UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE PAST? QUENTIN SKINNER AND PIERRE ROSANVALLON ON THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION[*]

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How can the study of unfamiliar ideas from the past help us to understand the present? In the following I will try to answer this question by focusing on one particular problem we encounter in society today. The problem I have in mind is the so-called 'crisis of political representation' which has haunted Western democracies since the eighties. Features of this crisis are well-known: people no longer feel represented by their rulers, they increasingly vote for far-right or populist parties, and some demand more direct forms of representation such as referenda. One way of countering this crisis has been the introduction by governments of new styles of communication. But results have been mixed. The existing unpopularity of politicians has merely been compounded by their spin doctors, who have become equally unpopular. The question is whether historians can help us to examine and even resolve this crisis. In the following I will focus on two eminent historians who have sought to answer this question, albeit in different ways, namely Quentin Skinner (b. 1940) and Pierre Rosanvallon (b. 1948).

Representing the Body Politic Through Participation (Skinner)

I will first turn to Quentin Skinner, who has been Regius Professor of Modern History in Cambridge since 1996, and whose recent publications include a three-volume collection of essays, entitled *Visions of Politics*.[1] Interest in his work is growing, as is recently evidenced by a first monograph on his entire *œuvre*.[2] What does Skinner believe we can learn from the past? For him, the historian can contribute to present-day debates by excavating answers from older, often forgotten, sources which differ from today's dominant visions such as 'liberal theory' which has today risen 'to a position of hegemony in modern political philosophy'.[3] Skinner himself has convincingly demonstrated how one such older vision, namely the neo-Roman tradition, represented by thinkers like Sallust, Livy, Machiavelli, Parker or Harrington, has been repressed by this liberal vision of politics.[4]

Liberals assume that maximising our individual freedom to pursue our own chosen ends means minimising service to, and interference by, the state. For them, fewer duties or less laws means more individual freedom. However, the crisis of political representation shows that this liberal model may be insufficient. Skinner has demonstrated how neo-Roman thinkers (or 'republicans' as he also calls them), unlike liberals, argue that we can only hope to maximise our freedom if, at the same time, we also maximise our participation and service to the community in which we live. This is not because the community is a good in itself, as pre-modern (or communitarian) thinkers still believed, but rather because participation in politics is 'instrumentally necessary' to ensure that we can maximise our individual freedom.[5]

To understand how neo-Roman thinkers arrive at this position, we need to grasp the significance of their specific concept of freedom 'not as the absence of interference but as absence of dependence'.[6] Skinner emphasises that for neo-Roman writers to be free means 'not to be subject to the power of anyone else'.[7] It follows that 'if the continuation of your liberties depends upon the arbitrary will of anyone else, then you are not a free-man but a slave, even though you may have the fullest *de facto* enjoyment of your liberties, and may therefore be able to act entirely as you choose'.[8] To summarise, in the neo-Roman view, 'freedom is restricted by dependence. To be free as a citizen, therefore, requires that the actions of the state should reflect the will of all its citizens'.[9]

The only way to ensure that we don't depend on the will of our rulers is to rule ourselves, which requires us to control our representatives by being actively involved in politics. Skinner explains that 'if you wish to maintain your liberty, you must ensure that you live under a political system in which there is no element of discretionary power (...) in other words, under a system in which the sole power of making laws remains with the people or their accredited representatives'.[10] This also requires citizens to participate in public life, to control their representatives and to remain distrustful and vigilant vis-à-vis power. Skinner argues that 'if we wish to maximise our own individual liberty, we must cease to put our trust in princes, and instead take charge of the public arena ourselves'.[11] Machiavelli already stated that 'the price of liberty is eternal vigilance' which implies that 'it is essential for everyone "to keep their eyes open"'.[12] Freedom, then, does not mean to minimise interference (in the form of duties or laws), but rather to minimise our dependence on the arbitrary will of our rulers, even if this involves duties and service to the community.

