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Representation and Democracy: an uneasy alliance*

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Abstract

The concept of 'representation' is puzzling not because it lacks a central definition, but because that definition implies a paradox (being present and yet not present) and is too general to help reconcile the word's many senses with their sometimes conflicting implications.

Representation has a problematic relationship with democracy, with which it is often thoughtlessly equated. The two ideas have different, even conflicting, origins. Democracy came from ancient Greece and was won through struggle, from below. Greek democracy was participatory and bore no relationship to representation. Representation dates - at least as a political concept and practice - from the late medieval period, when it was imposed as a duty by the monarch. Only in the English Civil War and then in the eighteenth-century democratic revolutions did the two concepts become linked.

Democrats saw representation - with an extended suffrage - as making possible large-scale democracy. Conservatives instead saw it as a tool for staving off democracy. Rousseau also contrasted the two concepts, but favoured democratic self-government. He was prescient in seeing representation as a threat to democracy. Representative government has become a new form of oligarchy, with ordinary people excluded from public life. This is not inevitable. Representation does make large-scale democracy possible, where it is based in participatory democratic politics at the local level.

Three obstacles block access to this possibility today: the scope of public problems and private power; money, or rather wealth; and ideas and their shaping, in an age of electronic media.

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The idea of representation has been getting renewed attention lately, especially in Europe, where the effort to form some sort of regional institutions - less than a state but more than an alliance - has raised countless issues of both theoretical principle and political practicality, many of them involving representation. What institutions should there be, with what powers, and how should their offices be filled? Appointment? Elections? On what basis and by whom? Whom or what are these officials to represent? These European concerns also reflect the wider problems raised by our peculiar current combination of unchecked globalization with resurgent localism and ethnic separatism. What sort of political organization, what sort of representation can suit such conditions?

Given the gravity, complexity, and urgency of such questions, together with the enormously technological outlook of our time, an audience attending a lecture on representation is almost bound to expect an expert, offering technical, institutional advice: unitary or district elections, winner-takes-all or proportional representation, majority rule or reserved quotas for minorities? Such issues do matter, but I am not such an expert. I fear that my remarks will disappoint you.

My own study of representation was not technically oriented but conceptual and theoretical [H.F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley, 1967]. True, it had its own kind of technicality, relying on the tools of 'ordinary-language' philosophy and semantic analysis. But it addressed none of the technical questions, offering at most an overview of this troubling concept's diversity.

The concept does have a central core of meaning: that somebody or something not literally present is nevertheless present in some non-literal sense. But that is not much help. First, the core itself contains an inescapable paradox: not present yet somehow present. And, second, the definition is too broadly vague to help in sorting out the many particular senses, often with incompatible implications or assumptions, that the word has developed over centuries of use.

The way a city or a mountain is 'made present' on a map differs totally from the way a litigant is 'made present' by an attorney. The way *Macbeth* is 'made present' on the stage differs from the way an ambassador represents a state, or the way one 'makes representations about' something, or what characterizes representational art or a representative sample. And all this is only in English. If one wants to know not just about the word, but about the actual phenomena of 'representation' in various times and cultures, things get much worse. Even in German - a language after all very close to English - representation in art or theatre has no conceptual

connection with representation in court or in government [H.F. Pitkin, 'Representation', in T. Ball, J. Farr, & R.L. Hanson (red.) *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Cambridge, 1989]

That is as far as I got with the concept when I studied it some forty years ago. Since then I have pursued other interests, and in order to engage at least one of them, I want to talk about the relationship of representation to democracy, a topic never raised in my earlier study because at the time I took that relationship for granted as 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. That assumption is not exactly false, but it is profoundly misleading, in ways that remain hidden if one treats it as an axiom and asks only technical rather than fundamental theoretical questions.

The idea of 'democracy' is every bit as complex and troublesome as that of representation. Etymologically it means that the people (Greek *demos*) rule (*kratein*). But the meaning of *demos* is ambiguous. Is it that all the people jointly are to rule themselves, or that the common (demotic) people are to rule over the (former) aristocracy? And what criteria determine whether the people are in fact ruling? Words such as 'democracy' and 'representation' furthermore, like the vocabulary of human institutions more generally, have this peculiarity: their use ranges confusingly between expressing an idea or ideal, and designating uncritically the actual arrangements currently supposed to embody that idea [Pitkin, 1967].

