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## **The Articulation of Public Problems within a Communicative Figuration Approach**

### **Abstract**

This article proposes an analytical shift in the theorization of public problems, from the standard (institutional) constructionist view which has informed the tradition of conceptualising social problems since Spector and Kitsuse's classic work, to a communicative constructionist view, stemming from the mediatization paradigm. The rationale behind this shift is based on the conceptualization of the relation between various types of actors as claim makers and the logic of visibility governing processes of publicization in a media ecology marked by accelerated development. If, in the new communication-landscape, claim-making activities can turn any new-media user into a potential constructor of public problems, then we need to explain how developments in media technology reconfigure the practices of claim-making. In our understanding, such reconfigurations are just a particular case of the socio-cultural processes of transformation which are the focus of the mediatization paradigm.

On the other hand, in a Foucaultian tradition, a shift from problems to problematizations is required in order to account for the processual dynamic through which certain phenomena are analysed under specific circumstances and at certain times, while others are ignored. This shift leads to an understanding of communicative figurations as a meta-theoretical framework for the construction of public problems, accounting for the interdependencies between articulations of public problems and the dynamics of the public sphere.

With this aim in view, we first identify and evaluate the theoretical directions that are symptomatic for the transition from social problems to public ones and from problems to problematizations. In the second part, we present the heuristic potential of the concept of communicative figurations for our topic and articulate some methodological implications for a research agenda.

**Keywords:** public problem, communicative figurations, mediatization, communicative constructionism, problematization

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## Introduction

In Romania, the 2019 European Parliament Elections occasioned a reiteration of a well-known media spectacle in the Romanian public sphere, labelled by the media as “the diaspora’s vote”. Images of the Romanians queuing in London, Brussels, Paris, Berlin, Rome, but also in smaller European cities such as Leicester, Stuttgart, Girona, or Padova, to vote in the elections and the referendum against corruption organized simultaneously, traced the geography of contemporary Romanian diaspora. These images, feeding from new media to public televisions and back, from live mobile phone broadcast on Facebook to professional TV broadcast, and the public discussion generated along with their circulation, equally traced a communicative geography. In this communicative dimension the rage of diasporic citizens who were running the risk of not being able to cast their ballot before the closing of the polling location was doubled by the solidarity of those remaining in the homeland. The public authorities presented various justifications for this situation. Under the pressure of the moment, claims were strongly made and fiercely contested, and political instrumentalizations and preoccupation for democratic life mingled beyond clear distinction.

The stream of images on Facebook, accounting for the experience of diasporic citizens, afforded journalists new interpellation strategies for public authorities. At the same time, by filming and broadcasting queues, the diasporic citizens emerged as a collective actor in a play of live political contestation amplified by traditional media but also by the diasporic citizens themselves through massive sharing in new media. Nonetheless this spectacle has run several times in the last decade: the Romanian elections in 2009 and 2014 generated the same situation. A law regulating postal vote, created to address mainly those abroad, couldn’t be employed in these particular elections due to various judicial reasons, and this limitation reignited older debates about criteria of belonging to the electoral body, and about citizenship. Thus, the diaspora’s inability to vote is not merely a problem, but rather a recurrent problematization in electoral contexts. The spectacular element of queuing to vote is a visual container condensing long-term demographic processes in live broadcasted images, linking specific events with multiple argumentative exchanges about residence, citizenship and right to vote and finally interweaving national bodies and transnational fields in the context of massive emigration to EU.

This example serves as an illustration of how public problems are constructed in the dynamics of public communication. Visibility becomes both a resource and a constraint for various actors; through patterns of publicization diaspora’s vote is granted the statute of a public problem. The new media landscape shapes both actors and their actions: citizens living abroad are assigned the diasporic statute by the media, which they reconfirm by using it strategically (Beciu & Lazăr, 2015), in a circular flow between traditional and new media, between collective actors who are the object of power relations in electoral circumstances (Beciu & al., 2018) but who also claim their own agency and heterogeneity through mediated action.

