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Preferable Minority Representatives: Brokerage and Betrayal

Eline Severs, *Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium*
Sara de Jong, *The Open University, United Kingdom*

Although the conditions for ethnic-minority representation vary greatly across sociopolitical and cultural contexts, minority representatives have one key feature in common: namely, their susceptibility to accusations of betrayal. Across the globe, a wide array of epithets exists that depict minority representatives as traitors of the social group with which they are associated (or, in some cases, as actors disloyal to dominant groups). Consider recent slurs that described former US President Obama as a "glossy Uncle Tom" (Pilger 2008). In Europe, labels such as *cuddle Moroccans* (in Dutch, *Knuffel Marokkaan*) and *Alibi Alis* are frequently invoked to describe elected officials whose representativeness—or their capacity to stand for minority constituents—is called into question. The combination of *Ali* (i.e., an "archetypical" Muslim name) with the term *alibi* echoes the belief that minority representatives are recruited by political parties merely to enhance their image. This leaves minority representatives little room to pursue a political agenda that truly foregrounds minority issues.

These epithets not only express feelings of minority betrayal but also connect these feelings to minority representatives' attempts to conform to the style and behavior associated with majority groups. Mainstream media, in contrast, often invokes minority representatives' cultural and social conformity to portray them as "exceptional." By portraying minority representatives as standing apart from "their" social groups, as extraordinary individuals who succeeded in divorcing themselves from "their" group, discourses of "exceptionality" tend to reinforce perceived boundaries between social groups (Severs 2015). The emphasis on representatives' individual-based characteristics, moreover, occludes the structural character of inequalities, thereby limiting possibilities to address power relationships.

Although discourses of betrayal and exceptionality are deeply embedded in contemporary multicultural contexts, they strongly echo the experiences of colonial "cultural brokers" who mediated the encounters (and confrontations) between native and settler or colonizer communities. In twentieth-century French West African societies, for example, it was common to refer to African employees of the colonial state as "white-blacks" (Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts 2006, 3). Similarly, the indigenous woman Malintzin Tenepal—translator, negotiator, and mistress of the Spanish conqueror Cortéz—became known in Mexico as "La Vendida," or "the sell-out" (Moraga 1983, 99).

This article draws on the literature on colonial cultural brokerage—with its long history—to make sense of these routinized accusations of betrayal and their implications for identifying "preferable descriptive representatives" (Dovi 2002). The work of colonial cultural brokers far exceeded linguistic translation and included the negotiation of communities' interests and diplomacy (Hagedorn 1988), which allowed us to draw the analogy in the first place. We found this literature to be particularly helpful because brokers, like contemporary ethnic-minority representatives, also were characterized by their social mobility, their ability to draw on various cultural repertoires and ambiguity over whose loyalties they served (Goodwin 2013).

The literature on brokerage reveals two important insights. First, it sensitizes us to the dynamic and complex power field in which minority representatives operate (de Jong 2015). In a manner similar to colonial cultural brokers, contemporary minority representatives are expected to maintain links with both the marginal and the dominant social groups. At the same time, they experience strong pressure to conform to dominant norms and interests. This paradoxical and contentious position makes them susceptible to accusations of betrayal.

Second, the literature on brokerage reminds us that the *difference* we want minority representatives to make is less related to the promotion of particular group interests than the promotion of more equitable intergroup relationships. Although this insight has been central to group-based theories on fair representation (Phillips 1995; Williams 1998; Young 1989), scholarly preoccupation with defining universally applicable operationalizations of social-group interests tend to distract from this.

THE CULTURAL BROKER: INSIGHTS FROM HISTORICAL STUDIES

Within anthropological and ethno-historical research, the concept of "cultural broker" describes individuals who mediated the encounters between indigenous communities and colonizer or settler communities. European colonization of, migration to, and settlement in so-called new continents elicited the need for actors who could facilitate exchanges between communities whose core beliefs and values were considered largely incomprehensible to one another.

These needs called for a particular type of mobile and hybrid actor. Although settlers or colonizers sometimes acted

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as intermediaries, some of the most famous cultural brokers originated in indigenous communities. Indigenous people sometimes were kidnapped by European settlers, instructed in their language and values, and then sent back to act as messengers. In other cases, cultural brokers were recruited by their own communities to operate as advocates, or they were

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the product of policies that encouraged interracial marriages (Kidwell 1992) as well as the exchange of children (Cohen 2011). Some individuals also actively pursued the role of broker, attracted by its economic and political benefits.

Following historian Hinderaker (2004), cultural brokers should not only be defined by the distinct brokerage acts they performed (i.e., translation, diplomacy, trade negotiation, and religious mediation). It is important that brokers also be defined by who they were: their mixed heritage, or transculturalization (signified by pluri-linguality, adoption of colonial dress, and/or conversion to Christianity), facilitated their adoption of the role of broker in the first instance (Sasz 1994). However, it was their protracted exposure to various sociocultural influences that allowed them to move easily from language translation to more complex acts of intermediation.

