BOOK REVIEW

Michael Saward 2010. *The Representative Claim*.
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Michael Saward makes two main arguments in *The Representative Claim*: first, that representation must be understood as a performative act that (also) brings into being what it claims to represent; and, second, that representation is ubiquitous in politics and should not be reduced to the electoral institutions of representative democracy.

The argument of the book proceeds in six chapters. The first three are the best for their systematic treatment of Saward's conception of representation in terms of representative claims. Chapters 4 and 5 apply this conception of representation to contemporary debates about representative democracy (the elected/unelected distinction; the representation of nature and women; and political parties). This is, in my view, the weakest part of the argument which would have been better, had it been pursued more systematically and in more depth. Taken together, the first five chapters make up the analytical part of the book, whereas the last chapter – chapter 6 – is a normative argument for a way to assess the legitimacy of democratic representation.

In making the case for representation as representative claims, Saward draws on a variety of sources. He discusses contemporary writings on representation and representative democracy. These include Hanna Pitkin's seminal *The Concept of Representation* from 1967,

but also the more recent works by, among others, Jane Mansbridge and Andrew Rehfeld. Saward shows how these works point in the direction of an understanding of representation as performative claims not restricted to democratic institutions, but he also argues that they retain problematic assumptions of more traditional approaches to political representation. To make this argument, Saward draws on works on representation in other fields, especially aesthetics, history and philosophy (Jacques Rancière, Frank Ankersmit and Jacques Derrida, among others).

Representation, Saward argues, must be understood as a performative act. That is, the representative does not reflect, in a transparent fashion, the represented; indeed, the represented and his or her identity do not pre-exist the act of representation. While the representative claim must be a claim to accurately reflect the identity or interests of a constituency, it also brings these into being. In this sense, the act of representation – the representative claim – constructs the represented, which is why Saward also refers to this aspect of representation as its aesthetic character:

> There is an indispensable *aesthetic* moment in political representation because the represented is never just given, unambiguous, transparent (74).

Note that the representative claim is also a claim about the representation itself and its representativity. The representativity of the representative and of the representation is not given, but must be established, above all by others taking up and accepting the representative claim. This can be done by the constituency about whom the claim is made and/or by the wider audience of the claim. This conception of representation is familiar enough in debates in aesthetics and critical theory, but will be less familiar to (mainstream) political scientists.

The second of the two main arguments of *The Representative Claim* is that political representation is ubiquitous. As Saward points out, political scientists and theorists typically assume that political representation is national (taking place within the nation-state), institutional (taking place within state institutions, first and foremost parliaments at different levels), formal (conforming to procedures, especially election rules) and elective (only authorised through elections).

Saward wants to correct this view of political representation in two ways. First, he argues, this is just one form that political repre-

sentation can take; there is much more to political representation than elections to parliamentary bodies within the nation-state: "legislatures, formal territorial constituencies and the institutions they support are not all that matters to political representation" (31). One of his examples is the Make Poverty History Campaign and Bono's role in that. This was an international phenomenon, and it was an instance of extra-parliamentary, informal or non-elective representation when Bono claimed to speak for poor Africans. But political representation it was, and Saward's point is that we must look outside political institutions (as well as inside them) to see how political representation takes place.

The second way in which Saward wants to correct the traditional view of political representation is by severing the link between democracy and representation. Typically, democracy is reduced to representative democracy, and political representation reduced to democratic representation. However, Saward argues, political representation can be both democratic and non-democratic, and democracy need not be representative, at least not in the traditional sense of the term. For instance, when speaking for poor Africans, Bono may be engaged in political representation, whether we deem it democratic or not; and one may also argue that what he was doing was democratic without necessarily being representative in the traditional sense of the transparent authorisation of an agent to act on behalf of a principal.

To avoid reducing political representation to a particular form of representation, saward introduces the notion of the representative claim:

> A *maker* of representations ('M') puts forward a *subject* ('S') which stands for an object ('O') that is related to a *referent* ('R') and is offered to an *audience* ('A') (36).

This model of representation is not meant to express the essence of representation – according to Saward there is no such essence – but is only meant as a model to examine the claims of representation. The – in my view – very useful model requires some explication. Saward provides a good example here: Bono and the Make Poverty History campaign. A claim maker (Bono) puts forward a claim about a subject (Bono) as a representative for an object (the needs of poor Africans), where the flesh-and-blood Africans are the referent, and this claim

is offered to an audience (poor Africans, "the international community"). What is evident is that the same agent can fill in several roles at once, for instance in claims to be the representative of a particular constituency (where maker and subject are the same). As for the audience and the constituency, they can be both intended and actual: the intended audience and constituency are those that the claim maker claims to speak for; the actual audience and constituency are those who recognise the claim as being about them. Bono may, for instance, claim to speak for poor Africans (intended constituency), but his claim may not reach them (actual constituency). And he may address his claim to Africans (intended audience), but in fact only reach Western media and opinion makers (actual audience).