Neo-Roman political theory can thus offer an interesting explanation of the current crisis of political representation. People may no longer consider themselves to be adequately represented today, because they may feel that they have become dependent on the will of their representatives, rather than the other way round. Members of parliament for example often follow the party line rather than the people they are supposed to represent.[13] Even if these representatives do not in fact act against the people's interests, but merely have the possibility of doing so, people may no longer feel represented.[14] Skinner gives the example of the British people who 'now find themselves living more and more under asymmetric relations of power and powerlessness'. He explains that 'the British people as a whole have no power to check their governments (...) nor does the Legislative (...) have any effective capacity to check the Executive'.[15]

The only way to solve this problem is to follow the neo-Roman advice and try to ensure that citizens participate more in politics so that their representatives again depend on them and that, as a result, these citizens are truly represented and are thus free from dependence when pursuing their private ends.[16] As Skinner writes: 'it is only possible to escape from personal servitude if you live as an active citizen under a representative form of government'.[17] However, neo-Roman writers are aware that 'we are not likely spontaneously to act in ways that

best safeguard' our freedom.[18] If citizens are not willing to participate in politics or remain vigilant vis-à-vis their rulers, the community can force them to do this, as this will, in the end, be in their own interest as it increases their individual freedom.[19] Mandatory participation in elections, which exists in countries such as Belgium or Greece, is thus an excellent example of a republican idea. It shows that, in the neo-Roman tradition, individuals can be 'forced to be free'.

Skinner not only rehabilitates this neo-Roman tradition, but he also explains why this tradition has been forgotten. He demonstrates how Hobbes, in the seventeenth century during the English civil war,[20] discredited the neo-Roman ideal of participation and self-rule while replacing it with the idea, familiar to us, that duties or laws reduce rather than increase individual freedom. Skinner insists that for Hobbes 'liberty has nothing to do with conditions of dependence or independence'. For Hobbes, by contrast, 'the question is not who makes the laws but simply how many laws are made. The fewer the laws, the greater the individual liberty'.[21]

By tracing both the origins of liberalism and the repression of its rival neo-Roman tradition in Hobbes' work, Skinner is also able to unmask the liberal tradition in yet another way. Hobbes' political theory indeed reveals that our interests are not automatically protected by institutions or the market, as a more optimistic eighteenth-century variant of liberalism would have it. On the contrary: if we do not participate in politics, then this will mean that we actually limit our freedom, because we then become dependent on what our rulers may decide arbitrarily, as becomes clear in Hobbes' theory of sovereignty and the state.[22] While neo-Roman thinkers still believed that sovereignty lies in the people, for Hobbes it lies in the person of the state. From Hobbes onwards the neo-Roman equation between 'the powers of sovereignty and the power of the people' has thus been forgotten.[23] For Skinner it is not surprising that the modern vision of the state was developed by 'theorists whose aspirations included a desire to legitimise the more absolutist forms of government'.[24] The source of today's crisis of political representation may thus lie in an insufficient connection between the people and their 'representatives', caused by a lack of participation and vigilance, induced by a liberal ideology and vision of the state that started with Hobbes.

In so doing, Skinner turns the standard interpretation of history on its head. Western history is not an evolution towards more free-

dom and democracy, as liberalism would have it. On the contrary, ever since Hobbes, participation has diminished and so has true individual freedom. Instead of ruling ourselves, we are now ruled by an abstract bureaucratic state.[25] Skinner gives the example of the British people who are confronted with 'an unregulated system of Executive power, with the body of the people and their representatives alike condemned to a state of corresponding dependence'.[26] According to the neo-Roman view, the crisis of political representation, as has recently become visible in the gap between the British people and their government over Iraq, should then come as no surprise. If historians want to study true democratic theory, they should focus on the neo-Roman theorists of early modern Europe rather than on the liberal theories which have been developed from the seventeenth century onwards. As Skinner writes: 'in the present crisis of our affairs, we may do well to reconsider the merits of the neo-Roman view that dependence involves an affront to our liberty'.[27]

