

THE REPRESENTATIVE CLAIM

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The Representative Claim

MICHAEL SAWARD

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For my parents, Rhyllis and Jim Saward

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Introduction

This book introduces a new way of looking at political representation, in the guise of the representative claim. Representative claims are unstable and highly variable. They encompass and implicate many different groups and individuals; they show us that representation is dynamic, shifting and elusive, and crucial to the very constitution of politics. Representative claims operate across borders and even across species; they denote shifting power relationships rather than fixed institutions; and they can work democratically and undemocratically. We need to look closely at how, and by whom, they are made, received, and judged.

Political ideas and practices are more closely intertwined than we often think. In part, the impetus behind the book comes from current and pressing problems of political life. The politics of representation in many countries and contexts is both changing fast and troubling – there is more than a little talk of a crisis of representation. This should provoke fresh thinking about what representation in politics is, and what it can be. But prevailing ideas about representation are looking tired and out-of-date; in key respects they are not up to the job. A number of political theorists have recognized this issue and have tackled it – I discuss their work throughout the book, and in Chapter 1 in particular – but the debate needs to be taken further.

The pressing problems and real-world changes that prompt this concern are varied:

- a decline in voting rates in most established democracies, and rising disaffection from mainstream representative politics;
- the decline of political parties and rising distrust of politicians;
- the increasing role, especially in international politics, of regulatory bodies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) which are often seen as unrepresentative or unaccountable; and

- renewed demands for better representation of marginalized groups such as women, cultural minorities, and even future generations and non-human nature.

That is not an exhaustive list, by any means. One can look at daily headlines and see the need for fresh thinking about representation. Who, several years after the US-led occupation, speaks or acts for the people of Iraq? Who claims to represent them, and how are those claims received? Is designing a parliamentary democracy enough to achieve representative democracy in Iraq? And what of global warming? Whose voices are most powerful in debates to address it? Among politicians, experts, corporate leaders, and green campaigners, who speaks for whom, and with what authority? Is it enough to be elected to be “representative,” or is there more to it?

Challenging our received ideas about political representation *matters*. Consider, for example, the widespread sense of remoteness of elected politicians in Western countries from “real issues” and citizen concerns. Conceiving of representation as a zero-sum game (either you are elected, and therefore a representative, or you are not) and as institutionally locked-in (elections alone confer representativeness) can readily lead to condemnation of representative government and politics. But this is both too rigid and politically too conservative a view of representation. Carefully revisiting the theory can – as I hope to show – open our eyes to new styles of representation, electoral and non-electoral, which might help varied actors to address the sense of remoteness and inadequacy.

Of course, representation is an institutional fact in the contemporary political world. But prior to that it is a multisided process of claim-making and the reception and judgment of claims. Conventional representative institutions, such as national parliaments, remain crucial to representative practice. But they do not exhaust its manifestations, or the ways in which (and the domains within which) it is politically important. Looking through the lens of the representative claim leads us to question a range of institutions and factors normally taken as settled. We come, for example, to see the field of the representable as constantly expanding and contracting, rather than as fixed or stable.

Political theory has a genuine role to play here; there is real scope for searching, problem-driven theory. In recent years, there has been some useful renewed attention paid to political representation by theorists. The

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widespread acceptance of the analysis of Hanna Pitkin for more than thirty years after the publication of her book *The Concept of Representation* (1967) is a key reason behind the lack of critical attention prior to the late 1990s (in Anglo-American political theory at any rate). But as we shall see, Pitkin herself now challenges important aspects of the thinking behind her classic book, on the basis of the troubling real-world developments (not least the impact of big money on representative democracy). Arguably, there are other reasons for this renewed attention that are more internal to political theory as a discipline. For example, the dominant deliberative thread in democratic theory in recent years – which has emphasized the democratic role of talking rather than voting – has prompted concern with who gets to deliberate, where, and how, which is very much an issue of representation.

