General introduction to the *Research Handbook on Political Representation*

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POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY AND BEYOND

The contemporary model of democracy, one of the historically most relevant inventions in the field of ‘political technology’, originally conceived and developed during the last two centuries in Europe and in its external projections (such as the United States) and then diffused in different parts of the world, has at its centre the idea of representation and the crafting of institutions to translate this into practice. The *representative* qualifier has thus come to be strictly associated with the noun ‘democracy’ to define the new model of *representative democracy*. This development, which has significantly contributed to shaping the politics of a large part of the world, is both the result of passionate ideological and philosophical debates and of very concrete and often dramatic political struggles, as well as of often contested institutional choices. The two dimensions, ideational and practical, have been closely intertwined, though sometimes conflicting. Theories of democracy and representation have inspired political struggles and institutional choices, but they have also been used to criticize the latter as insufficient or misdirected. In turn, practical choices have sometimes been guided more by expediency and compromises among political actors than by full attention to principles.

In the context of contemporary democracy, representation has thus obtained the position of the central and powerful metaphor used to address the oldest and most crucial problem of politics: how to normatively prescribe, practically organize and empirically describe the asymmetric and dangerous relationship between rulers and ruled. The solution offered by representation to this problem is seen as providing what is today (at least in principle) the predominant source of authorization and legitimation for the rulers (they can rule because they represent the sovereign people). It is also seen as the instrument that enables influence and control over those who detain power by those who do not wield direct power, and ensures that those who rule can be called to respond to the demands of those who are ruled, and in some way held to account.

When discussing the concept of political representation and its ramifications, we must therefore remember they are the result of extensive theoretical, political and institutional elaborations and of the enormous quantity of practices which have taken place over two centuries and more, first in a limited number, then in a multitude of countries. Stretching over time and across countries, the ideas and realities of representation have been challenged and contaminated by a huge variety of socio-political realities. Large or small communities, territorially homogeneous or heterogeneous countries, egalitarian or highly unequal societies, the presence or absence of ethnic minorities, the politicization or non-politicization of gender differences, the rise of parties with their variable organizational forms, the activation of social and political movements mobilizing population sections: these and many other aspects have caused the concept of representation to be continuously reinterpreted and different institutional solutions crafted to make it practicable. It should not be a surprise that a sort of Pandora’s box opens up as soon as we start unpacking the concept.

This is not to say, however, that the idea of representation did not exist before this period and that practices embodying it have not been used in the context of rather different political models. It is well known, in fact, that in Europe the modern concept and concrete forms of rep-

representation were not developed *ex nihilo*, but were able to profit significantly from pre-existing experiences and theories. They did so, either by incrementally transforming and reinterpreting these traditions (the English experience is probably the best example) or, *a contrario*, by contesting and repudiating them as outdated and no longer acceptable and by inventing radically new formulas (the French revolutionary experience is here the best example). We are thus allowed to say that modern political representation is at the same time a truly new phenomenon, but it is also vitally linked to a significant chain of antecedents.

Shifting our observation in another direction, we can say that even today the standard institutions and mechanisms of representation embodied in the contemporary form of liberal democracy do not exhaust the phenomenon. Different ideas and practices of representation also exist beyond the borders of that political model. Inspired by different principles, corporatist and technocratic forms of representation work sometimes in a complementary, sometimes in a conflicting way with the standard version. Moreover, different types of societal movements and aggregations do indeed produce elements of representation that do not fit easily into electoral representation. Finally, it must be remembered that more frequently than expected, non-democratic regimes adopt (and adapt) 'representative' institutions, mimicking those typical of democratic regimes with the purpose of enhancing their legitimacy, strengthening popular support and harnessing potential oppositions.

A RELATIVELY SIMPLE INSTITUTIONAL MODEL, BUT WITH MUCH LESS OBVIOUS MEANINGS

In contemporary liberal democracies, representation is implemented through what is at first sight a relatively straightforward institutional configuration. This obviously refers to a result that was often far from easy and complicated to achieve. Popular elections of parliamentary assemblies endowed with law-making powers and in some cases of the head of state as well (often, but not always, also combining the role of head of the executive) are the typical institutional translations of representation at the national level, and more or less similar formats are reproduced at regional or municipal levels. In Europe an innovative supra-national application has also been developed with the direct election of the European Parliament (as well as with the indirect representation of member states through the Council of the European Union). As is explicitly declared by most democratic constitutions, members of parliament (and directly or indirectly, the members of the executive) are thus institutionally defined as *the* representatives, while the citizens/ the nation/ the people are alternatively indicated as *the* represented. Specific arrangements concerning electoral systems, configurations of parliaments and of parliament-executive relations may vary, but more or less within the frame of a relatively common institutional design. The coexistence also of representative institutions pertaining to different territorial levels – sub-national, national and in some cases supra-national – makes the institutional settings more complex, but does not alter the basic frame of reference.

