discourse. The idea of an 'already said,' sedimented by the use that contributes to structure, the utterance continues to project the image of an enunciating instance, properly subjective, which completely controls the enunciation operations. On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari's proposal stresses that the order-words' emergence and permanence in the discursive flow are independ-

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[7]  John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson translate the German impersonal form 'Man' as 'they,' while other interpreters suggest 'one' as an alternative (then 'they-self' becomes 'one-ness'). What is important here is the foundational character of the *impersonal* as the primary form of Dasein's presence in the world in Heidegger's perspective.

[8]  The reference is obviously to the tensive model proposed by Claude Zilberberg (see Fontanille and Zilberberg 1998).
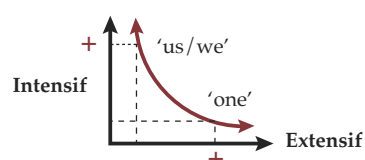
ent of the control of the enunciating instances.

They are, instead, 'placed' by a discursive plot that develops 'by itself.' The utterance can then express elements that do not depend on an instance of control; for example, the order-words manifested in discourse are not a generic impersonal, the 'they/one' sedimented by history, but an 'us/we' one adheres to and preceding the Ego, which, by pronouncing them, inscribes itself in them.[9]

Returning to the thread of the discourse from which we started, the idea of a situation of enunciation, of collective assemblage, allows Paolo Fabbri to underline the unstable, continuously mobile, and variable character of the 'us/we,' in which the identities profiled are continually formed and broken up. Therefore, it would be a characterization very close to the 'one,' within which occasional forms of collective self-identification would pulsate, ready to unravel and reform in different aggregates. Re-reading Deleuze and Guattari, however, we have seen that semiotic bodies are constituted in the form of "regimes of signs," concretized through networking. These are proper "social bodies,"[10] stable and durable, through which 'supportive' forms with a greater capacity for permanence are structured (collective identities).

Let us advance the following hypothesis. The first form, close to the 'one,' would be linked to the discursive flow's occasional character and momentary order-words, without implying any other form of identity, nothing that would impose 'self-identification' beyond the occasion itself. The second would be that of the lasting 'us/we,' in which a community recognizes itself irrespective of any specific occasion, in what we might call a process of *naturalization*. A process that makes the social aggregates in which one recognizes itself appear as *objective*, 'natural' entities, rather than products

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[9] The idea of enunciative praxis refers to semiotic patterns and forms deposited in culture by repeated use. This, as Paolo Fabbri suggested in the final debate at the 2019 AISS Congress in Siena, demands to include the *langue* as well, which would differ from other schemas only by degree of generality. At the same time, it would allow to extend the concept (as a summoning of schemas) also to semiotics without *langue*, such as iconographic compositional schemas in painting. Perhaps more than the impersonal (all schemata necessarily tend to be impersonal), enunciative praxis allows us to account for the multiplicity of semiotic forms that contribute to structuring any text or discourse. However, I am not so sure that it really tells us anything more about enunciation than the classical model (On the relations between Enunciation and Enunciative Praxis see, for example, Fontanille 1998). I also have a little doubt about the relevance of the 'modes of existence' model as a mechanism, certainly simple and effective, to account for the dynamics of enunciative praxis. According to this model, enunciative praxis consists in *actualizing* and *realizing* semiotic forms sedimented by use (*potentialized*). But, for a use to sediment, it must be repeated and how can something that has not been sedimented be repeated if sedimentation itself is the condition for repetition? This point touches a fundamental question in the conception of language, or of the semiotic in general, which we find at the heart of Deleuze and Guattari's reflection on the *collective assemblage of enunciation*, through the opposition of the model, they call "chomskyan", of competence (but which is proper to every idea of *langue*) against Labov's idea of a language in continuous variation, in which the *langue* would not be a tendentially stable form that serves as a type for every enunciation, with its regulated variations, but only a 'statistical' *a posteriori* construction.

[10] The idea of 'social body' is understood here as the result of a collective construction of expressive figures (the regimes of signs) through which a form of identity that is not individual can be made perceptible, such that individuals can recognize it. The same concept is used by Gianfranco Marrone (2001) in a different sense, to denote the dimension that is both intimate and collective of the 'body' that while it is 'one's own,' it is also always 'textured' by the images and narratives with which cultures conceive it.

of the social dynamics and bargaining. In this case of the 'us/we' identity will be defined by long-term programs and stable shared values. However, its permanence, the permanence of 'us,' rests, beyond the narrative orientations, on forms of discursive concretization, i.e., on the necessary adoption of characterizing figurative traits, of a stable and recognizable perceptible 'body': that of flags, of uniforms in the broader sense, of slogans, but also a haircut or a clearly labeled food style. Of order-words in short, or perhaps, generalizing, we better say of *order-figures* which have precisely the function of structuring the phenomenal body of a collectivity.

