

EDITORIAL

RETHINKING RE-PRESENTATION: DEVELOPMENTS IN DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Among theorists of democracy, there is a sea change underway regarding political representation: it is no longer antithetical to but essential to democracy. Nadia Urbinati captures the transformation when she describes “political representation as a democratic process, rather than an expedient or a second best” form of governance (p.18). Several of the articles in this volume explore the possibilities that are opened up by this change.

Political representation as a democratic process will make little sense to those who cling to a juridical model of political representation as a contract between a constituency and the legislator who acts on behalf of its common interests. Such a model depoliticizes the practice of representation by treating the constituency and its interests as if they were given in advance. The insight in this new work is that political representation, like representation in its other modes, works dynamically (cf. Ankersmit 2002). It is an activity that *creates* the constituency and the interest—i.e. the unity—that is to be represented.

What is genuinely thrilling here is that political representation loses its referent, whether that be imagined as the public interest or as a particular, parochial group identity. Or, properly speaking (as it makes little sense to speak of “losing” a referent that never existed in the first place), this shift in thinking displaces the meaning of representation that Hanna Pitkin once insisted should be drawn from the

“etymological origins” of the word: “*re-presentation*, a making present again” (1967, 8). If, as Urbinati writes, there is no “pre-existing entity” to “make visible,” political representation becomes distinctly action-oriented. The success of representative democracy depends not on competitive elections alone but requires a civil society that is rich with associations and dynamically linked to institutions of political governance.

This transformation in democratic political theory puts recent developments in French politics in a new light, as Joan Scott’s contribution to this volume shows. Scott’s account of the struggle for *parité* counters the views of those who would perceive that movement as evidence that American-style multicultural pluralism has insinuated its way into republican France. *Parité*, as Scott reconstructs it from its initial sophisticated formulations, was consistent with an ideal of democratic political representation without a pre-existing referent. The call for *parité* was precisely *not* a demand that sexual difference be recognized and institutionalized in the legislature. It was, instead, an effort to complete the ideal of equivalence before the law that is the hallmark of French universalism.

This ideal, as Scott’s essay so skillfully parses it, involves more than formal enfranchisement. It is also a matter of the way that one’s differences are judged by the hegemonic citizenry. Are they “deemed irreducible” and, so, feared as a force that might fracture the unity of the nation (p. 71)? Or are they regarded as “equally susceptible to abstraction” as any of the characteristics that *adhere* to hegemonic citizens (e.g., whiteness, maleness, straightness, Christian-ness) without *marking* them?

Equivalence is a key to distinguishing between American and French conceptions of universalism. Universalism on the American model aims for inclusion and rests, implicitly, on an “etymological” notion of political representation as making group differences “present again.” Universality is achieved by recognizing an ever-wider array of differences and transfiguring them from reasons to *exclude* a group to a rationale for *empowering* it. By contrast, the French concept of universalism is distinctive for refusing the etymological ruse of re-presentation. It rests not on including previously-excluded particulars but “on (socially or politically) agreed upon indifference to certain particularities” (p. 67).

The call for *parité* exemplified a thoroughly French universalism by calling attention to a failure of *indifference*, not—as an American rationale would have it—to a failure of inclusion. Women had been

formally enfranchised but they were not considered equivalent in the sense of capable of representing citizens in general. Being marked as the “different” sex (as Beauvoir so famously analyzed), they were suspected of only being able to speak in terms of that particularity. Thus, *parité* was understood by its initial proponents as a call to grant equivalence in full by acknowledging the “*duality* of the human,” not the difference of sex.

There is a different conception of equivalence at work in Oliver Marchart’s provocative analysis of political temporality in Arendt and Benjamin. For Marchart, drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, equivalence is the performative that consolidates an *antagonistic* popular struggle into two camps. The specificity of equivalence in this framework lies in the way that it effects that consolidation. Equivalence links political demands not by appealing to some positive content that struggles are said to have in common. Instead, it joins them negatively by demonstrating that their various and irreducibly plural unfulfilled demands can be addressed to a common antagonist.

Whereas equivalence is not a value for Marchart (as it is for the advocates of *parité*), it contributes equally to a non-referential understanding of democratic political representation. For Marchart, as for Urbinati and for Scott, a ‘people’ is an effect of politics, not its ground. To politicize representation as mobilizing a people is the promise of this new direction in democratic thought.

Lisa Disch

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