It is not that progress is undetectable. Consider arguments and institutions for enacting representation in territorial ways that are alternative to the nation-state (e.g., Held 1995) – or indeed non-territorial bases of representation, including ones which seek to have nonhuman interests represented within human polities (Eckersley 2004). Further, a good deal of recent empirical work illuminates issues of indigenous and minority representation, the representation of women, group representation, descriptive representation in deliberative forums, and the ambiguities of representatives' roles (see, e.g., the essays in Sawyer and Zappala 2001; Laycock 2004; Saward 2000). But mainstream approaches to representation place undue limits on creative thinking about who, or what, may be represented politically, and how this might be done, in these and other fields. A fuller conception of representation, which stresses its dynamic and creative aspects as well as its narrowly institutional ones, and its potential for radical extension, can open up further ways for us to think about political inclusion – going an important step further, I would argue, than even provocative work such as Held's or Eckersley's has taken us so far.

My aim is to offer a more fundamental reappraisal of the idea of political representation. Seeing representation as a dynamic process of claim-making, and not, for example, as a static fact of electoral politics, can help us to make sense of great changes in the daily politics of representation. Crucially, it can also help us to bring ideas of cultural and aesthetic representation into our thinking about political representation – where they belong.

My focus is quite relentlessly contemporary; this is not a book about the history of the idea of political representation. Good summaries of key parts of that history are available elsewhere (Pitkin 1967; Skinner 2005; Brito Vieira and Runciman 2008). The history is rich, to say the least, and varied historical currents inform the content of my argument. I make some brief and highly selective comments here to show how that is the case.

Political theories are partial and complex products of their times. Some, by virtue of prescient thinking, unusual insight, political influence, and compelling expression, resonate beyond their times and up to today (e.g., key works from Hobbes, Burke, Rousseau, and Paine). In her contemporary classic, Hanna Pitkin takes the insights of such writers as, together, providing us with a taxonomy of types of representation, no one complete in itself but each providing a vital piece in a “jigsaw.” My approach differs. I am interested less in locating a correct theory of representation, or in building a theory by close engagement with the work of great theorists from the past. My focus instead is on understanding what representation does, rather than what it is; to explore the effects of its invocation rather than its institutional embodiment; to stress its dynamic character rather than its correctly understood forms or types. Insofar as it can be achieved, I seek this understanding by deploying a perspective that is uncommon in other historical and contemporary works.

Of the varied currents from the history of thinking about representation that inform my efforts, perhaps the most evident is my attempt to knit tightly together in one framework aesthetic, cultural, electoral, and other political approaches. Representation and cognate terms, in Latin, French, and to a degree in English, historically referred to theatrical and symbolic representation before being adapted to use in more strictly political contexts. At the most general level, the history of representation and cognate terms has covered, over a wide sweep of history, varied ways in which one thing or person or body could be said to stand for another. That is the most abstract way to express the underlying meaning of representation, though the historical and theoretical variations on this formulation are so great that we must be cautious in reducing them to a general formula. Different currents have emerged from legal, artistic, religious, philosophical, and dramatic spheres. From Rome to early modern times, there are from these spheres complex, varied, and overlapping notions of

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representation as symbolizing, resembling, portraying, standing for, acting for a collectivity, acting for individuals, authorized and non-authorized portraying or acting for, microcosmic representation, and so on. Although the Latin word *repraesentare* in ancient Rome meant something close to “to present,” the theatrical term “persona,” a character or guise adopted for the stage, is perhaps closer to modern political usage. Middle Age Christian thinking and practice developed other senses of representation: spiritual, as in Christ representing God, and corporate, as in the pope representing Christ to Christendom, for example. Here, an early sense of one person or body being able to “speak for,” as well as symbolize, another body of people emerged, though this was not initially a form that involved authorization by the represented of the representative. Notions of consent underpinning the authority of political representatives emerged in a more recognizably modern form around the time of the English Civil War, not least in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*.

Several of these currents make their way through later centuries, informing or morphing into new modes such as virtual, republican, democratic, trustee, delegate, and others. So, from a modern political perspective, and to generalize perhaps too much, the earliest meanings were connected more to theatrical representation and religious symbolism. Subsequent meanings moved toward more political senses of a king or a parliament portraying, and then standing or speaking for, an earthly constituency. The latter set of meanings moved from acting for a collectivity without actual authorization, to acting for smaller groups and individuals with authorization.