It seems, then, that there are other differences in constructing the collective identity we enunciate using 'us/we.' One is mainly linked to what, in Greimasian terms, can be called *narrative,* i.e., a process which develops from selecting a core of values and is concretized in *narrative programs* or projects;[11] or, alternately, through the typical inclination for relevance that leads to choosing the same values. The other appears to be defined instead, in the first place, 'somatically,' based on the identification of homogeneous figurative traits that stabilize the 'us/we' in a recognizable body, which acts as the reference point for generating self-identification effects.

These two forms of 'us/we' refer to different processes. I would like to exemplify this by taking up another suggestion by Paolo Fabbri, again from the AISS congress in Siena mentioned above. Paolo recalled a passage in which Louis Marin (1999) dwelt on the alienating effects generated by the discursive strategy adopted by Stendhal in his autobiography to stage his own history and the spaces in which it evolves. Then, Paolo pointed out how in such a situation the narrator was induced to resort to the combination of two different substances, interweaving verbal semiotics and visual semiotics: the first to express the 'internal' knowledge of the Subject, the second to represent himself from the 'outside,' to place himself in an environment. In this way, Paolo emphasizes, the presupposed enunciating instance finds itself assuming a phenomenally 'impossible' point of view, which requires one to put himself outside his self so that he can see himself as a 'he' placed in a particular environment, projected onto a specific background, and from which it is also possible to observe and describe his facial expressions, postures, gestures, etc.

Regarding this doubling of perspective and betraying Paolo's preferences, I take up a reflection by Bakhtin from his essay 'The Author and the Hero.'[12] It is a phenomenological observation concerning the inevitably asymmetrical position of the perceiving, phenomenal Subject with respect to the Other, to any 'you' or 'he.' The asymmetry arises from the fact that the perceiving subject has an 'inner' vision of himself, his thoughts, feelings, or projects. In contrast, he may have only a partial and incomplete

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[11]  It is to this type of organization that the concept of 'collective actant' is usually referred. See, in particular, Greimas, A.J. (1976) and Landowski, E. (1989).

[12]  A book that, with due caution, could be read as a work on the forms of *enunciated enunciation* in literary discourse.

vision of his own phenomenal aspect, which excludes, for example, his face and what it expresses or the aesthetic relation between himself and the environment in which he is placed. This same Subject has, on the contrary, only an external phenomenal vision of the Other, who, according to Bakhtin, supports the 'practical' dimension of interactions. In this context, we don't define the Other but only make a sort of prognosis about what we can expect or not from him.[13]

This condition determines precisely an irreducible non-coincidence of the experiences of the interactants, although they can interchange the pronouns 'I' and 'you': one sees of the other what he cannot see of himself, and of which he can only get an idea from the signs that the other sends him. On the other hand, he knows of himself things that he cannot know of the other. Thus, there would never be a coincidence of the phenomenological field of presence: positional actants cannot exchange positions. Bakhtin writes:

> I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his gaze (his head, his face, and its expression), the world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. It is possible, upon assuming an appropriate position, to reduce this difference of horizons to a minimum, but in order to annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person. (Bakhtin 1989: 23)

This leads Bakhtin to distinguish two forms of subjectivity, a *phenomenal* and a *cognitive* one, the former characterized by a kind of extra-locality, a uniqueness of position / location concerning how the world unfolds, effectively making impossible the construction of a collective, supra-individual position, i.e., of an 'us/we.' Such a 'construction' is, in contrast, possible for the cognitive subject, whose lack of a specific location enables it to integrate different cognitive perspectives.

Assuming that the 'us/we' is always the integration of the I with the Other, with some Other, we can suggest, contravening Bakhtin's conclusions, that we are dealing not with the contrast between a (cognitive) possibility and a (phenomenal) impossibility but with two distinct and equally possible integration perspectives. To distinguish them, we can provisionally call them *Assimilative* and *Projective*. In the first, the Other is integrated, assimilated to the Ego since the latter perceives himself 'from the inside.' In the second, the Ego integrates with an Other, phenomenally perceived from the outside. In the former case, the Ego incorporates the Other, whereas, in the latter, the Ego incorporates himself in the Other, with the Other effectively incorporating the Ego.

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[13]   And in this prognostic attitude, we might note, what will be "seen" of the other, more than his individual identity, will be the characters that make him part of one or more collectives, his hypothetical "us/we".

Thus, we will have an 'us/we' insofar as others are equal to me, and an 'us/we' insofar as I am equal to others.

A third perspective to be taken into account in the processes of construction of the identity of the 'us/we,' on which Paolo Fabbri insists in the articles mentioned above, is the one that imposes a relational definition, since there is never a 'us/we' that is not defined, not only with respect to the 'I,' which it encompasses, but also in opposition to a 'you' or a 'them': the neighbor, with whom we are confronted, and the 'alien,' who, as Paolo states, is the one about whom we do not care.

