

The body and its surplus

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Petar Bojanić

Social Gestures
as the Condition of Efficiency
and (Existence) of Social Acts

My intention is to argue, drawing on entirely marginal suggestions of several authors who belong to different genres of philosophy and sociology, that there are indeed acts that are justifiably called “social gestures”. Their role in the construction of a group or institution may be significant. Not only would they not be a mere parasite or addition to social acts (which usually refers to linguistic acts), but they would directly participate in the construction of social acts and enable their efficient conduct. In addition, the role of social gestures, whose main characteristics are corporeality, visibility, and vivacity (“living gesture” is Aby Warburg’s expression¹), could be a kind of *a priori* to the existence of the social group as such.

There are only a few places in which Adolf Reinach writes about the form of appearance of our inner acts [*unsere innere Akte*]. And when thematizing social acts, he mentions the possibility that they can be known in ways other than through language or words. Namely, the form of appearance [*Erscheinungsform*], necessary to be certain of the existence of an act, is the condition for people to be able to connect with one another. But this form seems to come in different forms itself.

Social acts are those that do not rest in themselves [*die nicht in sich selbst ruhen*]. The essential assumption for social acts is (the existence of) another subject, to whom they wish to reveal themselves. This person to whom they are directed ought to acquire familiarity in this way. However, direct connection among people is not possible; what is necessary are expressions: thus, social acts must find an expression to reveal themselves to another. They have, to that end, various forms at their

¹ «Die lebhafteste Geste: die Antike hat’s erlaubt» (E. Gombrich, *Abby Warburg: eine intellektuelle Biographie*, Europäische VA, Hamburg 2006, p. 158).

disposal: words, gestures, (etc.) [*Worte, Gesten (usw.)*]. The addressee is thus clearly necessary for social acts, and therefore also the form of appearance [*Erscheinungsform*] of such acts. Their directedness to the addressee [*die Richtung auf den Adressaten*] is the very heart of these acts, this is their soul. Second, their form of appearance is not in their essence, but is rather their body [*die Erscheinungsform, liegt nicht in ihren Wesen und ist ihr Leib*]. It exists merely because we humans are incapable of knowing each other's inner acts other than through forms of appearance [*dass wir unsere inneren Akte nur an ihren Erscheinungsformen erkennen können*]².

Two years later we find two further similar passages in Chapter 3, "The Social Acts", of *The Apriori Foundations of the Civil Law*:

The act of deciding is an internal act. It can be performed [*vollzogen*] without being announced [*verlautbart*] or needing to be announced. Of course the decision can express itself in facial expressions and gestures [*Mienen oder Gesten ausdrücken*]. I can express it [*kundgeben*], communicate it to others if I want. But this is not necessary for the act as such. It can unfold entirely within, it can rest in itself and not receive an expression in any sense [*er kann beruhigt in sich selbst bleiben, ohne in irgendeinem Sinne eine Äusserung zu erfahren*]. One sees right away that it is otherwise with certain other spontaneous acts. Commanding or requesting, for instance, clearly cannot be performed entirely within³.

And then a few pages later:

But the social acts have an inner and an outer side, as if were a soul and a body. The body of social acts can widely vary while the soul remains the same. A command can be expressed in mien, gestures, words [*Mienen, in Gesten, in Worten in Erscheinung treten*]. One should not confuse the utterance [*Äusserung*] of social acts with the involuntary way in which all kinds of inner experience, such as shame, anger, or love can be externally reflected. This utterance is rather completely subject to our voluntariness and can be chosen with the greatest deliberation and circumspection, according to the ability of the addressee to understand it⁴.

² The short 1911 text (really a reconstruction of Reinach's lecture notes from Göttingen) was only published for the first time as part of his collected works. A. Reinach, *Nichtsoziale und soziale Akte*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 1, K. Schumann, B. Smith (eds.), Philosophia Verlag, München 1989, p. 357. It has not been translated into any other language except Italian, thanks to Olimpia G. Loddo, who translated it, and Francesca De Vecchi who edited and published a few of his texts recently. A. Reinach, *Atti non-sociali e atti sociali*, in F. De Vecchi (ed.), *Eidetica del diritto e ontologia sociale: il realismo di Adolf Reinach*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2012, pp. 200-203.