When I speak about democracy here today I mean to raise and acknowledge such difficulties rather than suppress them. Let us just say that by 'democracy' I mean popular self-government, what Abraham Lincoln spoke of – though John Wycliffe had used the expression some five centuries before – as 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people' [A. Lincoln, *Selected Writings and Speeches of Abraham Lincoln*, T. H. Williams (red.) 1980, p. 231]. It is a matter of degree, an idea or ideal realized more or less well in various circumstances, conditions, and institutional arrangements. 'Fugitive', Sheldon Wolin calls it [S.S. Wolin 'Fugitive Democracy', in S. Benhabib, (red.) *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Princeton, 1996].

That the relationship between democracy so understood and representation is problematic is suggested already by the two concepts' disparate, even conflicting, histories. Democracy originated with the ancient Greeks. At least the concept did; the practice must surely have been

lot older in some tribes and small settlements. Athenian democracy was won by political struggle, from below, and it was direct and participatory to an astonishing degree. It was also, by our standards, extremely constricted, unrelated to any notion of universal human rights. The Greeks thought of other peoples (barbarians) and of women as being generically incapable of politics. Their democracy also had nothing whatever to do with representation, an idea for which their language had no word.

Representation, at least as a political idea and practice, emerged only in the early modern period and had nothing at all to do with democracy. Take England, for example. The king, needing additional revenue beyond that from the royal estates and traditional feudal dues, required each shire and borough to send a delegate to commit the locality to special additional taxes. So representation was imposed as a duty from above, a matter of royal convenience and administrative control. As the practice was repeated, it gradually became institutionalized. Sometimes the delegates were sent with instructions from their communities; sometimes they were expected to report back on what had transpired. Gradually they began to make their consent conditional on redress of grievances, to think of themselves as members of a single, continuing body, and sometimes to join forces against the king. So representation slowly came to be considered a matter of right rather than a burden, though even then the selection of delegates was by no means democratic, often not even accomplished by election.

Only when these struggles between king and parliament culminated in civil war in England in the seventeenth century, and subsequently in the great democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century, was the alliance between democracy and representation formed. The democrats challenged the twin medieval assumptions, that God assigned to each man at birth his station in a sacred hierarchy, and that the realm was the geographic land and so its affairs were the concern only of the king and landed aristocracy.

Instead, the democrats held that everyone born and living in the land had a stake in public life: 'The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he.' Each has a 'birthright' that includes a 'voice' in public affairs, and no one is bound to obey a government 'that he has not had a voice to put himself under' (Woodhouse 1951, 51, 69). The democrats held as 'self-evident' that 'all men are created equal' rather than situated in a hierarchy, 'that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights', and that governments are legitimate only when they 'secure those rights' (Declaration of Independence of the United States of America). Far from consisting in the geographic land, the realm is a nation of citizens, all equally children of *la patrie*. The common people have no need

of any special, anointed ruler or of any special class to govern them; we all are capable of participating in political life, and entitled to do so.

So democracy (re-)emerged in the modern world. But, since it emerged in large nation-states rather than small city-states, and since by then the practice of (undemocratic) representation was well established, the alliance seemed obvious. Extend the suffrage, and democracy would be enabled by representation. Since, as John Selden put it, ‘the room will not hold all’, the people would rule themselves vicariously, through their representatives [H. Arendt *Crises of the Republic*, New York, 1972, p. 238].

The democrats’ conservative opponents, apart from a few die-hard monarchist absolutists, by this time accepted (undemocratic) representation as traditional. But far from equating it with democracy, they mobilized it as a tool for staving off the democratic impulse and controlling the unruly lower classes. In the debates accompanying the English Civil War, the conservatives said, once you start opening the traditional way of selecting members of parliament to the challenge of principle, ‘you must fly . . . to an absolute natural right’, and then there is no limit; anyone can claim anything. There are five times as many in this realm without (landed) property as with, they said. ‘If the master and servant shall be equal electors . . . the majority may by law . . . [enact] an equality of goods and estate.’ Chaos will result [A.S.P. Woodhouse *Puritanism and Liberty*, London, 1951, pp. 53, 63, 57].

