*Collective beliefs and horizontal
interactions between groups: the case
of political parties*

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Abstract: Groups matter in our ordinary folk psychology because a part of our social interactions is done with collective entities. In our everyday life, we indeed sometimes ascribe mental states to social groups as a whole or to individuals as members of groups in order to understand and predict their behavior. The aim of this paper is to explore this aspect of social interactions by focusing on the concept of 'collective belief' in a non-summative sense and, more precisely, on collective belief of a specific kind of group: the political party. How can the concept of 'collective belief' help to understand the interactions which involve these kinds of collective entities? After providing an epistemic description of political parties, this paper focuses on the collective belief in a non-summative sense. As Gilbert says, a group believes that p, if its members are jointly committed to believe that p as a body. It is argued, with the help of an example from the political history of France, that this view can enable us to understand the interaction between political parties. More precisely, it can help clarify the way in which a political party uses the rational constraints on the party as a whole and/or the social and epistemic constraints on the behavior of the group's members in order to destabilize or weaken other political parties.

Introduction: Extension of folk psychology and of the realm of social interaction

The problem of collective belief is the object of some philosophical studies. They examine the possibility of attributing doxastic states to groups and the sense in which this attribution must be understood (Engel 1997; Meijers 2003; Quinton 1976; Gilbert 1987; Tuomela 2000; Wray 2001). Debates about these topics occurred in the more general context of elaborating a theory of collective intentionality (e.g., Gilbert 1992; Searle 1995). Philosophers have also debated the problem of the epistemic behavior of collective entities and of the aggregation procedure, i.e. the mechanisms for aggregating the group members' individual beliefs into corresponding collective beliefs endorsed by the group as the whole (List and Pettit 2002; List 2005; Pettit 2004, 2007; Tollefsen 2004). The aim of this paper is to use these considerations about the nature of collective beliefs and the epistemic behavior of collective entities in order to describe the nature of interactions between specific groups, namely political parties. Nevertheless its theoretical assertions are somewhat limited. Their explanatory power— shown by the application to a specific case— is linked to a specific multiparty system, namely the French political context. Questions about the generalization of their explanatory power remain open.

In order to understand our social life, it is necessary to extend our concepts of folk psychology and social interaction. Sometimes folk psychology (FP) is used to refer to a particular set of cognitive capacities which are clearly related. They include: the capacity to predict the behavior of humans and their mental states in a wide range of circumstances; the capacity to attribute mental states to humans; the capacity to explain and evaluate the behavior of humans and their mental states in terms of their possessing mental states (Ravenscroft 2010). FP is a cornerstone of everyday social interaction, even if humans are not explicitly aware of employing FP during the majority of their interpersonal interactions: they interpret persons as intentional agents who believe that *p*, want that *p*, etc. Moreover, these attributions are supposed to have an explanatory relevance about the agents' behavior and mental life.

Groups matter in our ordinary FP because a part of our social interactions is with collective entities. Social agents attribute intentional states to these collective entities, they also understand, predict, explain and evaluate (epistemically and pragmatically)

their behavior and their intentional states in terms of their possessing mental states. In their everyday life, social agents sometimes ascribe mental states to social groups as a whole or to individuals as members of groups (attribution which can differ, for the same individual, according to the context) in order to understand, predict and explain their behavior. For example, it is possible to ask what will be the position of a syndicate *as such* toward a given economic problem, or how will a certain individual react when he is perceived (and is aware of being so perceived) as a *member* of a given syndicate. A collective entity can, therefore, be the object of an attribution, and group membership can shape the content of an attribution of mental states to individuals.

This paper aims to explore this aspect of social interactions by focusing on the concept of collective belief in a non-summative sense and, more precisely, on the collective belief of a specific kind of group: political parties. The following question arises: how can the concept of collective belief help to understand the interactions which involve these kinds of collective entities? In other words, how can this concept help to elucidate the way in which firstly, a political party acts in horizontal relations with other political parties and, secondly, an individual or a political party acts in horizontal relations with an individual who belongs to another party and who is explicitly perceived as such?

Epistemic description of political parties

There are different kinds of groups. As Pettit says (2004, p. 175), we can distinguish among unorganized collections of people related in more or less arbitrary ways, groups of people who share a common feature that does not affect their behavior and groups of people who share a common feature that does affect their behavior, but without leading them to do anything in common. By contrast, a political party is what Pettit (2004, p. 176) calls a 'purposive group': in other terms, it is a collection of individuals who coordinate their actions around the pursuit of a common goal.