³ A. Reinach, *Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürgerlichen Rechtes*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 1, cit., pp. 158-159 (transl. by J.F. Crosby, *The apriori foundations of the civil law*, in «Atheia», 3 (1983), pp. xxxii-142, p. 18).

⁴ A. Reinach, *The apriori foundations of the civil law*, cit., p. 20. The concluding lines of this passage in German are as follows: «Man darf die Äußerung sozialer Akte nicht verwechseln

These fragments fit together and complement each other very well (even if Reinach never makes a precise distinction between acts, social acts, and negative social acts), and they could be lucidly interpreted if we introduce a new repertoire of actions that actually precede acts, but which also hold them together and allows their existence and efficiency. Let us look at how Reinach's theater of functions and naming of these acts plays out. It is immediately clear that the form of appearance or "body" of the social act has been degraded in relation to experience, to the interior or the "directedness [*Richtung*] towards the other" of the social act. The soul of the social act always has two moments: the experience, which is inner, and direction, or path of transmission of the experience to the addressee. In that sense, the other or addressee is for Reinach also in the background, and their answer, also realized in the "form of appearance", does not determine the success of the social act⁵. Since for Reinach the ideal acting would be telepathic (without any exterior instruments or "material" connections between the actors), and since an ideally constructed community would be one *a priori* established by a common inner experience (we see here hints of "collective intentionality") making it unified prior to any factual unity, the significance of the manifestation and the "visibility of acts" and explicit connections between actors is entirely secondary. Two paradoxical consequences follow from here: the first is the construction of the "interior" or the "myth of the interior", a fantasy about the existence of "acts" or experiences that supposedly exist and supposedly arrive at the addressee, but would never have to become expressed or manifest or indeed even concern those others; and second, the very vague description of the form of appearance essential for a coherent transfer of an individual's inner experiences to others. Reinach thinks that there are some kind of, let us provisionally call them "personal acts", which lie completely still within the interior of a person and do not concern others in the least. An example he provides is the "decision". Further, the implicit assumption would be that such acts (among which certainly making a "decision") can thus be completely hidden from others. However, the very existence of such

mit der unwillkürlichen Weise, in der allerlei innere Erlebnisse, Scham oder Zorn oder Liebe, sich nach außen hin spiegeln können. Sie ist vielmehr durchaus willkürlicher Natur und kann, je nach den Verständnissfähigkeiten des Adressaten, mit größter Überlegung und Umsicht ausgewählt werden» (A Reinach, *Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürgerlichen Rechtes*, cit., p. 160).

⁵ In contrast to Reinach, Husserl estimates that the social act is realized only at the arrival of the other's response. The social act is social only if there is a reciprocal response to the initial address. Cfr. P. Bojanić, *Che cos'è un atto d'impegno? Husserl e Reinach sul "soggetto di livello superiore"; (noi) e gli atti (non) sociali*, in «Teoria», 31 (2019) n. 1, pp. 217-230.

acts would then imply a domain of the interior or some kind of an “individual’s inner”, which would be *a priori* antisocial or negatively social, and can never or under any circumstances be manifested. If our inner acts [*unsere innere Akte*], as he calls them – which include the experience of “shame”, “wrath”, or “love” – are unjustifiably stripped (by Reinach) of their status as “social acts”, Reinach thinks that they would have to be included in a new class of “social gestures”. All three of these protocols imply the existence of some other or others, even depend on those others, and are secretly directed at them, although the protocols in no way obligate these other persons to either reciprocate or respond. Thus, they do not belong to the class of social acts, but are still more than mere “inner gestures” or “inner (social) gestures”, and allow for the existence of social gestures or social acts without possibility of themselves being manifested as such. The fact that wrath, shame, or love can be experienced without being externalized or manifested to others because they do not necessarily bind us to those others when they are manifested, does not abolish their capacity to represent social value or socially integrate a group. Not only that: perhaps only when I manifest my wrath will the necessary conditions be met for my ensuing command to be uttered thus fulfilling its function of social act. The function of a social gesture would thus be to prepare and ensure the appearance of social acts.

Let us now attempt, in a few preliminary steps, to combine Reinach’s formulations with some complementary, kindred ideas and thus potentially reconstruct the relation between social acts and social gestures (or acts and gestures more broadly). To begin with, let us assume that in one way or another, inner life or inner experience concerns others and refers to others (those external), and that the distinction between inner and outer is weak, albeit at the origin of the gestural protocol. Let us also assume that experiences or “inner” could in one way or another be expressed or exposed, which is to say that nothing can remain hidden such that it is impossible to be revealed.