But even if the neo-Roman tradition represents a very interesting alternative to liberalism, the question remains as to whether it is sufficient to explain problems existing in our contemporary democracies. What if people became more vigilant, distrusted their rulers and controlled their representatives, thus following the advice of neo-Roman writers of early modern Europe? Would this in itself be sufficient to solve the crisis of political representation? Neo-Roman thinkers would probably argue that it would. Once we control our representatives and eliminate dependence on unelected rulers, we will be adequately represented again and thus no longer be enslaved, thereby regaining our personal freedom. However, this neo-Roman theory of political representation rests on one crucial assumption, namely that there already exists a unified body of the people that can simply be represented.[28] As Skinner explains, in the neo-Roman view 'the people must never be considered as a mere collection of individuals; they must always be recognised at the same time as a unified community or group (...) as a corporation' acting 'in the manner of a single person with one will and one voice'.[29] The metaphor of the body politic means that adequate political representation of the people through a parliament simply means offering 'a lifelike and exactly proportionate representation of their real body as a whole. It follows that, when this elected body acts, it cannot fail to act in precisely the manner that the real body itself would have acted' and that 'parliament is no different from the people in any way at all'.[30]

However, as Skinner himself indicates, not everyone agrees that such a coherent and unified body politic exists. It was again Hobbes who questioned the very idea that there exists a unified body of people independent of its rulers. For Skinner, Hobbes argues that 'there is no such thing as the body of the people, from which it follows that there cannot be any such body awaiting representation'.[31] But what if Hobbes is right to deny that states or 'civil associations are created out of pre-existing and unified bodies of people'?[32] What, then, would be the implications for understanding our contemporary crisis of political representation?

Making Sense of a Dismembered Society (Rosanvallon)

One way to answer these questions is to turn to the work of the French historian and political theorist Pierre Rosanvallon who has been Professor at the prestigious *Collège de France* in Paris since 2001 and who offers yet another way of contributing to the present through the study of the strangeness of the past. Since only three of his more than 15 books are currently available in English[33], he remains relatively unknown to an Anglophone audience.[34] This is a pity since he too offers some interesting arguments concerning the debate on political representation, notably in his *Le Peuple Introuvable* (which can be translated as 'the people that cannot be found')[35] or, more recently, in his work on intermediary institutions in France[36] or on 'negative democracy'.[37]

In these and in other works, Rosanvallon argues, like Skinner, that representation does not happen automatically, as liberals still believe. However, for Rosanvallon this is not because representation requires active participation of citizens, but rather because, as Hobbes already stated, in modern societies a coherent social body no longer exists. Rosanvallon rejects a theory that 'conceives sovereignty as already fixed, given, and known' or that presumes 'that the people constitutes (...) a self-evident subject, naturally united in a bloc without fissures'.[38] He emphasises that modern societies based on the formal equality of individuals desubstantialise, disincorporate or dismember a traditional society that understood itself as a unified and coherent body politic.[39] As he explains: 'the transition from a corporatist to an individualist society makes society less representable. For how to give

a form (...) to an agglomeration of individuals?'.[40] As a result, representation can no longer mean passively representing an existing unified body of the people, but rather must involve an active attempt to make sense of a society that has lost its 'evidently coherent totality'.[41] Rosanvallon states that the people no longer exists independently of its representation but 'is to be constructed' (*il est à construire*).[42] Rosanvallon's vision of political representation is similar to Hobbes' view that 'there is (...) no natural unity outside the state' and that 'unity and community are attained only with the appointment of a representative'[43] or to Frank Ankersmit's aesthetic vision of representation according to which 'political reality only comes into being after and due to representation'.[44]

For Rosanvallon representation is about a society's ability to read and understand itself, which is what he calls 'the political' and which he contrasts with the particular sphere of politics. The political refers to processes of deliberation and reflection through which rules of a common world are constructed and a society is made visible and legible.[45] 'Visibility' and 'legibility', Rosanvallon explains, 'have been two constitutive characteristics of the very essence of the political. There is no politics, indeed, if actions cannot be gathered together in a single narrative and represented on a single stage before the public'.[46] While Hobbes believed that only an individual ('the sovereign') could successfully act on behalf of a fictional commonwealth on the political stage,[47] Rosanvallon argues instead that in a pluralist, democratic society this active process of representation requires a variety of representative institutions, associations and practices who all try to make sense of a society that no longer has a natural meaning and coherence.[48]

More so than Skinner, Rosanvallon stresses that an adequate representation not only presupposes participation, vigilance and control by active individuals, but also strong institutions that mediate between the individual and society. For Rosanvallon, particular preferences and interests of individuals can indeed only be represented if there are mediating institutions like political parties, unions, media and social sciences, who all somehow order and indeed simplify the enormous diversity of private interests, opinions and preferences.[49] What would a society look like, if there were no media, parties, unions, and social scientists to simplify and order this potentially chaotic individualised society?

