Spokespersonship

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Spokespersons give voice to the existence, purposes, and interests of other beings, both human and nonhuman, both real and imaginary. They potentially speak in the name of everyone and everything: the president, the nation, the people, the market, Shell Company, the Brazilian rainforest, the seals in the Wadden Sea. Attorneys speak for their clients, sales managers for their firms and products, ambassadors for their queen and country, political leaders for their parties and electorates, scientists for their university, discipline, and discoveries.

In modern communication- and media-driven cultures, spokespersonship has become a pivotal profession (press agent, public relations officer, communication specialist), indispensable for advocating the identity and interests of persons, groups, and institutions. However, the true significance of the idea of spokespersonship derives from its axial role in a more general sociology of representation. In this deeper social-constitutional sense, we all perform as spokespersons, by presenting that which is not immediately at hand (persons, things, ideas) in current face-to-face situations. What is absent and invisible must be imagined, named, evoked, or performed; what is unable to speak for itself must be spoken for and given voice.

All representational acts are therefore crucially implicated in struggles over trustworthiness and legitimacy. Immediately beyond the readily demonstrable and point-at-able, representation becomes a matter of belief and credit and hence of the authority and credibility of the spokesperson. At the heart of representation therefore lurks a permanent danger of appropriation: the risk that spokespersons may take the place and usurp the power of the subjects and objects represented by them. Spokespersons by definition speak in the name of others, who must first be reduced to silence before they can be effectively spoken for (Bourdieu, 1991). There is no "translation" without treason (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987). Obviously, this inherent risk of usurpation presents particular challenges when powerful media and politicians produce "fake news" and "alternative facts" in a "post-truth" culture.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1996 [1887]: 83) already satirized the "priestly modesty" of pundits such as Richard Wagner, who paraded as "a sort of spokesman of the 'in itself' of things, a telephone of the beyond." The "absent spokesperson" (Pels, 2000) conveniently hides behind his/her object, thing or constituency, claiming that "the facts" or "the people" speak for themselves. The priest may hide behind his all powerful God, the scientist behind objective reality, the politician behind the sovereign people (the proletariat, the nation, public opinion), profiting from the paradox of priestly humility: I may be nothing, but if what I speak for is everything, I am everything by proxy (Bourdieu, 1991).

A critical theory of spokespersonship must therefore be on permanent alert for such "identitarian" forms of representation and the symbolic power yielded by them. What Bourdieu calls the "mystery of ministry" precisely issues from the self-consecration of spokespersons who appropriate the group's authority in an act of magic which transforms the collectivity into a single person. The magic requires that *performative* representations of social, political or scientific facts, which cocreate realities by defining them, are passed off as *ostensive* representations which "merely" claim to mirror or reflect them.

Intriguingly, this critical generalization of the idea of spokespersonship does not stop before the representation of material entities and natural facts. From the spokesperson's point of view, there is no major distinction between representing people and representing things: both need someone to speak for them, both can be recruited as allies and authorize their spokespersons. Latour and Callon's actor-network theory (ANT) hence encourages a more symmetrical treatment of social, political, and scientific representation, including an account of how natural and material facts are made to "speak

for themselves" by scientific spokespersons. However, what is mounted by Bourdieu as a critical theory of reification is transformed by ANT into an agnostically descriptive approach of "following the actors," which identifies reification ("black-boxing") as the intended strategic purpose of all spokespersonship. "Translation" seeks to establish a maximum of identity between spokespersons and "their" things or facts – while spokespersons are simultaneously described as opportunistically shuttling between the reification of facts and their performative construction (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1988, 2006).

ANT hence also reverses the order of representation, in claiming that human beings delegate agency to nonhuman "actants," turning them into placeholders of people and acting back upon them. However, while material things do indeed prescribe human behaviour, the metaphor of spokespersonship is strained beyond acceptable limits if the ontological distinctions between humans and nonhumans are tendentially erased. Spokespersons may indeed symmetrically speak for both living and nonliving, acting and non-acting beings, but only human beings act as spokespersons and confer meaning and moral value.

According to this weaker *a*symmetry (Pels, 2003), people may well act as representatives of natural entities (cf., the Dutch "water envoy," who officially represents the "interests" of water). But claims to the effect that people, nature, facts or objects "speak for themselves" are linguistic tricks performed by spokespersons who prefer to hide behind them in order to make themselves bigger. Contemporary political discourses are rife with such essentialist constructions of the "people," the "nation," the "market," "history," or "nature," which nurture authoritarian forms of populism, neoliberalism, identity politics, and political ecology.

A critical theory of spokespersonship must resist this identitarian drift, and challenge forms of objectivism and essentialism which render the speaker and his performative reality-making invisible. From a constructivist perspective, spokespersons should remain fully aware of and accountable for their reality-constructions, minimizing the dangers of reification, usurpation, and "treason." A democratic theory of spokespersonship does not blackbox people or things, but opens a hiatus of uncertainty which activates incessant debates about the representativeness and authority of their spokespersons.

SEE ALSO: Actor-Network Theory; Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002); Essentialism and Constructionism; Performativity; Populism; Representation

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