Form of Appearance [Erscheinungsform]

In this regard, Reinach privileges the linguistic expression. Indeed, the social act is necessarily a linguistic act. Regardless of the fact that not all linguistic acts are necessarily social, Reinach (who is not alone on this point in the histories of social ontology and social epistemology) defines social acts primarily normatively. Social acts are actions that create connections

between actors that can be broken or modified only through a new mutual agreement. By contrast, gestures imply non-normativity since they would appear not to be obligatory for others⁶. If I laugh, another may not necessarily, even if something is truly funny and everyone else in the group is laughing; if I am toasting something, someone else does not have to respond to my toast; if I produce a mocking gesture, there is no obligation for the addressee of the gesture to return in kind. Similarly, my outstretched hand obligates no one to respond to my gesture by shaking it. Gestures ought to be filled with meaning, but not necessarily be repeated, followed, or remembered. In several places, Reinach mentions various forms of appearance: *Worte*, *Geste*, *usw.* (although we do not know what is included in *usw.* or *etc.*). *Mienen* is a complicated word that functions well in German, English, and French, referring to facial expressions (grimaces)⁷, while *Geste* is generally ascribed to hands and less often to body parts or the whole body). *Gebärde* and *Geste* (the former is difficult to translate, but would possibly be gesticulation, a movement more sudden and aggressive than mere gesture, and would not necessarily refer to hand motions)⁸.

In 1911, Reinach writes the following:

The form of appearance [*Erscheinungsform*] exists only because the way things stand among us humans is that we can only know our inner acts through their forms of appearance [*dass wir unsere inneren Akte nur an ihren Erscheinungsformen erkennen können*].

But in *Introduction to Philosophy* from 1913, we encounter a new formulation and a new question:

⁶ «[...] la pensée “antinormative” a toujours eu pour la gestualité» (J. Kristeva, *Le geste, pratique ou communication?*, in «Langages», 3 (1968), n. 10, pp. 48-64, p. 48). For this reason gestures are usually banal or irrelevant [*gesto banale, gesto irrillevante*] (cfr. O. Loddo, *Manifestare gli atti sociali. Canali della giuridicità dopo Reinach*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2020, p. 72).

⁷ In Italian this word is rendered as “espressioni del volto” (A. Reinach, *I fondamenti a priori del diritto civile*, Giuffrè, Milano 1990, pp. 27, 30). The designation *la mine* is perhaps best constructed by Montaigne: «signes qu’un muet fait pour faire comprendre ce qu’il ne peut pas dire» (M. de Montaigne, *Essais*, Vol. I, PUF, Paris 2004, p. 169).

⁸ Perhaps the difference between these two words can be elaborated better. However, the definition for *Geste* indicates that it is “either a spontaneous or intentional” gesture (primarily with the hands or head) conveying an inner state, and can either accompany or replace words, or an action that communicates something indirectly. *Gebärde*, on the other hand, is primarily with hands and arms and *intended* to convey a message, though the secondary definition indicates it can also be a behavior or demeanor to indicate something specific. *Gebärde* is more direct and intentional, while *Geste* could be involuntary and simply indicative of inner feelings or attitudes that a person may not have intended to communicate, yet are nonetheless apparent.

We do not (in this way) participate in another's experience [*Fremderlebnis*]. The only thing that can be noted from another's experience are the gestures [*den Gesten*]: I understand another's experiences first in the gesticulations [*zuerst erfasse ich in den Gebärde des Anderen seine Erlebnisse*]. What then compels one to say that they only notice their own acts [*Was drängt dann dazu zu sagen, ich kann nur meine eigenen Akte wahrnehmen*]⁹?

The last question seems to come out of nowhere; sloppily constructed, it brings with it an odd dilemma. Regardless of this throwing around of the pronouns ("we", "our", "I"), what is clear is that forms of appearance, such as *Geste* and *Gebärde* are opposed to *Akte*, in this case inner acts [*innere Akte*]. Inner acts can only be known if they are manifested – I can only know what I have in me if I manifest it in some way¹⁰. Three years later, Reinach wonders about the possibility that one can note (but probably not really know) only one's own inner acts. My power to notice my own decision or wrath or shame is not only trivial, but also does not abolish the capacity of another to also notice them in my gestures or movements that I manifest either simultaneously or occasionally. This new perspective muddies Reinach's order of concepts: the "soul of act" suddenly appears not only in words as the decisive form of appearance, but also in gestures.