To answer that question, you can think of revolutionary France in which all intermediary institutions were banned as relics from feudal society and a society became literally dismembered, thus radically breaking with the idea of a natural coherence of the body politic. As a result it became difficult to give a recognisable form to a society in which only abstract citizens, but no intermediary corporations, were acknowledged.[50] From then onwards, political representation became problematic. In his work, Rosanvallon analyses France's long and often painful search to give a meaningful and visible form to a people so that it would be more than simply an abstract collection of citizens. France was indeed soon confronted with the fact that the people not only wanted to be represented as a collection of abstract citizens, but also as individuals who are part of a very concrete social or gendered background. In the French republic there were not only French citizens, but also workers and women. Rosanvallon thus shows that even if France had always been reluctant towards intermediary institutions (because they allegedly distorted the immediately given will of the people), it nevertheless had to acknowledge (albeit slowly and often implicitly) the necessity of intermediary institutions (unions, political parties, associations) in making feel individuals at home in modern society.[51]

It is precisely because parties, unions, and other pressure groups put items on the agenda, offer certain choices, profiles and positions that individuals can feel connected to larger groups, and thus also feel represented. Thus for Rosanvallon, the political parties that emerged in the nineteenth century do not simply mirror existing preferences, but rather mould these so that they acquire meaning and coherence.[52] Like political parties, social sciences too came into existence to create larger categories so that an individualised society remained somehow tangible and individuals experienced themselves as part of larger groups.[53] If individuals no longer feel represented by their rulers today, then this may be due to the incapacity of political parties, unions, and social sciences to structure society and offer individuals a global identity,[54] rather than to a lack of participation of citizens.

Rosanvallon goes still further when he argues against common opinion that the problem today may be that there is too much rather than too little control, distrust, surveillance and participation. By contrast with the more pessimistic accounts offered by many, including Skinner, Rosanvallon states that today 'diverse (...) forms of the over-

sight and supervision of leaders' are actually increasing,[55] in the form of ever-growing practices of denunciation, rejection, surveillance, distrust and control by various associations and institutions.[56] The fact that we still face a crisis of political representation despite increasing control, surveillance and participation by citizens may indicate that this crisis is about more than just participation. While Rosanvallon agrees with Skinner that surveillance, vigilance and control of rulers by citizens are an essential feature of democracies,[57] he believes that this alone cannot solve the problem of political representation. In a pre-modern neo-Roman world where a social body was seen as coherent and self-evident, surveillance and distrust were sufficient to ensure that parliament offers an adequate representation of the existing body of the people. In our modern Hobbesian world, by contrast, this self-evident bodily unity of the people is no longer given, which means that we need to compensate this loss with a positive and global understanding of what it means to live in a dismembered society. Rosanvallon suggests that 'the point is no longer simply to put the people in power; more radically, it is to institute the people in a coherent collectivity'.[58]

For this positive task, neo-Roman vigilance and distrust are not really helpful, according to Rosanvallon. 'In essence negative and reactive', he writes, mechanisms of control and distrust 'cannot serve to structure or to bear a collective project'.[59] When describing the current increase of mechanisms of control, he therefore talks about a 'negative democracy', an 'indirect democracy' or a 'counter-democracy' (*contre-démocratie*).[60] As long as these practices are only negative they can even make the positive task of creating a collective representation of society more difficult and thus contribute to the crisis of political representation rather than solving it. This is because these practices promote 'forms of fragmentation and differentiation where a coherent order and the imperative of totality have to be sought'.[61] For Rosanvallon the crisis of political representation mainly refers to a lack of institutional and other resources for making sense of society as a whole rather than to a lack of surveillance of our representatives.