This purpose can be partly defined as epistemic. In other words, a party aims not only at modifying the social reality and, as we will see, the political judgments and decisions of other parties, but also at producing *true statements* about the social world. These statements are supposed to justify its actions. Therefore, a party formulates on

one side descriptive beliefs about political, economic, demographic, cultural, or social diagnoses of the situation, which include, among others, explanative beliefs about the causes of this situation, second-order beliefs about the reasons why another party judges that *p*, intends to do something, etc. On the other side, a party formulates a set of normative beliefs, which involves, among others: *prescriptive* beliefs about what should be done in order to solve issues that are defined as problems; *evaluative* beliefs (in the moral, pragmatic or epistemic senses) about the views of other parties and the socially diffused systems of reasons or arguments and, finally, *axiological beliefs* in a broader sense or value statements about what is good, fair, legitimate in general, that is to say, beliefs not only about what is the case, but also about what ought to be the case.

It is also necessary to distinguish the kind of beliefs of a party according to their importance or centrality in the set of beliefs of the party. This set of beliefs is hierarchically organized. Some beliefs (descriptive and normative), which can be called 'core beliefs', are constitutive properties of the party insofar as they contribute to define the party's identity. Therefore, the revision of these beliefs is very unlikely because it would weaken a part of the identity and the reason for being a given party. For example, the belief in class struggle is a constitutive property of the French Communist Party. By contrast, other beliefs can be called 'peripheral': they are open to revision and a party can easily adjust when they seem to be false or when it is not strategic to adopt them. For example, the position about taxation is, for the French communist party, more central than the position about legalization of drugs partly because a judgment about taxation follows more obviously than a judgment about legalization of drugs from the constitutive beliefs of the party (even if we can also draw conclusions from the core beliefs about the legalization of drugs). The content of these beliefs (descriptive and normative) and the kind of organization of the set of beliefs (their distinctive degree of openness to revision) can partly change over time. They are defining characteristics of the party, and they contribute to its identification.

Moreover, a party may try to have beliefs that are not held or formed in a manner that is entirely insensitive to evidence and consistency, that is to say to rational constraints. In other words, evidence and consistency constraints are supposed to have at least a minimal explanatory relevance in the emergence of a group's beliefs. Speaking of 'rational constraints', we do not mean here the aggregation procedure, that is to say the mechanisms for aggregating the group members' individual beliefs into corresponding

collective beliefs endorsed by the group as the whole (List 2005) but the epistemic behavior *of the group as such*, independently of the manner in which collective beliefs are formed. If this is correct, a political party can, at least in this sense, be described as an epistemic subject. What does this mean?

According to the definition of these terms provided by Philip Pettit (2004, p. 178), political parties are both *intentional* and *personal* subjects. First, they are intentional subjects over and beyond its members, displaying intentional states, such as beliefs, intentions, desires, hopes, etc. and performing actions that such states rationalize. Therefore, to be an intentional subject, a party must display a rational unity. We can say that there are two interlinked kinds of rational constraints, synchronic and diachronic: *synchronic* because a party will generally act in a manner that is rationalized by both its mental states – the core beliefs, in particular - and the evidence (in the social world) at its disposal. It is what Pettit (2007, p. 496) calls the 'attitude-to-evidence standards' which requires that the system's belief be responsive to evidence and the 'attitude-to-attitude' standards, which require that, even as they adjust under evidential inputs, its beliefs and desires must be coherent. For example, and from an epistemic point of view, the party must revise one's beliefs appropriately in the light of new evidence, it must respect inference rules within intuitively feasible limits, etc.; *diachronic* because past judgments of the group will constrain the judgment that the group ought to make in various new cases: it must be coherent with the past judgments if it wants to be able, as Pettit (2004, p. 177) says, to present itself as an effective and credible promoter of its purpose. Therefore, it must avoid automatic recourse to the revision of past commitments. In other terms, rational unity is a constraint that binds the attitudes of the collectivity at any time *and* across different times.