The expression of promise is not exhausted in words. The soul of the promise can in different bodies be manifested through gesture, facial expression, etc.¹¹.

How can we understand this sudden consolidation of body (form of appearance) and soul of an act in the gesture? What does it mean that the soul of the act is manifested or expressed in the gesture? Is this a consequence of Reinach's reading of Bergson? Be that as it may, the gesture has a soul if and only if it can construct a group by holding (temporarily) multiple bodies in one location. All of a sudden, this becomes the condition of production and efficiency of social gestures.

⁹ A. Reinach, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Band I, K. Schumann, B. Smith (eds.), Philosophia Verlag, München 1989, p. 391.

¹⁰ «Only in the gestures of others do I see how I appear in this case [*Ich weiß nur aus anderer Leute Gebärden, wie ich in dem Falle auch aussehe*]: only their wrathful looks indicate the ugliness of my affect» (A. Reinach, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, cit., p. 390).

¹¹ «[Der] Ausdruck des Versprechens erschöpft sich nicht in Worten. Auch in Gesten, Mienen etc. kann [die] Seele des Versprechens sich in verschiedenen Leibern kundgeben» (A. Reinach, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, cit., pp. 449-450).

What Is a Gesture? On the Corporeal or Material of a Gesture

There is a famous definition of a gesture from the twelfth century by Hugh of St. Victor, which could provide us a bridge from the complex meaning the word had in Cicero, to the present. In Chapter 12 of *De institutione novitarium*, dedicated to gestures¹², he writes:

Gestus est motus et figuratio membrorum corporis, ad omnem agendi et habendi modum.

I would like to follow Clemens Grün's insight of a potential double translation of this sentence¹³. «A gesture is a motion and figure of body parts, such that they are adapted to any mode of acting or being»; or otherwise: «a gesture is a motion and figure of body parts befitting the mode of any acting and being». When the body emits a gesture, it is already in the figure that allows for that gesture, that is, the body is figured to manifest it. The gesture, then, ensures its own manifestation by figuring the body, how it is held, and how it carries out or “bears” the gesture. It would appear that the gesture is an agent that produces its own manifestation or action, adapting the body to itself; while the body ought to “carry” it out, to carry itself specifically to be able to manifest that gesture. Although written down at the heart of Scholastic thinking, the definition releases us brilliantly from Scholasticism, a hefty heritage according to which God usually acts or produces his acts through human gestures [*gesta*]. It contains a novelty that returns us to Cicero and the first original uses of this word. Gesture as agent (as alternative name for desire; in many Medieval protocols, the words “gesture” and “desire” are synonymous) represents an introduction into a “relative autonomy of human action”, and thus a completely new situation wherein the human is capable of acting alone and manifest their own acts through gestures [*gestus*]¹⁴. Moreover, the word “gesture” does not limit itself to a motion of the hand, but rather the entire body is engaged in its production, liberating it as a

¹² H. de S. Victore, *De institutione novitarium*, in J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 176, J.-P. Migne, Paris 1854, p. 935.

¹³ Cfr. *gestus, gesta, gesticulatio – Gesten und ihre Klassifizierung anhand von Hugo von St. Victor's – De institutione novitarium, Seminararbeit*, 2001, Ebook, p. 23. Cfr. J.-C. Schmitt, “*Gestus*” – “*Gesticulatio*”. *Contribution à l'étude du vocabulaire latin médiéval des gestes*, in *La lexicographie du latin médiéval et ses rapports avec les recherches actuelles sur la civilisation du Moyen Âge. Colloque international du CNRS 589*, CNRS, Paris 1981, pp. 377-390, pp. 383-385.

