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A New Agenda for Democratic Representation?

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Modern democracy is often considered to be tantamount to representative democracy. In her most recent statement on representation, Hanna Pitkin admits that when writing *The Concept of Representation* (1967), she took the relationship between representation and democracy to be unproblematic: "... like most people even today, I more or less equated democracy with representation, or at least with representative government. It seemed axiomatic that under modern conditions only representation can make democracy possible" (2004, 336). Almost forty years later, Pitkin's view is that "representation has supplanted democracy instead of serving it" (2004, 339). She concludes her analysis asking whether democracy can be saved from the increasing turn (or return) of political representation to more elitist forms of government and dominion.

Pitkin's question captures a certain anxiety in recent democratic theory. Participation, deliberation, and the entrenchment of human and constitutional rights have variously been used as strategies to reinvigorate democracy while underpinning its legitimacy. But renewed attention has recently been given to representation, suggesting new ways of both conceptualizing and organizing it, with a view of making it more democratic. Increasing doubts have been raised about the idea that representative democracy is no more than a second-best form of democracy, by arguing that political representation plays a fundamental role within the process of democratic deliberation; and by aligning political representation with other forms of citizens' participation, rather

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than considering it as their necessary substitute for reasons of scale, time, and competence. The realignment of theories of democratic representation with more deliberative and participatory modes of democratic governance asks for a reexamination of the relationship between will and judgment formation in politics, as well as that between interest recognition and first-order preferences.

The reasons for the return of representation on the theoretical agenda are not wholly endogenous to theoretical reflection. There are more immediate political reasons, like the crisis of confidence in the main institutions of representation, such as parliaments and parties; the increasing demands for recognition of minorities as well as oppressed and disadvantaged groups; and the wide-ranging effects following the increasing globalization and diversification of the political space. The crisis of representation and its various causes have created deep dissatisfaction with what can be called its "standard version." I take the "standard version" to be a rather abstract and simplified model, the theoretical synthesis of the way in which the core institutions of democratic representation have developed across time and space. Nonetheless, the "standard version" provides us with a foil against which to analyze the phenomenology of the crisis of political representation.

In sum, the "standard version" may be said to consist of four main components. First, from a more structural (formal, in Pitkin's analysis) perspective, political representation can be thought of as a principal-agent relationship, encompassing both the processes of authorization and accountability, whose combination is constitutive of the very relationship of representation. Second, modern political (and particularly democratic) representation has developed on territorial and electoral grounds, both of which, in different ways, provide the basis for political equality. Territorial constituencies of similar size represent a way in which interests are (artificially) homogenized and made comparable, while the one-person-one-vote principle and the universal franchise are considered as the minimal formal requirements for equal access to power and influence. Third, political representation offers a focal point (a deliberative space, usually in the form of parliaments and other institutions of the public sphere) for decision making. This provides both symbolic and procedural mechanisms that help to bring to unity the differences of opinions, interests, identities, and volitions characterizing the body politic at large. Fourth, political representation (different from legal representation, for instance) provides a flexible — some would say ambiguous — channel through which to give substance (Pitkin's

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substantive conceptions) to both influence and responsiveness. In their simplicity, electoral mechanisms are blunt yet effective means for channeling the voice of the citizens and for making representatives both accountable and responsive. But electoral democracy is only part of the democratic representative system considered as a whole. The processes of electoral selection and sanctioning (i.e., rejecting past governments and representatives at the ballot) takes place within a broader context of opinion formation and of construction of social interests, which only eventually are filtered through the political system.

In different ways, each of these four characteristics of the "standard version" are now subject to criticism, due partly to social and historical developments that have eroded the capacities of traditional institutions to reflect fully the democratic instances that both animate and legitimate representative forms of government in our society. Demands for the recognition of gender as a power factor in politics have been at the forefront of this criticism and particularly of the more formal aspects of representation. In this essay, I briefly mention the shortcomings of each of the four characteristics and then single out the aspects of the current debate that I consider of greater significance.

As for the first characteristic, the principal-agent form of political representation has been criticized both for its rigidity, for being conceived as "natural" (rather than "constructed" by the agents themselves in the process of representation), and for being insulated from other processes of social representation and self-recognition taking place contextually. The second characteristic, the territorial and electoral basis, is seen as less and less apt at organizing political representation in a way that meets the criteria of functionality, effectiveness, and, in some case, recognition. This is particularly true as far as the inclusion of women or disadvantaged groups and minorities is concerned. The third characteristic, consisting in the space for deliberation and decision making, is under threat both from the outside, as nation-states' capacity to act is weakened by supranational and big corporate powers, and from the inside, due to the increasing complexity and abstractness of decision making, and to the manipulation of opinion formation. Finally, the substantive ways in which traditional representation works are regarded as unsatisfactory, partly for a loss of general trust in political representatives, and partly due to the personalization of politics in mass-media dominated societies. The latter means that the ways in which the represented perceive their representatives can be more easily manipulated, while issues of competence in office become subordinate to more trivial issues of appearance and presentation.