In this article we start from a preliminary understanding of the public problem as “a process of symbolic negotiation of the definitions and interpretations of socially problematic situations and phenomena which are considered to necessitate collective action and public policies” (Beciu & al., 2018, p. 13). From this starting point, several questions emerge: how do various social issues turn into public problems? What type of power and visibility are required to cover the distance between problem claiming and problem recognition? And what is the role of the new communication technologies, with their democratic promise, in cover-

ing this distance? How can we conceptualize public problems flexibly enough to accommodate the interrelation between the accelerated rhythm of developments in new media, and emerging socio-cultural practices in society? And, ultimately, are we to understand the concept of public problem as implicitly evaluative, producing symbolic hierarchies between various social issues, or as simply descriptive? In this respect, what is the relation between public problem understood as a claim-making strategy (various actors claiming that we need to recognise and address a problem – i.e. a category of practice) and public problem as an analytical category, with a consistent theoretical history? While the last track needs a separate discussion, this article will address the first questions. To this end, three main approaches on public problems are selected and discussed in the first section, which are symptomatic for the transition from social issues to public problems and from problems to problematizations. The second section proposes the premises of an analytical framework, relying on the heuristic potential of the concept of communicative figurations and articulating some implications for a research agenda.

## 1. Theoretical approaches on public problems

### 1.1. Public problems within the paradigm of symbolic interactionism

The literature on public problems stems from the symbolic interactionist tradition, continuing the Chicago School approach, and more specifically W. Thomas and D. Thomas' conceptualization of the *definition of situations*. Employing the concept of *social problems*, the paradigmatic work is the classic *Constructing social problems* by Spector and Kitsuse (1977/2001). It is Joseph Gusfield who substitutes *social problems* for *public problems* in his 1981/1984 work, proposing the public dimension as a key concept in his theoretical model. Relying heavily on Kenneth Burke's rhetorical criticism and on Goffman's dramaturgy, he is interested in the construction of a form of *public consciousness* through ritual, ceremonial and the dramatic qualities of public actions. Within the paradigm of symbolic interactionism, he discusses about the structure of a public problem (a cognitive and a moral dimension) and the types of responsibilities that such a problem creates: "The structure of public problems is then an arena of conflict in which a set of groups and institutions, often including governmental agencies, compete and struggle over ownership and disownership, the acceptance of causal theories, and the fixation of responsibility" (Gusfield, 1981, p. 15). The problem challenges the symbolic order and can be controlled by attributing causes, establishing responsibilities, etc. Gusfield distinguishes between ownership, causal responsibility and political responsibility. "Owners" can be groups or institutions that have symbolic power over various problems, at different moments in time. Disowning public problems refers to the avoidance of the obligation to get involved in the process of creating or solving a problem. Causal responsibility refers to facts (what causes a problem), while political responsibility relates to public policies (Gusfield, 1981, p. 14). Ownership of public problems is not a status quo external to the debate, but a position that is permanently assessed, reconfirmed or contested by various actors in the public space, thus constituting itself as a strategy of legitimization and acceptability transfer from symbolic prestige to public position and the other way around.

More recently, Miller (2018) reflects upon the constructionist approach to public problems, insisting on Spector and Kitsuse's book, *Constructing Social Problems*. In his opinion, stud-

ies of claim-making activities need to embrace interpretive frameworks that are more encompassing than those proposed by Spector and Kitsuse. An expanding vision should consider how social problems claim-making is organized and accomplished within diverse groups and activities in contemporary societies (Miller, 2018, p. 87). The study of social problems should insist on claim-making activities as culturally constructed. Secondly, following in Gusfield's footsteps, Miller considers Burke's depiction of drama as very useful in showing how social problems claims are narratively organized, based on the pentad consisting of *agents* using their *agency* in *acting* within *scenes* to pursue discernible *purposes* (Burke, 1945 [1969]). In other words, Burke's analysis is a way of seeing social problem construction as a rhetorical instrument, closely connected to ownership.

Overall, Miller suggests that one should rethink concepts such as social problems ownership, games and work, "in a world where every blogger or person with a YouTube or Facebook account is a potential constructor of social problems" (2018, p. 94), leaving open the issue of how media technologies reshape the relations between actors, agencies and scenes – in Burkean terminology – and to what consequence for the articulation of public problems.

### 1.2. The public problem in the perspective of French pragmatic sociology

The constructionist premises of the American tradition are nuanced in the model articulated by representatives of the French pragmatic sociology. In their theories on the public sphere they introduce the concepts of social theory on the public sphere (H. Arendt, J. Habermas). Pragmatic sociology looks to understand the factors that lead to the constitution of categories of public action.

Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) discuss the normative principles that underlie the competence that actors employ in critical moments (*moments critiques*) on a public scene. When actors have disputes on the public scene, they can reach consensus by establishing equivalence (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 361), by which the authors mean a form of generality external to actors, which involves giving up singularity and converging towards a form of generality. This search for generality supposes a critical competence in actors involved in dispute. The collective conventions of equivalence build a regime of justification, which can be analysed as a grammar of orders of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 359), such as the civic order, whose mode of evaluation is collective interest (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 368).

Boltanski recognizes, with pragmatic sociologists, that uncertainty can threaten reality. But, unlike them, he does not believe that uncertainty can be reduced by actors, on the basis of a common sense that is derived from shared knowledge or meaning. In Boltanski's view, people cannot reach agreement even when they share the same context, because they are not in the same situation (Boltanski, 2011, pp. 59-60). On the contrary, in social life there is "radical uncertainty about the whatness of what is [ce qu'il en est de ce qui est]" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 55), which creates unease. This stance

"involves abandoning the idea of an implicit agreement, which would somehow be immanent in the functioning of social life, to put *dispute*, and, with it, the divergence of points of view, interpretations and usages at the heart of social bonds, so as to return from this position to the issue of agreement, to examine its problematic, fragile and possibly exceptional character." (Boltanski, 2011, p. 61)

By putting dispute and divergence at the basis of social life, Boltanski places himself against standard social constructionism. However, he does acknowledge the agency of peo-

ple and institutions they create in the construction of social reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 25).

It is in this line of pragmatic sociology that Cefaï et al. later develop a broader project of a sociology of valuation and evaluation, which aims to investigate how people assign meaning to their actions and how they evaluate situations (Cefaï et al., 2015, p. 2). The moral operation of valuation is understood as an objective act arising from the agents' habitus and ethos. The idea stems from Jon Dewey's definition of what constitutes a problematic situation and how public problems arise, as well as the experience of public problems through the moral operation of valuation. By attempting to build an explanatory framework of how people define and evaluate situations and experience values, the sociology of valuation and evaluation is essentially interested in norms that guide interaction between actors, actors' agency and the values that direct their actions.

How are public problems different from social problems? Not all social problems become public problems. They may require action from the state or other institutions that address the public good, but they do not become public unless they are configured dramatically, rhetorically and narratively, as Gusfield (1984) describes. So the problem becomes public when it generates discourses and when it generates practices. "The public problem is constructed and stabilized, thematized and interpreted in the frameworks or the frames of relevance that are taking place in a horizon of interactions and interlocutions" (Cefaï, 1996, p. 47, our translation). For instance, the problem of migration in Romania is a society theme that populates the imaginary of Romanians, a theme on the media and political agenda, but also a public problem that has generated engagement and public policies (Beciu et al., 2018, p. 11; see also Beciu et al., 2017, for a discussion on forms of agency, sources of power and (re)positionings of the media in a transnational field of social relations, in the context of circular migration).

However, "the public problem is not just a projection of social representations, accessible as discursive contents" (Cefaï, 2013a, our translation). In fact, the public problem requires validation by actors. This activates various criteria (moral, political, etc.), which are themselves debated and which, eventually, lead to a self-reflection of society. The problem becomes public when it constitutes a public. Since the public itself does not exist outside publicization ("The idea of 'publicization' implies that 'the public' is not a given in itself, existing before or outside the performances that concern it" – Cefaï & Pasquier, 2003, p. 14, our translation), publicization is a collective action (Cefaï & Pasquier, 2003, p. 16), by various actors who claim what is relevant for a certain community in terms of public action towards the common good.

Public problems are constituted through discourse and practical procedures/performance, on a public arena. Just like the public problem, the public arena does not exist beforehand. It is built by means of the tensions and conflicts that accompany the constitution of the public problem (Cefaï, 2013a). Gusfield (1981) sees it as a place of debate, controversy, expertise, and deliberation. In the public arena a series of practical acts take place: mobilization of actors, participation, interpretations, disputes, negotiation, deliberation, decision, etc. (Cefaï, 1996, p. 57). But not all conflictual situations become public problems, because public attention is limited. Public problems gain prominence through operations of selection and argumentation that make a specific conflictual situation general and legitimate. The publicization of the public problem on a public arena involves a valuation of potential problematic situations (Cefaï, 2013b, p. 3). In this respect, collective action can be understood as this process of finding the general aspect and the legitimacy of public problems.