¹⁴ The distinction between *gesta* and *gestus* belongs to Jean-Claude Schmitt (cfr. J.-C. Schmitt, *La morale des gestes*, in «*Communications*», 46 (1987), pp. 31-47, pp. 35-36).

whole to open and present in space, as both a physical and social fact¹⁵. Perhaps, however, it is possible to closer still reconstruct the consequences of Hugh of St. Victor's determination of the gesture, in an even more systematic way, or at least in a way that would ensure a potential future epistemology of the gestural and its clear position in the structure of actions that ultimately constitute a group and its joint acting. Several moments can be presented without hesitation: a) a gesture produces the body or a body is bodily only if it produces gestures that in turn, paradoxically both confirm and surpass the body as such. *Gestation* is pregnancy, an interior state or interval of time from conception to (giving) birth. *Gestation* is also the maturing of an idea or a project or *affection anima*¹⁶, becoming a mother or creator, which has as its result (or expression, since the result is an expression) what we call a gesture or gestures. b) The gesture carries or brings [*gerere*] an expression of the former and what originally forms the body itself, while simultaneously being cultivated in the body and in the interior from where it is then manifested¹⁷. c) a gesture designates [*disegno*; drawing or sketch] the development of the concept or conception, first by hand and then in an effort of the whole body. Through such a gesture (first of the hand, and then the rest of the body), the body is placed in a social space¹⁸. d) The appearance of tools attached to the hand – a pen, brush, or conductor's baton – leads us swiftly

¹⁵ The reconstruction of the history of gestures by the archeologist Salomon Reinach is evidently guided by Hugh of St. Victor's definition. «Le geste est un mouvement du corps ou d'un membre du corps qui exprime une pensée ou une émotion». Reinach pays particular attention to the relation between gesture, attitude, and movement (S. Reinach, *L'histoire des gestes*, in «Revue Archéologique», 20 (1924), pp. 64-79, p. 64). This formulation, a variation on Cicero, in which gesture «refers to a movement of the body or of any part of it that is expressive of thought or feeling» today stands in myriad dictionaries (cfr. A. Kendon, *Gesture*, in «Annual Review of Anthropology», 26 (1997), pp. 109-128, p. 109).

¹⁶ In *Idee zu einer Mimik* (letter 6) Johann Jakob Engel thematizes expressive gestures which in German resemble what Cicero designates with the word gesture [*gestus*]: «Gestus nur von den äussern Zeichen des Gemuthszustandes, der affectionum animi, erklärt» (J.J. Engel, *Idee zu einer Mimik*, August Mylius, Berlin 1785, p. 60). *Significatio* Engel designates using the word *Ausdruck* and is different to *demonstratio*, a protocol reserved for painting.

¹⁷ This protocol is usually tied to a famous lecture by Aby Warburg in February 1927: «Ur-worte leidenschaftlicher Gebärdensprache» [Ur-Words of the Affective Language of Gestures]. Gestures are not mere movements expressive of emotions in man or animal, originally having a stimulus-reaction model (Darwin). The function of gesturs is symbolic. They are expressions of inner affect (pre-shaped forms, original forms, primordial words). «Original significant visual elements as gestures are presented in concepts and in cultural artefacts» (cfr. I. Woldt, *Ur-Words of the Affective Language of Gestures: The Hermeneutics of Body Movement in Aby Warburg*, in «Interfaces», 40 (2018), pp. 133-157).

¹⁸ Cfr. Ch. «Lo spazio sociale», in A. Leroi-Gourhan, *Il gesto e la parola*, Vol. 2, Einaudi, Torino 1977 (1964), pp. 374-378.

to the thematization of the body itself as an instrument, one constituted by gestures in order to then be manifested by it¹⁹. e) Marcel Mauss designates the “ensemble of techniques of the body” [*l'ensemble des techniques du corps*] as humanity's most natural instrument and prior to the “techniques of instruments” [*les techniques à instruments*]²⁰. Even though Mauss alternates in the use of acts and gestures, insufficiently differentiating between them, it is clear that “techniques of the body” or patterns of distribution of bodies in society always refer to classifications of a plurality of uniform social gestures. People imitate and transmit them among each other, thus producing the social space that allows for more complex human relations to even take place. These inter-human ties would certainly be the products of social acts that bring people together, further organizing their time and change of location. For example, if walking down the street requires (greater than normal) distance between bodies, if touching or handshakes are discouraged, or conversation must be held at a “controlled physical proximity” – the production of social relations will be disturbed. The order of various gestures will thus alter the efficiency of social acts and their power.