An observation must be added. Occasionally both constraints can be incompatible and the question of the centrality of belief is here important in order to know which judgment must be formed or revised. Partly because of both diachronic and synchronic constraints, the attitude-to-evidence standard is complex: beliefs and judgments [1] are underdetermined by data as well as by evidential relations. Longino (1990, pp. 41-43) is right in claiming that there is no unique or intrinsic relation between states of affairs in virtue of which they possess evidential status. What determines whether or not someone will take some fact, event and so forth as reason for a given belief is that person's evaluation of the evidential connection among states of affairs. Yet, I argue

that even when we know the background beliefs of a party that determine the evidential connection among states of affairs, it can be difficult to predict the party's position about a given problem. Let us take an example in order to illustrate this kind of selectivity of a party's inferences. During the events which took place in May 1968 in France, the French Communist Party tried to form a position which dealt selectively with evidence in order to adjust itself with its central beliefs and some strategic imperatives. As a matter of fact, the French Communist Party preferred denying the revolutionary dimension of the events rather than revising its most fundamental principle that designated the working class as the *only* revolutionary subject (Courtois and Lazar 1995).

Secondly, parties are personal subjects, because they can be held responsible for failures to unify their intentional states and actions in a rational way: they acknowledge intentional states and corresponding actions as their own. They are open to criticism in the event of not achieving unity. As Pettit (2007, p. 499) says, they are responsive at the meta-propositional level to rational requirements: they can form meta-propositional attitudes, for example deliberating whether to believe that *p*, asking whether certain propositions are really consistent, supported by the evidence, etc. For example, it is not absurd to reproach the French Communist Party for not having seen that the situation was in May 1968 potentially revolutionary. This critique consists in saying that the Party *should* have revised a part of its judgments and, as a consequence, as attributing to the party as a whole a meta-propositional capacity to deliberate whether to judge that *p*. For instance, we can think that, at the beginning of the event, the party should have concluded that the students could contribute to initiate a revolution. It is possible to infer from this that the party should have supported more clearly the social movements. This inference can be derived from the analysis of past judgments, the core beliefs of the party and the evidence at its disposal. The critique consists in claiming that all these elements should have been integrated in the collective doxastic deliberation and that it should have led to the conclusion that students can be a revolutionary subject. Yet, we must ask, in what sense can this kind of epistemic subject *have* beliefs?

Different kinds of collective belief

First, it is necessary to distinguish collective beliefs from *socialized* beliefs (Bouvier 2004). A big part of our beliefs are indeed individual but acquired through socialization and, therefore, often with others' help. We can apply to beliefs what Goldman (1999, p. 4) says about truth seeking: formation of such a belief is *directly* social when it depends on verbally requested information or consulted written texts; it is, by contrast, *indirectly* social when it depends on the social agent's activity which, albeit autonomous, exploits intellectual skills acquired from others.

There are different kinds of collective beliefs. Following Schmitt (1995, pp. 262-263), we distinguish among *common* beliefs, *coordinated* beliefs and *group beliefs*. There is a plurality of collective beliefs in this specific kind of social entity that is a political party. Each kind of belief has an important role in group action. The importance of the latter will be emphasized. First, common beliefs are shared individual beliefs. For example, members of the party must believe that they belong to the group, and that they are engaged in a joint action. Second, there are coordinated beliefs, which resulted from a task assigned to a member (or to a group of members) under a division of cognitive labor among the group's members. Certain members can indeed specialize to acquire information and are responsible for particular expectations about which others need have no beliefs. As Schmitt says, this kind of collective belief [2] enables groups to act in situations where a requirement of common or joint belief might prevent action.

Finally, what are group beliefs? What is to ascribe a certain belief to a group *as a whole*? According to Gilbert, what she calls the 'joint acceptance' model of group beliefs corresponds better than the summative account of group belief to our unexamined everyday ascriptions of beliefs to collective entities. A statement such as

> The Republican Party believes that each person is responsible for his or her own place in society

must refer to a phenomenon involving the Republican Party in a more than accidental way. It is not a necessary condition of a Republican Party's belief that each member of the party believe that each person is responsible for his or her own place in society, either that most group members believe that each person is responsible for his or her

own place in society, or that there be common knowledge within the group that most members believe this proposition. More positively, again following Gilbert, a group G believes that p '...if and only if the members of G are jointly committed to believe that p as a body. Moreover, members of G jointly accept that p if and only if it is common knowledge in G that the individual members of G have openly expressed a conditional commitment jointly to accept that p together with the other members of G' (Gilbert 1987, p. 195).