In America, similarly, James Madison in *The Federalist* contrasted representative government – which he called a ‘republic’ – to democracy, rather than linking the two. The ‘pure’ democracy of ancient Greece, he said, presupposed a small city-state, and it was marked by constant ‘turbulence and contention’, by hasty, passionate, and unwise decisions. A representative government as proposed in the new constitution, by contrast, not only would allow for a large and growing republic, but also would ‘refine and enlarge’ – that is, deflect or replace – the views of ordinary citizens by filtering them through a wise, responsible elite, better able to ‘discern the true interests of their country’ [A. Hamilton, J. Madison, & J. Jay, *The Federalist with the Letters of Brutus*, T. Ball (red.), Cambridge, 2003, p. 43–45].

But saying that the democrats conjoined representation with democracy while the conservatives contrasted the two ideas is too simple. There was also at least one idiosyncratic democratic voice that warned against representation: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Now, Rousseau spoke not in terms of ‘democracy’, which he regarded merely as a form of executive, but of freedom in a legitimate state. Still, what he said was quintessentially democratic: freedom requires the active, personal participation of all, assembled

together, jointly deciding public policy. It is therefore incompatible with representation. The English, Rousseau remarked, imagine themselves to be free, but actually they are free only at the moment of casting their ballots in an election; immediately afterwards they sink back into slavery, and cease to exist as a people [Rousseau 1968, pp. 101–2, 110, 141].

Well, Rousseau was a romantic and a utopian, hopelessly impractical. By his account, freedom would be possible only in a very small community and among people who are heroically, self-sacrificingly public spirited. ‘As soon as the public service ceases to be the main concern of the citizens’, he wrote, or as citizens begin to say about the public good, ‘What does it matter to me?’, freedom disappears [J-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (vert. M. Cranston), Harmondsworth, 1968, pp. 140–41].

And yet, for all his romantic posturing, Rousseau was on to something about representation. The intervening centuries seem to have proved him right, at least in this respect. Despite repeated efforts to democratize the representative system, the predominant result has been that representation has supplanted democracy instead of serving it. Our governors have become a self-perpetuating elite that rules - or rather, administers - passive or privatized masses of people. The representatives act not as agents of the people but simply instead of them.

We send them to take care of public affairs like hired experts, and they are professionals, entrenched in office and in party structures. Immersed in a distinct culture of their own, surrounded by other specialists and insulated from the ordinary realities of their constituents’ lives, they live not just physically but also mentally ‘inside the beltway’, as we say in America (that is, within the ring of freeways that encircle Washington, DC). Their constituents, accordingly, feel powerless and resentful. Having sent experts to tend to their public concerns, they give their own attention and energy to other matters, closer to home. Lacking political experience, they feel ignorant and incapable. (‘The President has access to all sorts of classified information we don’t have’, I’ve heard repeatedly in recent months. ‘He must know what he is doing.’)

Not that people idolize their governors and believe all the official pronouncements. On the contrary, they are cynical and sulky, deeply alienated from what is done in their name and from those who do it. Yet in their conduct they continue to support - that is, to refrain from disrupting - the system. Most do not even bother to vote, let alone take any active responsibility for their nation’s public life. Sporadically unruly, distrusting politicians and hating ‘the government’ even while they accept and pursue its largesse, they regard the resulting policies and conditions as if fated. It never occurs to them to think of the government as their shared instrument, or of the

public as consisting simply of themselves collectively. (And why should it occur to them, given how things now work?)

Clearly, representation is not the only culprit in bringing about this lamentable state of affairs, but it is a culprit. The repeated widening of the suffrage and the many technical improvements in systems of representation have brought about neither the property redistribution and social chaos the conservatives feared nor the effective democracy the reformers expected. The arrangements we call 'representative democracy' have become a substitute for popular self-government, not its enactment. Calling them 'democracy'

only adds insult to injury. The late Hannah Arendt, who wrote most eloquently and thoughtfully on these matters, says, 'Representative government has in fact become oligarchic government', in the sense that 'the ageold distinction between ruler and ruled which the [American and French] Revolution[s] had set out to abolish through the establishment of a republic has asserted itself again; once more, the people are not admitted to the public realm, once more the business of government has become the privilege of the few' [H. Arendt, *On Revolution*. New York, 1965, pp. 273, 240].