As we already said, these pronouns do not merely indicate positional actants but are charged with a specific semantic depth, which Fabbri exemplifies by showing how they 'react' differently when approached to a verb such as 'to believe.' 'We believe' suggests a solid adherence to preached values; 'You believe' insinuates a certain degree of doubt regarding preached values, while 'They believe' signals their laughable unacceptability.

Both of these other collective subjects, you and them, do not stop, in their constant mutability, to send us signals about who we are and assign us an identity (as you or them) with which we have to deal. Everyone is always subject to an external gaze that assigns to him a collective identity before an individual one, in the predictive game Bakhtin spoke of, in establishing what someone can or cannot expect from *us*, thus reminding us that alterity is always relative. In the other's eyes, 'we' never cease to be Other; the outcome of the same cultural construction strategies, which place us beyond a border or threshold of identity by someone, of another 'us/we' that is also built around other *order-figures*.

To conclude, in an entirely provisional way, we could therefore begin to articulate the forms of construction of the discursive identity of 'us/we' according to three different perspectives, which I summarize as follows:

1) *Transient vs. Stable*. The first is the ever-changing outcome of the *collective assemblage of enunciation*. That which leads the Subject to place himself within a discursive flow and submit to its rhythm and related order-words, and in which the 'us/we' emerges as a temporary concretion in the territory of the 'one,' the 'they' of subjective neutralization or, in Heidegger's terms, of the discharge of all individual responsibility. The second appears instead to be founded, using Deleuze and Guattari's terms, on *order-figures*: order-words, images of order to which the Subject connects in a stable form and which constitute a kind of phenomenal collective body, common to those who adopt them, and through which the 'us/we' emerges as a 'positive' figure, through which one agrees to 'take charge,' actively, with reason, and perhaps even more, with passion.
An example of this collective body is what Paolo Fabbri calls *Identity Repertoires*, regarding the construction of the patriotic and sovereignist 'us/we.' Although these

are certainly not the only identity traits that plot, in the form of *order-figures*, the *collective assemblage of enunciation,* they continue to remind us who and how we should be. Another example is that of the *media acts*, which Deleuze and Guattari propose to integrate with the *speech acts*, through which the illocutions of the market and the associated must-appear circulate: thin, fit, integrated, happy, and so on. In this regard, and quoting the highly esteemed François Jullien, Paolo Fabbri reminds us of the risk of exchanging the *same* with the *identical*, the universality of ethical and political values with the globalized uniformity of economic and political consumption. Two possible horizons of the cultural production of the 'us/we' to which we are incessantly called to adhere.

2) *Projective vs. Assimilative*. All of the above cases seem to suggest that the 'us/we,' whether transitory or stable, are mostly projective, the outcome of the work of social conformity that pushes individuals to adhere to the 'right' position, to integrate into the positively valued group, moved either by the particular occasion or by the more sedimented and recurring *order-figures*. In any case, it would be an integration based on the desire to be first and foremost part of something visible and recognizable. A will exercised through the assumption and the further relaunch of the *order-figures*: discursive actions that contribute to giving a phenomenal body to the collective identities to which one adheres. The second perspective, the one we called *Assimilative*, is undoubtedly more complex since it is not based on the assumption and revival of a constituted and recognizable social body. On the contrary, in this perspective, each Other should be integrated with the Ego in its uniqueness to be united with its uniqueness, giving rise to a sort of partitive rather than integral 'us/we.' Therefore, not a *mass* 'us/we,' linked to order figures, but a project-based 'us/we,' in which each Other is integrated for its own 'uniqueness.'

3) *Active vs. Passive*. The above-mentioned *assimilative* 'us/we' is undoubtedly the most distinctly active form of self-integration into a collective identity, juxtaposing cases in which the Ego is captured in the flow of the *collective assemblage of enunciation* and brought to act projectively. However, these two perspectives are opposed by a third one, in which the 'us/we' is suffered in a completely passive way since it is assigned from the outside. Which hardly happens according to the projective or assimilative perspectives that one would have chosen.
It is in this context that we can place the 'forced' integrations of the 'us/we,' that are those determined by a suffered designation of otherness, which forces the excluded to recognize itself in a collective in which it would not necessarily want to be identified, and thus to reflect on what would make it equal to the others to which it is assimilated, frequently based on order figures imposed from the outside: the mark, the collective stigma, which generates a 'us/we' that we could call 'defensive.'[14]

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[14]  Regarding this issue see  my analysis of Joseph Losey's *The Lawless*, in Lancioni (2020).

This last suggestion serves to remind us that before being 'I,' we are in any case 'us,' at least from the others' point of view. This is because, at the same time, we are also 'you' and 'them,' not because the roles are symmetrical but, on the contrary, because the identities associated with them inevitably remain asymmetrical, whether stable or transitory.

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