The role of broker also cannot be understood in abstraction from the power relationships among communities. Because all exchanges were shaped by the relationships between cultural brokers and the communities they served, cultural brokers were scrutinized continuously for evidence of their integrity (Hinderaker 2004). Any suggestion that their acts were led by personal interests or sought to safeguard the interests of one community over another sufficed to compromise their efforts. This helps in understanding why cultural brokers so often are remembered as outcasts and tragic figures despised by both communities. Caught in the power struggle between two unequal parties, many brokers found themselves "in an oddly uncomfortable position, at the center of important activities yet isolated and vulnerable as the result of their unique role" (Hinderaker 2004, 358).

Although there is little systematic research on the conditions for successful brokerage, three important insights can be derived from the literature. The first condition echoes the previous discussion: brokerage was more likely to lead to solutions considered fair by both settler and indigenous communities when the broker managed to establish mutual relationships of trust (Stovel and Shaw 2012, 151–4). In this sense, brokers' ability to draw on various sociopolitical and cultural repertoires was both their power base and their Achilles' heel. Whereas their cultural versatility facilitated access to both communities and enhanced their capacity to evoke trust, any appearance of partiality or skewed loyalties made them susceptible to distrust. As a result, they often were perceived as traitors who take the opposite side rather than mediators who balance diverging sets of interests (Metcalf 2005, 2).

Second, the success of brokers depended greatly on the level of power symmetry between indigenous and settler or colonizer communities. As colonizers and settlers progressively gained economic and military power, brokers became increasingly dependent on them, which compromised their perceived integrity.

Third, closely related to the former condition, brokers' successes depended on the extent to which indigenous communities managed to exercise control over the selection and training of brokers. An important means of control (and resistance) was restriction of knowledge transfers, such as the refusal to teach indigenous languages to colonizers or settlers. Where natives succeeded, the outcomes of brokerage better reflected their interests (Cohen 2011, 234).

Scholars also addressed the role of brokers' personal interests. Salovesh (1987) elaborated on potential tensions between brokers' personal and community interests in his study of cultural brokers operating in 1930s Mexico. He concluded: "[f]or the broker to succeed *as broker*, he must try to control those [cultural] gates so as to guarantee that only the broker himself may pass them freely" (Salovesh 1987, 368; emphasis in original). Although this conclusion too radically divorces brokers' personal interests from their communities' interests, Salovesh's analysis helps in understanding the power field in which cultural brokers operate. In contexts in which their services are considered needed, brokers simultaneously feature as symbolic bridges that connect and as gatekeepers who keep groups separate. In fact, the demand for brokerage depends on perceiving social groups as distinct and disconnected from one another. This insight—that the presence of brokers already constitutes intergroup relationships in a particular way—is one that we seek to contribute to the literature on preferable descriptive representatives.

PREFERABLE DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATIVES

Dovi's (2002) concept of "preferable descriptive representatives" reflects two central insights from the literature on social-group representation. The first is that shared lived experiences of subordination are the most effective starting points for group advocacy. The second is that not all descriptive representatives will promote the interests of the social group with which they are associated. Combined, these two insights explain the search for standards that would allow minority constituents to better hold "their" representatives to account.

Before specifying Dovi's (2002) standards for preferable descriptive representatives, it is important to elaborate on her relational account of social groups. Rather than conceive of

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social groups as fixed, neatly contained, and readily identifiable entities, she treats social groups as dynamic, fluid, and context-bound. What distinguishes one social group from another is the different ways in which systems of domination (e.g., gender, "race"/ethnicity, age, and class) structure members' lived experiences. This conception of social groups cautions against essentialism: it neither conceives of the effects of systems of domination as given nor treats group members as quasi-uniform individuals who perceive their social experiences in the same way (Young 1989).

Reflecting her anti-essentialist approach, Dovi (2002) defined "preferable descriptive representatives" as representatives who have strong mutual relationships with dispossessed subgroups. Such mutuality, based on reciprocal recognition, makes it more likely that descriptive representatives will promote "their" group's perspective in a manner that is considerate of within-group diversity, as opposed to imposing their proper, invariably limited experiences (Strolovitch 2006).

minority constituents' expectations. Because minority constituents expect "their" representatives to promote their interests, they also monitor more closely the actions of ethnic-minority representatives (Tate 2003). Political parties also actively recruit minority representatives to enhance their demographic representativeness and gain access to minority electorates that otherwise are deemed unreachable by majority representatives.