Inner Gesture, Pressure, and Expression

“Waiting”, “listening”, and “silence” (a kind of manifestation of the first two, which also usually follows them) are three different operations that refer to the “interior”, the “inner”. Can the “inner” be given order? What would that mean? It can be said that the function of the gesture in Wittgenstein – the architect and philosopher simultaneously – serves to organize the great confusion in the “inner”²¹? Thus, waiting for the bus or for a friend to arrive

¹⁹ Cfr. Ch. “Gesture and Affect. The Practice of a Phenomenology of Gesture”, in V. Flusser, *Gesture*, University of Minnesota Press, London-Minneapolis 1999, pp. 1-9. A number of times over the course of his career, Agamben writes about the gesture as «the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such» [*Il gesto è l'esibizione di una medialità, il render visibile un mezzo come tale*] (G. Agamben, *Mezzi senza fine. Note sulla politica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1996, p. 52). The problem is that the body is not erased by the gesture, but amended to it and inextricable from it. Yet, the body cannot be reduced to the gesture or a means, since it can also be immobile even before its complete demise.

²⁰ M. Mauss, *Les techniques du corps* (lecture of 17 May 1934), in «Journal de Psychologie», 32 (1935), n. 3-4, pp. 271-293, p. 278.

²¹ In a wealth of places across myriad fragments, Wittgenstein deploys a dizzying array of variations that refer to the inner or the “concept of the ‘inner’”, as he calls it at one point: “inner eye”, “inner move”, “inner object”, “inner seeing” or inner evidence, voice, life, picture, experience, life, process, etc.

at the cinema in time, or perhaps waiting for urgently-needed help to arrive, could all be termed negative actions. If I utter “hello” to a news agent but (expecting a response) am greeted only with “silence”, is this a negative social act? Is silence not a constitutive part of every social act, and is the exchange of such negative acts not the condition of the social act’s efficiency? In preparatory notes for two paragraphs (671 and 672) of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces and problematizes the “inner gesture”.

How can the inner gesture belong to the sentence? to the language game? It ‘accompanies it’ not in the sense in which a gesture accompanies it; it is simply no gesture. A receptive attitude (listening e.g.) to be sure can be a gesture and function as a pointing, but the sensory impression (hearing e.g.) that we get by means of it does not correspond to the object which was pointed to. By the gesture of listening I do not point to what one calls ‘my auditory impression’ (MS 120, pp. 188-189)²².

Let us put aside the numerous dilemmas regarding meaning and logical form of gestures, which are ever on Wittgenstein’s mind and ultimately animate this fragment too²³. Even though there seems to be no gesture when listening since nothing is performed publicly, undoubtedly present is the act of listening or a motion with intent or an action connected to the will of the one listening²⁴. A receptive attitude (“*rezeptive Einstellung*” in German) or an “attitude of vigilant expectation” is stripped of an object and in that sense appears lacking. It leaves no trace and therefore appears as no gesture at all. However, were we to, entirely arbitrarily, adopt a never fully elaborated idea by Husserl, that there is such a thing as empty intention or intention whose object is not present but might appear in, say, the future, it would be possible to develop the “realization” of careful listening in what has yet to be heard (which, unless it were “allowed” to be heard, would not

²² Cfr. M.T. Hark, *Beyond the inner and the outer: Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Psychology*, Kluwer, New York 1990, p. 37. Paragraphs 671 and 672 are as follows: 671. And what do I point to by the inner activity of listening? To the sound that comes to my ears, and to the silence when I hear *nothing*? Listening as it were *looks for* an auditory impression and hence can’t point to it, but only to the *place* where it is looking for it.

672. If a receptive attitude is called a kind of “pointing” to something – then that something is not the sensation which we get by means of it (L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, London, Basil Blackwell 1958, p. 169).

²³ The anecdote about a Neapolitan gesture Wittgenstein discusses with Piero Sraffa, which was written about by Norman Malcolm and Amartya Sen, recalls vividly Napoli as the birthplace of the gesture’s thematization. I mean Andrea de Jorio’s 1832 book, *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano*, only recently translated into English.