Must we accept this as inevitable? Must we acquiesce in Rousseau's view, with its implication that in a globalized world, democracy is irrelevant? Arendt thought not. From her own study of modern revolutions and 'social movements' and from Alexis de Tocqueville's study of America in the 1830s, she concluded that the struggle for democracy is not yet lost. Genuinely democratic representation is possible, she held, where the centralized, largescale, necessarily abstract representative system is based in a lively, participatory, concrete direct democracy at the local level.

Participating actively in local political life, people learn the real meaning of citizenship. They discover that (some of) their personal troubles are widely shared, and how their apparently private concerns are in fact implicated in public policy and public issues. Thus they discover a possibility based neither on private, competitive selfishness nor on heroic self-sacrifice, since they collectively *are* the public that benefits, yet disagree on what is to be done. In shared deliberation with others, the citizens revise their own understanding of both their individual self-interest and the public interest, and both together [H.F. Pitkin & S.M. Shumer, 'On Participation' in: *democracy* 2, pp. 43–54, 1982].

Having these experiences in a context of action and responsibility, seeing the actual results in the world, they also realize (that is, they both perfect and become aware of) their own capacities: for autonomous judgment, for deliberation, and for effective action. Seeing themselves in collective

action, they observe their own powers and their shared power. People with this kind of face-to-face experience among their neighbours can then also be effective democratic citizens in relation to their more distant, national representatives. Local direct democracy undergirds national representative democracy.

Tocqueville claimed to have observed this in Jacksonian America. He saw a people passionately engaged with their public life, in a not at all self-sacrificing way. Take away politics from an American, he said, and it would be as if 'half his existence (had been) snatched from him; he would feel it as a vast void in his life and become incredibly unhappy' [A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, J. P. Mayer (red), vert. G. Lawrence, New York, 1969, p. 243]. As recently as the 1960s something like this kind of political engagement still seemed possible in many lands. Today the outlook is considerably more bleak; we democrats have reason to worry. I will conclude by just mentioning three big obstacles that stand in the way.

The first concerns the scope of public problems and private power. For local politics to be able to provide the experience of active citizenship, it must be real. Something that genuinely matters to people, some problem in their actual lives, must be at stake. A mere pretend politics, a simulacrum of public action without significant content or consequences, will not do. But in our world the conditions that trouble people's lives are - more and more - large scale. They are by-products of the activities of huge, undemocratic organizations, be they national mafias, transnational corporations, or even government bureaucracies and armies. If the local community's only water supply is owned by a transnational corporation with headquarters elsewhere (or, effectively, nowhere) and an annual budget larger than that of many states, then there may result local troubles of such overwhelming importance that nothing else matters by comparison, but which cannot be locally handled.

The second, related obstacle is money, or rather wealth. Not so much the corrupting role of money in elections which has been the focus of attention in America recently, but the more general, age-old tension between the power of wealth and 'people power', meaning the power of numbers and of commitment. (It is unfortunate that Marx is no longer read since the demise of the Soviet Union; for all their faults, his works are useful for thinking about these matters.)

The third obstacle is difficult to designate by a single apt name. It is about ideas and their shaping. Deception, propaganda, and indoctrination have always played a role in the rough and tumble of actual political life, but they take on new, disturbing dimensions in our age of electronic media and satellite surveillance, of 'hype', 'spin', and the 'infomercial', of 'image', 'credibility', and 'virtual reality'. Watching television from infancy, people not only acquire

misinformation; they become habituated to the role of spectator. The line between fantasy and reality blurs (indeed, the line between television image and one's own fantasy blurs). As for those who set policy and shape the images, insulated from any reality check, they soon become captive to their own fictions. All this does not bode well for democracy, either. Am I being too pessimistic? Perhaps things look more cheerful in other lands. I am painfully aware of the irony of writing today as an American on - of all things! - democracy and representation. I mean, where in the world has representative democracy had a better chance than in America, where its beginnings were so promising and the conditions so favourable? And look at it now! So maybe America distorts my vision. After all, the democratic impulse has proved amazingly resilient, and even the joint-stock limited liability corporation is only a human invention, humanly changeable, not an inevitability.

Can democracy be saved? I am old; it is up to you.