But why are these institutions failing us today, rather than thirty years ago? For Rosanvallon, this has nothing to do with a temporary unwillingness on the part of these institutions, but rather with the growing individualisation in our societies. If individuals increasingly follow their unpredictable and highly individual choices, then

it is simply much more difficult to trace regular patterns. Societies in the past used to be organised around clear ideological divisions in politics, education, welfare provisions and so on. Today that has changed since the choices of individuals have become unpredictable and social scientists and politicians lack the categories to map society.[62] As Rosanvallon explains: 'While we have access to a wealth of statistics, paradoxically we seem less able to make sense of society'.[63] As the people's voice becomes ever more diverse and whimsical, and the intermediary associations have increasing trouble in ordering it, individuals have the impression that their particular identities and interests are no longer given a voice, which then leads to a crisis of political representation.

If the crisis is first and foremost a crisis of institutions and practices, then Rosanvallon's study of the emergence of these institutions and practices in the past can also help to understand the present. A 'generalised comparativism' in time (or in space), as offered by historians, may not only prevent us from perceiving our particular values or solutions as universal, but may also inspire political theorists by offering them 'a repertory of examples' and a 'field' or 'space of experience'.[64] Given that agents in contexts different from ours faced a similar problem of how to make sense of society, we can learn from them. The historian may discover solutions from the past which were once tried out but have been forgotten – solutions which, in an adapted form, could help us today in structuring an individualised society.

How can the study of the past inspire us to solve our contemporary problem of political representation? One lesson we can learn from the past is that social conflict and debate on issues like justice, inclusion or equality help societies understand themselves better and that we should thus foster conflict rather than seeking to subdue it in the name of social cohesion.[65] Historical research into past examples may also show how contemporary practices of control, distrust and rejection can be successfully amended so that they may still help democracies in a more constructive way.[66] Rosanvallon also gives the example of the political meaning of the so-called 'poetic representation'. Consider novelists of the nineteenth century like Flaubert or Balzac. Did they not attempt to give meaning to an individualised society by narrating the lives of single individuals while situating them in society at large? Similarly, travel narratives, schoolbooks and of course statistics all actively tried to make sense of a complex society.[67] Could

this, then, not inspire contemporary social scientists and indeed politicians to individualise the categories by which they interpret society today?[68] As Rosanvallon writes: ‘While the cognitive output of the big statistical mechanisms has diminished, it is time to make a new use of the monograph to grasp the texture of society’.[69]

Rather than passively mirroring an ‘unrepresentable’ society, politicians and social scientists should actively look for new ways to make sense of an individualised society. For example by writing a collective story of society which is at the same time a ‘diary’ of the individual, thus reconciling society’s general viewpoint with the concrete and individualised social reality.[70] Rosanvallon writes that, given the historians’ focus on narratives and biography, ‘the sociologist must coordinate with the historian to understand social trends (…)’.[71] Rosanvallon suggests more generally that ‘there is a work to be shouldered of writing and publication that (...) would aim to give a vocabulary to social experience and to outline for it the framework in which it takes on meaning – and thus allow for it to reform itself’.[72] This can be done by social scientists, the media, public intellectuals or think tanks.[73] In so doing, more adequate knowledge of society may be constructed, so that people can feel represented again.

Conclusion

The work of Skinner and Rosanvallon shows that historians can contribute to present-day debates in political theory while respecting the strangeness of the past. Of course, many questions remain. Historians may wonder whether it is their task to contribute to the present at all, and if such an actualisation of the past can be done without sacrificing the strangeness of the past to our present-day concerns. Conversely, social theorists may ask whether the past is not too different to be able to help us today. But even if historians believe the strangeness of the past can be of some help to the present, the question remains to *what* past the historian should be looking. If he believes that there is a body politic awaiting representation and that a lack of participation makes political representation inadequate, then he can indeed turn to the early-modern neo-Roman writings. If, on the contrary, he is convinced that such a body-politic is no longer given and that, consequently, it is the activity of institutions, associations, writers and so-

cial scientists that makes democracies function properly, then he will be more keen to turn to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, both Skinner and Rosanvallon stress that it is not their intention to determine 'how historians ought to be spending their time'.[74] This implies that there will always be different answers to the questions I have been raising, which in turn means that, happily, there remains room for discussion and debate.