A question that arises: how can we understand this conditional *commitment*? According to Gilbert, the existence of a group view is held directly to generate a personal obligation for each member of the group. More precisely, I would say that the behavior of the individual parties to a collective belief is subject to a certain *socio-epistemic constraint*. Each of the individuals involved is personally obliged to act appropriately. As Gilbert says, '...once a group believes that p, then, *ceteris paribus*, group members are personally obliged not to deny that p or to say things that presuppose the denial of p in their ensuing interactions with each other' (Gilbert 1987, pp. 193-194). It must be added: with other individuals and especially, in the political context, with members of other groups. Such actions could also consist in publicly affirming p and saying things that presuppose that p when it is appropriate to do so. When one feels bound to speak against the group view, one must preface one's remark making it clear that one is speaking *for oneself alone*, and not for the group.

Therefore, this view of collective belief has several consequences about the kind of inference and prediction not only about the group as a whole but also about the behavior of the group's members that entitles the attribution of beliefs to a group. These inferences are simultaneously about the social and the epistemic behavior of the group as a whole and of the group's members. We will focus on the latter.

On one side, the inferences are about the (verbal and non-verbal) behavior of agents in particular social contexts when they speak as members of the group. On the other side, when Gilbert says that members are expected not 'to say things that presupposes the denial of p and '...to say things that presupposes that p when it is appropriate to do so' (Gilbert 1987, p. 195), Gilbert implies that the expected behavior involves some *inferential activity* of the members of the group. Indeed, agents must be able to draw some conclusions from the Group's belief in order to adjust these beliefs to new social

situations, for example when they are interviewed. The underdetermination mentioned above is here obvious. As it has been shown, even when we know what are the background beliefs of a party which determine the evidential connection between such a state of affairs and other states of affairs, it can be difficult to predict what will be the position of a party toward such a given problem. Because of the fact that a group's belief does not determine a unique position about such a question, there is always a risk that the inference drawn by the member in question would not be approved by the party.

It will be argued, in the next section, that this view can enable us to understand the horizontal interaction between political parties. More precisely, it can help to clarify the way in which a political party (or its representatives) uses the rational constraints on the party as a whole and/or the social and epistemic constraints on the behavior of the group's members in order to *destabilize* or *weaken* other political parties and/or its representatives.

Collective beliefs in a non-summative sense and horizontal interactions between groups

In which sense does the summative concept of groups' beliefs provide a better understanding of some aspects of political parties' interactions?

As will be shown, a political party can be epistemically and/or pragmatically justified in believing that p. Because of the fact that political parties partly need to determine their positions in relation to those of other parties, there is often an *internal interweaving* between epistemic and strategic considerations. Our concern about interactions between groups arises in this context. Statements or positions can emerge from strategic calculations. A group may be subject to strong external pressure from another group. Moreover, a political party can position itself in order to provoke counter movements; it can determine another party to form a collective view, thereby weakening or destabilizing it. This strategy is particularly obvious in election periods when parties try to impose their issues.

The destabilization can occur at two levels. Firstly, it can be *external*: a group can make another party adopt a collective position which may discredit it in the eyes of the electorate. For example, by showing that it is inconsistent with its central beliefs, its past judgements and/or the available evidence. Secondly, what is more interesting here, the destabilization can be simultaneously internal *and* external. In other words, it can consist in constraining another party to adopt a collective belief which is sure to create a conflict within the party because it contradicts the personal beliefs of many members of the party. Therefore, it can create tensions, contradictory declarations among the members of the party and contradiction between individual declarations and the official view of the party. These consequences can weaken not only the organization itself, but also the public image of the party. In this regard, issues that disrupt traditional party lines - which can be called 'transversal themes' - are really effective. Some examples of such transversal themes are, in the French political context, the legalization of prostitution, the legalization of drugs or surrogate motherhood. This does not amount to suggesting that these issues are necessarily promoted *in order to* destabilize other parties. Yet they have had this effect and their promoters are aware of these effects. These questions are sources of conflict between members of the same party, partly because they involve a potential contradiction between central beliefs of the party in question. They can illustrate both kinds (internal and external) of destabilization.