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The inadequacy of the "standard version" asks for revisions in our theoretical analysis and for institutional imagination if we wish to answer positively Pitkin's question: Can we save democracy? One particular revision, which has been on the agenda for some time, is the one regarding exclusion, which Philips discusses in her contribution to this issue. I shall not deal directly with this here, apart from pointing out that descriptive representation — which has been at the center of gender-inspired revisions of ideas of representation and of the "politics of presence" theory (Phillips 1995) — can, indeed, support democratic forms of substantive representation. This is an important point also in connection with Pitkin's own contribution to the conceptualization of representation, because she is often criticized for treating the different forms of representation as taxonomy, where one form may exclude the other. On the contrary, I regard the different forms discussed by Pitkin as only analytically distinct. From such a perspective, descriptive representation in the case of women, for instance, can be construed as a way of making substantive representation more effective.

The other two revisions to the "standard versions" have emerged more recently. The first emphasizes the importance of political representation as an intrinsic part of the process of collective will and opinion formation in democracies. Its main role is that of providing a moment of mediation, filtering, and self-reflexivity that is not only essential for a representative form of democracy, but also for any democratic society. This type of argument turns the traditional view of representative government as a form of electoral aristocracy into an endorsement of its democratic credentials by stressing the role that the institutions of political representation play in the process of collective deliberation, public reasoning, and preference laundering. On the one hand, such a view may stress how the more deliberative features of representative democracy (parliaments, parties, public opinion, and other forms of public debate and consultation) are an essential part of our conception of democracy; but on the other, it ought to recognize that such deliberative forms and institutions are too thin and, if anything, increasingly eroded and undermined by the very crisis of representation briefly outlined above. One available option is to shift the emphasis from the political and narrowly institutional terrain to broader, more informal and dispersed, and more socially rooted processes of deliberation and opinion formation. This, after all, was also the role of mass parties, workers' organizations, and social movements for part of the age of what Manin (1997) calls "party democracy." Nowadays, such roles tend to be

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taken by civil society organizations, minipublics, and citizens' assemblies, or even more by professional organizations operating in civil society. This, however, comes at a cost, for the system of political representation becomes more tenuous, informal, dispersed, and disaggregated. Is this a price that democratic representation can pay? The answer to this question is still unclear; much depends on whether we think that democratic societies still need a certain amount of unity in the way in which the public interest can be determined.

The second revision to the "standard version" is mainly concerned with the questioning of the traditional delegate-trustee distinction in relation to the way in which representatives interpret and conduct their role. Historically, the debate on whether to consider representatives as mandated by their constituency to vote in specific ways or whether they should act on their own judgment as trustees of their electors and therefore free to make up their minds independently of any specific mandates, was settled long ago. Most constitutional states uphold the latter view. But this has not prevented a suspicious attitude toward trusteeship as a quintessentially aristocratic conception of the representative relation to remain alive both in normal politics and in democratic theory and to reemerge from time to time, particularly when representatives clearly flout the opinions of those whom they represent. Moreover, it is common to consider referenda or other direct forms of expression of the will and preferences of the electorate to have a greater legitimacy than the one of representative assemblies.

But, of late, a more sustained attempt has been made, which in many respects parallels the one we saw about the deliberative qualities of representation, to revaluate a more trusteeship-based conception of the role of the representatives. Among the various attempts, the most imaginative is probably Mansbridge's (2003), for her nuanced analysis of the way in which the relationship between the represented and representatives can be characterized in ways that escape the straightjacket of the simple dichotomy between delegates and trustees. Mansbridge's introduction of new classifications such as "promissory," "anticipatory," "gyroscopic," and "surrogate" shows the variety of roles that representatives can play and the different forms the relationship between represented and representatives can take. Mansbridge (2009) describes two main models of democratic representation: one emphasizing the selection process of the representatives and the other the mechanisms of control and sanctioning. Her own preference for the "selection model" points to a series of mechanisms and strategies that can inject virtue and commitment in the representative body,

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without this reliance on some aristocratic view of what representation is about. As she says, "[T]he characters of the representative and the constituents are also formed in the representative-constituent relation" (Mansbridge 2009, 392), as their policy choice may be. This is perhaps problematic from an empirical perspective, but normatively, such a defense of the "selection model" is of a piece with a more deliberative conception of democracy, suggesting ways in which representative institutions and mechanisms can be made to conform with some of its principles. Moreover, thinking in terms of gender or group representation in general, one may also see how the deliberative mechanisms invoked by Mansbridge can be combined with descriptive forms of representation in order to strengthen trust and trustworthiness.

In both the revisionist turns here briefly sketched, what is at stake is the fundamental relationship between the expression of the will of the democratic citizens and the formation of their political judgment. If representative institutions and practices can contribute to the formation of the latter by operating with a certain degree of autonomy — without, however, undermining the principle of democratic self-government and without stifling responsiveness — then it may be possible to answer in the positive Pitkin's question on whether we can save democracy from elitism. But, as Hannah Pitkin's path-breaking book on the concept of representation illustrated more than 40 years ago, the tension between will and judgment remains at the center of our understanding of what democratic representation is about. The difference between then and now is that we require new institutional means and practices to deal with the new contexts and identities of politics.

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