



The Value of Representation

EDITORIAL

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The previous issue of *Redescriptions* directed attention to anti-gender mobilisations, which are widely considered a contemporary danger to democracy, intertwined with right-wing authoritarian and populist political tendencies. In many countries, proponents of anti-gender politics have been particularly active in appealing to seemingly democratic sentiments, calling for the ‘power to be given back to the people’; respect for the ‘majority’ opinion; and referendums on anti-gender issues, particularly those relating to the idea of multiplicity of gender.

This appeal to popular sovereignty in the form of direct democracy has often prompted discussion on ‘the crisis of representation’. Rather than declaring a crisis, however, this moment could also be viewed as an opportunity to reconsider the value of representation in democratic theory.

On all sides of the political spectrum, there are plenty who conceive of representation as nothing but a substitute for direct democracy. However, there is also serious scholarship that argues the contrary. Nadia Urbinati, Frank Ankersmit, Lisa Disch, David Runciman and Mónica Brito Vieira, to name a few theorists, have set out a clear and profound argument for the view that representation should not be considered a second-best choice, existing only in lieu of the direct presence of all citizens in decision-making processes. Representation is not just a practical necessity when direct citizen participation in decision-making cannot be organised; it has value in its own right.

According to scholars who recognize the value of representation, it should not be conceived as merely mirroring the citizens or attempting to mimic those who are represented. Rather than mimicking the interests or ideas of those they represent, these political theorists emphasise that representatives are elected to exercise their judgement and propose new ideas.

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Connected to these thoughts is the view that participation and representation should not be conceived as oppositions. Rather than pitting representation against presence and participation, the theorists who value representation see it as a process that creates both representatives and the represented within a democratic life. This is why representation has value in its own right and should remain a key concept in political theory.

For feminist political theory, representation is a particularly challenging issue. Feminism has its roots within the history of democratisation in Europe and the era of the French Revolution, when the abstract notion of the will of the people and its representation first emerged. However, in many ways, feminism grew out of the exclusion of a particular group from political representation: women. This exclusion effectively created the category of women, which feminism has represented ever since.

In feminist political theory and political science, claims for presence and participation in representation have dominated the agenda. This is for a reason: it reflects the initial and long-continued exclusionary practices organised by gender. However, simultaneously, presence and participation as feminist issues in political theory necessarily maintain the problematic category of ‘women,’ as if consisting of a distinct sameness. This sameness of all women has been problematized by subsequent feminists as violating the multiplicity ‘represented’ by this category.

In the current era of anti-gender mobilisation, when political representation is devalued and referendums are called for to combat something called ‘gender ideology’, feminist concerns may also manifest as renewed interest in the concept of representation in political theory. Representational institutions, which are spaces for debating ideas and making judgements about societal change, are devalued by attempts to remove certain ideas, such as those of the multiplicity of gender, from the representative institutions by appealing to a natural order, the majority view and the direct expression of the will of ‘the people’. Feminism has always been about ideas and about change. When conceptions of democracy are so strongly implicated within the ideological contestation concerning gender, the question arises as to whether the value of representation should be identified as a feminist concern.

In this issue of *Redescriptions*, the concept of representation is discussed first in the article by **Hugo Bonin, Pasi Ihalainen** and **Zachris Haaparinne**. They present results of their empirical quantitative research on the use of the concepts in the plenary debates in three European parliaments, through which they sought to determine how contemporary representatives conceive of democracy in relation to representation. They studied the use of the concepts ‘representative’, ‘direct’ and ‘participative’ democracy in the plenary discussion in the UK, French and German parliaments. The results of the analysis allow them to draw conclusions that are also interesting in the context of the discussions about theory of representation.

In their research, they noticed a concern about participation in all of these three European parliaments in the 2000’s. This was primarily expressed as a need to reform representative democracy through increased citizen participation in political decision-making. However, the trend changed in the 2010s, during which the authors identified that a new trend had appeared in all three parliaments: the polarisation of the question of direct democracy, together with increased advocacy of referendums by the right-wing parties.

These results are interesting in themselves as a piece of conceptual history and the history of parliamentary debates. It would also be interesting to consider them further in the context of political theory. Should this study be interpreted as testifying to and confirming a ‘crisis of representation?’ That would certainly be an easy conclusion to draw. However, further reflection on these results might also suggest that this trend in parliaments indicates the need to reflect more on the idea of representation and to rethink its value.

The second article in this issue discusses gender and its categories – in particular, the category of women. However, this is not done in the realm of politics but rather in another area of intellectual classification: medical practice and its categories of specialities. The key concept in the article by **Alexandra Toupin** and **Roxanne Brousseau** is gynaecology. The authors present a study of the institutional definition of this concept in a concrete case of the medical institutions in Quebec. Notably, gynaecology is the only medical speciality that defines its expertise in relation to a sex/gender category. This category, ‘women’, raises the issue of representation in feminist critical analysis.

The authors’ analysis shows in detail how the institutional use of the concept tends to conflate gynaecology with obstetrics. This effectively constructs a close association between femininity and maternity, rendering feminine health intelligible only through reproduction. As the authors point out, this obscures the true diversity of patients’ experiences and needs. When an identity category, such as ‘women’, is understood to mirror reality, it works to violate the actual multiplicity of those it is taken to represent. In this case, it enables institutions to evade specifying who gynaecology serves. The authors advocate a more feminist conceptualisation of gynaecology that would acknowledge the historical androcentrism of medicine, which has reduced women’s health to their reproductive function. They also emphasise the importance of redefining the field to better account for diverse bodies and experiences.

The final two articles in this issue each focus on a specific concept and its use in particular philosophical discussions. **Andreas Beyer Gregersen**’s topic is the concept of civility. By exploring how civility is conceived by a number of liberal and critical theoretical contributions, he argues that, as a social and political practice, civility exists and develops in a manner shaped by how it is described, therefore existing in a constant in-between of having several meanings or one single meaning. According to the author, this particular dynamic makes civility a distinct mode of normativity between ethics and politics.

Finally, **Tomás Ramos Mejía** examines the concept of vortex in the work of Georges Bataille. He elaborately analyses Bataille’s use of this concept, arguing that Bataille adopted it from biological and astrophysical texts and used it as a metaphor to represent society. This metaphor produces an organicist perspective of society.

Metaphors can also be considered representations, albeit in a very different way from political institutions or identity categories, such as ‘woman’. What these representations have in common is that they all play an active role. This is also clear for the metaphor ‘vortex’: it achieves something in Bataille’s text. It is important to recognise the active role of representation, whether in a political institution, a category or a metaphor. As a representation, it has value in its own right in relation to what it represents.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author is the Editor-in-Chief of the journal.

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