²⁴ “Pointing” is probably not the happiest translation of the German *Hinweisen*, but does also cover, apart from the hand gesture indicating direction, the masonry act of laying brick and mortar.

even appear). It seems that an entirely incomplete social gesture can still be designated as inner gesture precisely because it gives the location of appearance of a public gesture or act, which has the form of appearance and can be heard or granted. If my careful observation is grounded in the expectation that someone will emerge from a nearby building, such action is not simply without gestural force; although, of course, the gesture will be a failure if no one appears.

The thematization of the “inner” and the topic of the uncertain interior gesture leads us into several topics the architect and philosopher Wittgenstein is continuously attempting to develop. Two remain mere hints: the connection of expression and gesture (the theory of pressure/pression/is understood to belong to protocols of the gestural because pressure is achieved by way of gesture to arrive at expression or new gesture); and the idea of translation of words into gestures and vice versa²⁵. The third topic has, due to the abundance of fragments in which it is found, become very important for architects, since the gesture is determined in different ways that are supposed to explain Wittgenstein’s statement that architecture (real or good architecture) is a gesture²⁶. In defining architecture as gesture, Wittgenstein notes that the purposive motion of the human body is not a gesture, nor is any constructed edifice executed through appropriate purpose or intention. There are five characteristics of the gesture, making a gesture a gesture.

First, a gesture is a miracle, something miraculous that above all interrupts or disrupts the routine²⁷. A divine gesture, according to Wittgenstein, can be called a miracle. An architectural gesture, if it is to be one, should have a miraculous quality. Second, a gesture is an event. For something to happen, it must of necessity be sudden, significantly pleasurable or rather unpleasant – it forces us to cease, stop, take a stand towards what has befall-

²⁵ «How curious: we should like to explain our understanding of gesture by means of a translation into words, and the understanding of words by translating them into a gesture. (Thus we are tossed to and for when we find out where understanding properly resides.) And we really shall be explaining words by a gesture, and a gesture by words» (L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1970, § 227).

²⁶ «Architecture is a gesture. Not every purposive movement of the human body is a gesture. Just as little as every functional building is architecture» (L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1980, p. 42). The gesture and architecture in Wittgenstein are scattered across many texts. Daniele Pisani wrote a book that remains the best systematic overview of this problem (cfr. D. Pisani, *L’architettura è un gesto: Ludwig Wittgenstein architetto*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2011).

²⁷ «A miracle is, as it were, a gesture which God makes. [...] A so-called “miracle” must be [...] as it were sacred gesture» (L. Wittgenstein, *MS 131 221*: 08.09.1946).

en or overcome us, determining at once what has appeared and taken place. For something to be a gesture, or for an event to be an event, it must excite and provoke self-thematization of those who perceive and accept it. Third, the gestural is not sudden or original or auto-mobile (automatic) production. “You design a door and look at it and say: ‘Higher, higher, higher... oh, all right’. (Gesture). What is this? Is it an expression of content?”²⁸. Wittgenstein is thus using the word gesture for a set of operations or work adjusting and amending the visible to the invisible, proportion with measure, leading to an expression of pleasure or satisfaction. For a “gesture” to take place, there must be shifting and amending. Fourth, a gesture is architectural and marks good architecture if the architect has managed to express a thought or emotion well («Remember the impression made by good architecture, that it expresses a thought. One would like to respond to it too with a gesture»)²⁹. AG gesture is to be found in the interval between thought and expression; the expression, in turn, is adequate if and only if the gesture is correct and fitting. The fifth characteristic of the gesture assumes that what is “gestural” cannot be recognized through rules. If we lack the rules and means with which to grasp the observed or anticipated expression filled with soulfulness [*seelenvolle Austruck*] – we are before or in the presence of a gesture³⁰.

The Social Gesture

What then is the relation between acts and gestures, and is it possible to determine a stable conceptual distance (or proximity) of these two crucial protocols in the construction of a group of people working together? Only the distinction between *agere* and *gerere* could indicate that gesture reorganizes space and time³¹, amending both; while the function of acts is to hold and maintain what they encounter in space and time, when bodies are already distributed and fixed. Still, what is it that changes? Or how does the gesture (as a kind of act) prepare a future exchange of acts and social acts?

²⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Beliefs*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1966, p. 13.

²⁹ L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, cit., p. 26.

³⁰ «Die seelenvolle Ausdruck in der Musik. Er ist nicht nach Graden der Stärke und des Tempos zu beschrieben. Sowenig wie der seelenvolle Gesichtsausdruck durch räumliche Masse» (L. Wittgenstein, *MS 138: 29a*).