For example, themes such as cultural or identity insecurity through the defense of a certain conception of secularism have sometimes been brought back into discussion by a part of the right wing. These themes have been destabilizing factors for the French socialist party (Ferhat 2013). Why? Partly because of the epistemic requirements mentioned above. Firstly, these issues can indeed affect its diachronic coherence. Initially, secularism was a defining property for the identity of French socialism. Past decisions, for example against the private school in 1984, have opposed socialists to a considerable part of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, from 1989, with the headscarves affair, the fact that secularism was perceived as being in conflict with a religion of a socially disadvantaged minority and the fact that the supposed strict application of this principle may exclude from school young women has, at the beginning, created difficulties for the party in the formulation of a collective belief about secularism. The problem of secularism was now supposed to be linked to problems of integration and multiculturalism. Nevertheless, it has been observed by the

representatives of the right wing party that these difficulties were not coherent with the history and the past judgements of the Socialist party about such an issue. Secondly, these issues can also affect its synchronic coherence: these issues have indeed created a tension within the central (normative and descriptive) beliefs of the party. Which beliefs? On one side, the republican conception of secularism, the fight against what is often perceived as obscurantism, the affirmation of state authority. On the other side, the fight against stigmatization of a minority, the protection of an economically disadvantaged minority, the idea that cultural issues are less important than the social ones, the ideal of an universal admission of students in public school.

Thirdly, the party was criticized for his supposed evidential insensibility to social events (such as halal meat in the school canteen) which was conceived as evidence in favor of these so-called 'problems'. This supposed epistemic insensibility was sometimes perceived by their adversaries as denial. In philosophical terms, we could say that it was interpreted as a kind of collective wishful thinking or self-deception. [3]

At that time, it created internal tensions and different movements within the party, particularly a tension between followers of the so-called 'open laicity' (partly focused on the defense of the minorities) on one side and the so-called 'laicists' on the other side. This tension does not show that partisans or representatives of the same party do not share a belief in these central ideas, but rather that they *differently rank* these ideas or attach to them alternative values. The difference between ways of ranking is a potential source of difficulties in formulating a collective view. Therefore, it can be a good strategy to determine other parties to form a 'weak' group belief which can destabilize itself. Gilbert is right when she says that it is not a necessary condition of a group's belief that p that every single member of the group personally believes that p. But a strong disagreement within the group can prevent members from adopting a collective view and/or from fulfilling all their personal obligations.

It can be added that this kind of destabilization can also occur in face to face interactions because of the rational constraints of the representation of ideas in public. We can understand the way in which a representative of a political party or a journalist can use the social and epistemic constraints on the behavior of the group's members in order to destabilize or weaken its representatives. As we have shown, participants in collective beliefs are not required to actually believe in its content.

When it is not the case, they can, as Cohen (1992) says, *accept* the content in question. Accepting *p* is having or adopting a policy of positing or postulating that *p*, for example, including the proposition among one's premises for deciding what to think in a particular context whether or not one believes that *p*. Therefore, unlike belief, acceptance is a propositional attitude created by a decision. For example, during an interview, acceptance can be helpful for the representative for adjusting his answers to the collective belief. In a sense, we can speak of different levels of inference: he must infer a coherent answer independently of what he thinks - that is to say, independently of what he would infer based on his personal thoughts. The attempt of destabilization can consist in trying to obtain answers incompatible with what we know to be the personal (and strong) opinions of the representative in such a case. This is done in order to underline the contradiction between what the representative believes and what he accepts together with others. The strategy consists here in destabilizing the member in his role as a representative of the party and thereby the party.

Conclusion

If this analysis is correct, a party can be perceived as an epistemic subject. More generally, it shows that groups are significant units of analysis of the social world. Groups are normatively and explanatively relevant entities when we try to understand a considerable part of our social interactions. Our FP can, in this sense, include purposive collectivity and, more generally, all the collective entities which can be described as epistemic subjects. Hence, they can be epistemically criticized and destabilized.

The fact that political parties can be described in this way helps to understand why, as Rydgren (2005, 4) says, changing positions takes some time for a political party— at least in the French political context— partly because of the constraint of ideological commitment. Moreover, in order to create a successful mobilization, a party needs to be to a certain extent flexible or free from ideological commitments that are at odds with its strategic interests. The fact that established parties are more constrained by their political history and ideological commitment explains, again following Rydgren (2005, 163), why a new party has some initial strategic advantages in the electoral arena. Because they are core or constitutive collective beliefs, ideological commitments cannot

be automatically revised for instrumental reasons. Because such commitments lead, in specific circumstances, to contradictory assessments, they can be the Achilles heel of a party.

Endnotes

[1] A good question would be to ask if it is really possible to distinguish collective beliefs from collective *judgments*.

[2] We could ask in what sense are coordinated beliefs really *collective* beliefs? I cannot discuss this topic within the limits of this paper.

[3] About the concept of 'collective self-deception', see Deweese-Boyd 2012.

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