I believe it is important to stress two points in relation to this model. First, the representative claim is conceived as an event, not as a fact. That is, representation is an ongoing practice, not an achieved fact that one can point to, for instance by pointing to a particular institutional arrangement. Second, the model effectively decentres the claim of representation. This is so in a variety of ways. Among other things, if we follow this model, representation is no longer a one-to-one relationship between a subject (a representative agent) and an object (a represented principal). It gives us a more complex – and, in my view, more realistic and fruitful – picture of representation, where representation is not unidirectional, and where no particular actor can completely control the process and the meaning of the representative claim. As Saward writes,

> there is no representative claim that cannot be 'read back' or contested or disputed by its targets, recipients, or observers. [...] there is no representative claim without its being open to a counterclaim or a denial of claim from part of its audience (54).

I would only add that the representative claim always involves an element of power, since to be able to make the representative claim and to have it recognised is to occupy a position of relative power vis-à-vis the represented.

I do think the model has one weak point, though: the notion of "referent". It is not obvious to me why we need this part of the model. Saward is clear that the referent only gains meaning within the representative claim. That is, we are not dealing with an essence of the

constituency, which is then reflected in the representative claim about the constituency. However, in that case, I wonder if we cannot simply get rid of the referent as an element distinct from the object of the representative claim.

Saward's conception of political representation has profound implications for both the theory and the practice of representation. To take just one example: if we accept the ubiquity of representation, the old distinction between direct and representative democracy breaks down. This is so because so-called direct democracy also rests on representative claims and institutions, for instance claims about what counts as a vote, and who belongs to the demos. In short, direct democracy is always mediated by political institutions that are said to be representative (of the demos, democracy, equality, and so on). As a further consequence, representation is not a second-best option, but the first-best option, because its alleged alternative (direct democracy) is itself a form of representative democracy: "*all* democratic politics is representative politics" (162). It is then a matter of deciding what sort of representative politics one prefers. Finally, if we accept that elections, political parties, and so on, are not all there is to representation, then we can answer those who talk about a crisis of representation by pointing to the myriad of other ways in which (democratic) representation happens across society. This is not to say that there is no crisis of representation, but we must at least consider more carefully on what basis we make this judgement.

Saward's conception of political representation also throws into question traditional conceptions of the legitimacy of democratic representation, and it is probably here that the book will meet with most scepticism among mainstream political scientists and theorists. Thinking of representation in terms of representative claims challenges traditional criteria on which to assess the legitimacy of representative democracy, especially the transparency of the principal's (the represented's) authorisation of the agent (the representative).

Saward proposes a different conception of the democratic legitimacy of representative claims. "[P]rovisionally acceptable claims to democratic legitimacy across society", he writes,

> are those for which there is evidence of sufficient acceptance of claims by appropriate constituencies under reasonable conditions of judgment (145, emphasis removed).

where "appropriate constituencies" refer to the sum of intended and actual constituencies. Here legitimacy

> is the perception of legitimacy, not legitimacy according to a standard that is posited as independent of the context in which the question arises (144).

In other words, legitimacy is not independent of the force of representative claims – there is no "beyond representation" from where to assess representative claims. Importantly, the legitimacy in question is not the legitimacy, or acceptance, that one finds at any given moment. Legitimacy is always provisional because we can never be certain that the appropriate constituency has "really" accepted the claim; for instance, we may be suspicious of the constituency's acceptance because of structural inequalities or lack of information. Saward here argues that the more "open" a society is – that is, the more citizens are able to freely discuss ideas – the easier it is to assess the legitimacy of the claim, because the easier it is for the constituency to adequately assess the claim. It should be clear that Saward does not give up on the traditional yardsticks of transparency and the self-legislating and self-defining citizen, although these are no longer universal yardsticks that can yield unequivocal judgements.

I agree with the conception of political representation presented in *The Representative Claim*. This is a welcome book – also because it engages with issues in mainstream Anglo-Saxon political science and theory, and because it does so in a clear and accessible language. As such, the book is likely to appeal to readers who do not already share the view of representation as performative and ubiquitous. In this, the book goes beyond the otherwise more sophisticated writings of, for example, Ernesto Laclau, Nancy Schwartz and Brian Seitz.