NOTES

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1. Skinner 2002a; 2002b; 2002c.
2. Palonen 2003.
3. Skinner 1998, 113.
4. Skinner 1998.
5. E.g. Skinner 2002b, 211.
6. Skinner 2002d, 255.
7. Skinner 2002d, 249.
8. Skinner 2006a, 157.
9. Skinner 2003, 15.
10. Skinner 1998, 74.
11. Skinner 1990, 308.
12. Skinner 2000, 76-77.
13. Skinner 2006b.
14. Skinner 1998, 49, 52, 69-77, 86.
15. Skinner 2003, 25.
16. Skinner 1990, 308-9.
17. Skinner 1998, 77; see also Skinner 2002b, 379.

18. Skinner 1997, 76.
19. Skinner 2002b, 177ff., 210ff.
20. Skinner 2002d, Skinner 2005.
21. Skinner 2003, 15-16.
22. Skinner 2002b, 395ff., 404; Skinner 2002c, 177ff.
23. Skinner 2002b, 386.
24. Skinner 2002b, 395.
25. Skinner 2002b, xi, 9, 410f.
26. Skinner 2003, 25.
27. Skinner 2003, 24-5.
28. Skinner 2005, 158-60; 163-5; see also Skinner 1998, 24-25; 28-9.
29. Skinner 2005, 158.
30. Skinner 2005, 164-5.
31. Skinner 2005, 172.
32. Skinner 2005, 173.
33. Rosanvallon 2000, 2006a and 2007.
34. For introductions to his work, see Jainchill and Moyn 2004, Moyn 2005 and Weymans 2004 and 2005a.
35. Rosanvallon 1998.
36. Rosanvallon 2004 (translated as Rosanvallon 2007).
37. Rosanvallon 2006b.
38. Rosanvallon 2006a, 198.
39. Rosanvallon 1998, 13-16, 91.
40. Rosanvallon 2006a, 85.
41. Rosanvallon 1998, 18; Rosanvallon 2006a, 194; Rosanvallon 2006b, 299, 315.
42. Rosanvallon 1998, 18.
43. Skinner 2002c, 198.
44. Ankersmit 1996, 47.
45. Rosanvallon 2006b, 298; Rosanvallon 2006a, 34-36.
46. Rosanvallon 2006a, 247.
47. Skinner 2002c, 198-99; Skinner 2005, 173-4.
48. Rosanvallon 1998, 15-17, Rosanvallon 2007.
49. Rosanvallon 1988, 149-150.
50. Rosanvallon 1988, 161; Rosanvallon 2006a, 90, Rosanvallon 2007.
51. Rosanvallon 1988, 161-66, 171-75; Rosanvallon 1998; Rosanvallon 2004; Rosanvallon 2006a, 79-97, Rosanvallon 2007.
52. Rosanvallon 1998, 173ff.
53. Rosanvallon 1998, 109ff., 293ff.
54. Rosanvallon 1988, 147-150.

55. Rosanvallon 2006b, 24ff or 258; Rosanvallon 2006a, 235, 247.

56. Rosanvallon 2006a and 2006b.

57. Rosanvallon 2006a, 247.

58. Rosanvallon 2006a, 212.

59. Rosanvallon 2006a, 247.

60. Rosanvallon 2006a, 242, 238 and Rosanvallon 2006b.

61. Rosanvallon 2006a, 248; Rosanvallon 2006b, 258.

62. Rosanvallon 1988, 147-150, 154-55, Rosanvallon 2006a, 210-11; Rosanvallon 2006b, 271.

63. Rosanvallon 2000, 100.

64. Rosanvallon 2006b, 31-2.

65. Rosanvallon 2006b, 298, 305-06, 312, 317-18; Rosanvallon 2006a, 212-13; Rosanvallon 2000.

66. Rosanvallon 2006b, 307-12.

67. Rosanvallon 1998, 279-301.

68. Rosanvallon 1998, 354ff.

69. Rosanvallon 2000, 101.

70. Rosanvallon 1995, 41-2; Rosanvallon 1998, 356ff.

71. Rosanvallon 2000, 101.

72. Rosanvallon 2006a, 250.

73. Rosanvallon 1988, 180-81; Rosanvallon 2001, 198-99.

74. Skinner 1998, 108.

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