Today, the term tends to be used in specialized ways. There is little overlap, for example, between discussions of political representation via election, artistic representation, and cultural representations. As I hope to demonstrate, we need to knit together these disparate threads that have too often been driven apart. To do so we require an analytical tool built from a perspective that differs substantially from received contemporary ideas of representation. The tool I fabricate and deploy will be one that elaborates the idea of the representative claim. It links five central elements of representation: the maker, the subject, the object, the referent, and the audience. These terms and their important interconnections will be explained in Chapters 2 and 3 in particular. This analytical tool is designed to incorporate symbolic, mimetic, corporate, individual, electoral, and

other currents in the history and present of the idea. I hope to show that it can help us to capture multiple particularities of political representation without sacrificing, for example, aesthetic dimensions of representative practice. As such, it offers a way to avoid “types” or “models” of representation that too artificially separate and oppose different, related threads in the study of political representation. It offers a way to look at political representation today in more than formal, parliamentary, and electoral terms; terms that settle it as a fact rather than a claim, and fail as a consequence to question sufficiently what sort of relationship it is, and what cultural factors make it feasible. The tool can help in these ways precisely by concentrating on representative claims, and their multiple dimensions.

The representative claim is defined, unpacked, illustrated, and defended in the pages that follow. Chapter 1 offers a focused critique of Pitkin’s classic account, and explores more recent innovations and their limits, in order to show what work remains to be done and why it matters. It establishes the need to focus more on what representation *does*; how claims pay a constitutive role; why interpretive depth is more important, in the first instance, than normative bite; how we need to downplay typologies and highlight dynamics (what is going on in representation); why non-electoral modes need to be taken seriously; and why national state representation should not be the overwhelming focus of studies of representation.

Chapter 2 defines and elaborates the multisided idea of the representative claim, setting out its attractions as an analytical tool. Framed by a broad account of representation as an event (especially a claim) rather than a given presence (or a fact), it sets out and discusses in some detail the five-part account of the elements of the representative claim. Representation has often been understood as three-sided: a subject stands for an object that is an account of a referent. The argument in the chapter shows that to understand multiple forms of political representation we need to add to this triangular conception the ideas of the maker and the audience (for claims). The account is designed both to capture the essence and to show the subtlety and reach of the representative claim approach. Chapter 3 continues that work, looking at the variety of dimensions of the representative claim, for example at singular and multiple claims, and internal and external claims. It also explores the crucial role of performance in

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representative claim-making, and seeks to recast representative types or roles as resources that varied actors can use in the making of representative claims. This chapter further elaborates the aesthetic and cultural elements in any representative claim – and therefore that are present in any political manifestation of representation – and examines the notion of the ubiquity of representation (if representation is everywhere, perhaps it is nowhere in particular?).

Chapter 4 takes the framework elaborated thus far and homes in the controversial question of nonelective representation. The nature and limits of elective representative claims are used as a way to discuss several practical types and examples of nonelective representation. The chapter goes on to examine some of the main modes of reception of representative claims, setting up the discussion in the final chapter of the judgment of claims in terms of democratic legitimacy. The broader usefulness of the claim-based framework is addressed in Chapter 5, which takes up questions of the representation of women, future generations, and “nature,” and the representative role of political parties in the past and the future. Factors that are central to the idea of the representative claim, such as nonelective representation, the making of portrayals of the represented, and the multiple potential sites of representative practice are elaborated with respect to these three important cases. Here, and indeed across the book, there is a good deal of focus on specific institutions, practices, and places – this is political theory *because* it stays close to real politics, and not in spite of the fact. In the concluding Chapter 6, I review some key points and step back to consider what these new approaches and arguments might mean for democratic representation and “representative democracy.” I explore how we might judge the democratic character of representative claims, not by offering an independent theory of legitimacy but by exploring the conditions under which certain constituencies and audiences may make assessments of claims. The chapter further pinpoints how various points of received wisdom about representative democracy need to be revised, some of which might be considered surprising.

We hope you have enjoyed this short preview. The representative claim by Michael Saward can be purchased from Amazon here:

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Representative-Claim-Michael-Saward/dp/0199579385>

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