These diverging expectations position ethnic-minority representatives in a power field that closely resembles the situation of the colonial cultural broker. Like the broker, minority representatives are expected to simultaneously serve the interests of majority and minority groups. This explains why minority representatives so easily fall prey to accusations of betrayal; similar to the colonial broker in the past, the integrity of minority representatives is under increased scrutiny when existing power inequalities are amplified by growing distrust between majority and minority groups. As a result,

This conceptualization, we argue, is helpful in understanding that what makes some descriptive representatives preferable over others has less to do with the promotion of particular group interests *(i.e., the "what" question) than with* the ways in which descriptive representatives promote these interests *(i.e., the "how" question) (cf. Severs, Erzeel, and Celis 2016).*

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This insight, however, has implications that reach far beyond Dovi's (2002) conceptualization of preferable descriptive representatives. Attention to intragroup diversity will not suffice to undo the work of marginalization. Closer attention also is needed for the ways in which descriptive representatives (re)constitute intergroup relationships. This implies that before we can specify standards for preferable descriptive representatives, we first must have a solid understanding of the nature of prevailing power relationships and how ethnic-minority representatives can reify or dismantle them.

At this point, it is interesting to return to the literature on colonial cultural brokers. Although ethnic-minority representatives are not formally appointed the task of mediating relationships between cultural communities, they routinely are perceived as a type of "go-between." Empirical research, for instance, has demonstrated that representatives' descriptive characteristics evoke relationships of trust and shape the room for maneuvering—much needed for a representative to be successful—becomes increasingly narrow. This affects the range of representative strategies available to them. When minority representatives stray too far from mainstream representative repertoires, their claims are unlikely to resonate with their parties. Alternatively, when their claims appeal too greatly to mainstream audiences, they may be perceived as betraying minority perspectives.

Another relevant insight can be drawn from the literature on colonial cultural brokers. As Salovesh (1987) indicated, the perceived need for "go-betweens" already constitutes the relationships between social groups in a particular way. Parties' assumptions that minority candidates would enhance their reach into minority constituents signals that the latter are perceived as distinct units whose identity, values, and norms only marginally overlap or crisscross the majority culture. It is partly because minority interests and values are considered incomprehensible to members belonging to the majority group that minority representatives are needed in the first place.

This sensitizes us to the ways in which the prevailing discourse conditions the ways in which minority representatives may contribute to (re)constituting intergroup relationships on more equitable terms. Like the colonial cultural brokers, minority representatives often are depicted in "mainstream" media as being both "exemplary and exceptional" (de Jong 2016)—as belonging to their social group but at the same time standing apart from it. This discourse keeps power relationships firmly in place: the label of "exceptionality"

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simultaneously lauds ethnic-minority representatives for their social mobility toward positions predominantly associated with the majority but also suggests that few minority members can follow in their footsteps. Although such discourse may be deemed helpful for problematizing structural obstacles that limit social mobility, they may be less conducive when representatives' exemplary function is too greatly emphasized. In these instances, their presence in politics not only solidifies perceived boundaries between social groups but also risks penalizing members of ethnic-minority groups for their own inability to overcome structural inequalities.

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We clarify this point by turning to the case of former US President Barack Obama, who often was criticized for not speaking out strongly enough against racial discrimination—especially against the backdrop of heightened visibility of racist police violence. However, throughout his presidency, Obama actively resisted discourses that invoked his election as evidence that America had entered an era of postracialism in which race inequalities have been reduced to such an extent that they are no longer a topic of debate. Consider the following statement Obama made in an interview: "There's no black male my age, who's a professional, who hasn't come out of a restaurant and is waiting for their car and somebody didn't hand them their car keys" (Sobieraj Westfall 2014).

First, Obama's statement draws attention to the ways in which racism continues to restrain the opportunities available to African Americans, thereby debunking the myth of a postracial era. Second, by adding that "[y]es, it had happened to me as well" (Sobieraj Westfall 2014), Obama underlined that no amount of individual effort on the part of African Americans could prevent them from being affected by racism, thereby preventing less successful African Americans from being penalized. Third, Obama's alignment with the experiences of other African Americans prevents him from being perceived as an "exceptional" and unique member of the African American community. Instead, by marrying the position of most powerful man in the world to that of denigrated subject, he reinserted fluidity into the symbolic boundaries drawn between social groups, thereby potentially weakening the stereotypes associated with them.

DISCUSSION

The insight that minority representatives exert important influence on processes of boundary (re)making should not lead us to attribute responsibility for addressing power relationships to them. Not only would this be unethical—in the sense of unduly restraining their agency—it also could reinforce the discourse of betrayal critiqued in this article. However, because of their centrality in processes of boundary (re)making, we should prefer those representatives who help constitute more equitable social-group relationships.

Although a full account of what is necessary to promote fairness is beyond the scope of this article, it is obvious that preferable representative strategies are contingent and, therefore, plural (Severs, Erzeel, and Celis 2016). The nature of prevailing power relationships, the ways in which intergroup differences are (intersectionally) constructed, and how representatives enter parliament (i.e., quota/reserved seats, party recruitment, or as movement leaders) affect the representative strategies most suited for equalizing intergroup relationships. Future research, we contend, should give priority to studying which strategies work in which intergroup contexts rather than defining universal criteria for measuring social-group interests.

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