³¹ Cfr. J.-F. Lyotard, *Gesture and Commentary*, in «Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly», 42 (1993), pp. 37-48, p. 40.

In an old text (from 1976) about Cy Twombly, Roland Barthes compares gesture and action:

What is a gesture? Something like the surplus of an action. The action is transitive, it seeks only to provoke an object, a result; the gesture is the indeterminate and inexhaustible total of reasons, pulsions, indolences which surround the action with an *atmosphere* (in the astronomical sense of the word)³².

Actions or acts imply communication between actors, while the object of the gesture is actually the future or the project (the object that has yet to be constructed), or even the preliminary, nearly mechanical construction of social reality³³. What is the meaning of this pseudo-Searlean phrase pre-construction of social reality? It would probably be best to recall how at the dawn of the twentieth century, Bergson twice terms laughter a “social gesture” whose function is to maintain the reciprocity of the basic activities of society (or the “*corps social*”)³⁴. Even better, «the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as the body reminds us of a mere machine»³⁵. Here is Bergson’s contribution to the thematization of the gesture, still very relevant today:

Instead of concentrating our attention on actions, comedy directs it rather to gestures. By gestures we here mean the attitudes, the movements and even the language by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching. Gesture, thus defined, is profoundly different from action. Action is intentional or, at any rate, conscious; gesture slips out unawares, it is automatic. In action, the entire person is engaged; in gesture, an isolated part of the person is expressed, unknown to, or at least apart from, the whole of the personality. Lastly – and here is the essential point – action is in exact proportion to the feeling that inspires it: the one gradually passes into

³² R. Barthes, *Cy Twombly: Works on Paper*, in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1991, p. 160.

³³ «Under the term *gestus* we need to understand a group of gestures, facial play and (more often) statements made by one or several people to one or several others. A person selling fish shows, among other things, the *gestus* of selling. A man drawing up his will, a woman who seduces a man, a policeman who beats up a man, a man who gives his wages to ten others – there we always find a social *gestus* [*sozialer Gestus*]. Following this definition the prayer a man offers up to God only becomes a *gestus* if the man prays while thinking of other people or in a context that includes relations of men to men (the king’s prayer, Hamlet)» (W. Hecht (ed.), *Brechts Theorie des Theaters*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 347).

³⁴ H. Bergson, *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique*, Félix Alcan, Paris 1900, pp. 20, 89 (transl. by C. Brereton and F. Rothwell, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Macmillan, New York 1913, pp. 20, 87).

³⁵ H. Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 30 (transl. p. 29).

the other, so that we may allow our sympathy or our aversion to glide along the line running from feeling to action and become increasingly interested. About gesture, however, there is something explosive, which awakes our sensibility when on the point of being lulled to sleep and, by thus rousing us up, prevents our taking matters seriously. Thus, as soon as our attention is fixed on gesture and not on action, we are in the realm of comedy³⁶.

Bergson does not systematically differentiate action from act, but it does not crucially change his argument. Clearly gestures and acts are coordinated and complement one another, rather than exclude or alternate in function. Still, certain actions, such as laughter or comedy, as a repertoire of spontaneous gestures and gesticulations, outside any kind of normative framework, mobilize different groups of people. It seems possible to me to find many such actions that improve the social capacity of common life.

Abstract

The thematization of social gestures and social acts is practically inexistent, despite a classification of various such actions emerging in texts by great philosophers of the beginning of the last century. My intention is to argue, drawing on entirely marginal suggestions of several authors who belong to different genres of philosophy and sociology, that there are indeed acts that are justifiably called “social gestures”. Their role in the construction of a group or institution may be significant. Not only would they not be a mere parasite or addition to social acts (which usually refers to linguistic acts), but they would directly participate in the construction of social acts and enable their efficient conduct. In addition, the role of social gestures, whose main characteristics are corporeality, visibility, and vivacity, could be a kind of a priori to the existence of the social group as such.

Keywords: gesture; social gesture; act; social act; form of appearance.

Petar Bojanić

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory - University of Belgrade
 bojanic@instifdt.bg.ac.rs

Center for Advanced Studies - University of Rijeka
 bojanic@cas.uniri.hr

³⁶ H. Bergson, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-147 (transl. pp. 143-144).