If the institutional set-up typical of democratic regimes has, so to speak, provided a normatively formalized version of representation, by which a relatively small set of people elected by a much larger set of other people has been seen as the way to achieve this goal, what this more precisely entails is much less clear and often contested. The ambiguous and polysemic character of the representation metaphor immediately emerges and is matched by a multiplicity of meanings and practices as soon as we open the box.

The literal meaning implied by representation – making present what is otherwise absent – is the most obvious starting point for disentangling the concept, but at closer inspection is unable to define in a univocal and precise way the substance of the phenomenon. In fact, both at the normative level (what representation should be) and at the empirical level (what it is, in fact) a rather wide space of variation opens up. At least three sets of questions emerge: (a) who

is/are the representative/s; (b) who is/are the represented; (c) what kind of relational linkage unites and what distance divides the two terms of the representation equation? These questions have been the subjects on the one hand of intense theoretical and normative discussions and on the other of wide-ranging empirical analyses of their variable practical implementations.

Are the represented the individual citizens, groups or categories of citizens, or a comprehensive and abstract collective entity (called the people, the nation, or sometimes the class)? When an individual, a social group or category, or an abstract collective entity is said to be represented, what is in fact at stake? Their interests, value orientations, specific demands, peculiar personal features, identities? All are in fact potentially involved. And if we also bring the temporal dimension into play, we can further distinguish between short-term and long-term interests, attitudes, and so on.

On the other side of the representative relation, who do we expect the representative to be? The individual member of parliament, the party in parliament (or outside), a leader, or the parliament as a whole?

Behind the answers given to these questions at the normative level it is not too difficult to detect rather different and potentially conflicting conceptions about the political body and its components, but also about democracy and its relationship with society.

At the empirical level, the answers will reflect variations in the practical working of the political and social conditions which directly or indirectly impinge upon the representation processes. For instance, just to mention a few factors, changes in the extension of franchise, variations in electoral systems, the development (and decline) of mass organized parties, or at a more sociological level the decay of class society, the fragmentation of interests, and the mobilization of identity-based groups, can significantly alter the meaning of who is represented and who is representing. The research strategies will change accordingly.

Questions about who is represented and who represents do not exhaust the representation debate. The nature of the relationship between the two terms of the equation is equally important both at the normative and at the empirical level. This element, while obviously influenced by the specific features of represented and representatives, deserves specific attention. As amply discussed in the literature on representation, a variety of aspects are at play here. There is first of all the aspect of authorization, that is, how (and within what limits) the representative is legitimized to act on behalf of the represented and to bind them by his or her actions. It may be seen as a purely formalistic fact, but we should not underestimate the symbolic value that can be attached to it: to be a representative of the people carries both prestige and responsibilities. The second aspect concerns the actions of the representatives and the criteria that (should) guide them and by which they can be evaluated. Acting in the interest of the represented is here the apparently easy answer. It is much less easy to specify what precisely defines this 'acting in the interest' and how the representatives should operate in order to absolve this duty. Does it entail special norms for guiding their actions (and for evaluating them)? Leaving aside the big problems arising from the concept of interest itself, the degree of freedom/constraint for the representative in interpreting and implementing the interest(s) of the represented is here the crucial issue which has animated the long and recurrently re-emerging debate on the delegate/trustee alternative. Both normatively and empirically the answer to this dilemma is strongly linked to the nature of the represented, but also to the prevalence of elitist or participatory interpretations of democracy. Is democracy a predominantly elite controlled process or is it rather driven by popular participation? Responsiveness and accountability are themes strictly linked to the solutions given to the previous questions. How important are they for the fulfilment of representation and how do they work in practice?

But is representing necessarily and exclusively about interests (or, in other words, demands...) and the actions which (should) respond to them? Or is there something else at stake which has less to do with actions and more to do with identities (*being* rather than *acting*)? The very old idea of peer representation, which to a large extent inspired the format of pre-modern parliaments,

has made a strong comeback in contemporary times, particularly, but not only, in response to the highly gender-biased state of representation. In this and other cases, the question of the degree to which representatives (should) reflect the identity, that is to say selected personal features, of the represented has gained prominence. Finally, in times of populist politics, the personality traits of the individual leader may operate as a drastic shortcut in the representation equation.

With regard to the representative relationship, a further point has to be raised. Representation is often discussed both from the normative and from the empirical point of view in a static perspective. The representative relationship (with all its potential shades discussed above) is often observed and evaluated in terms of the degree of congruence existing at a given point in time between the 'positions' (or identities) of the representatives and those of the represented, viewed as fixed. This, however, is a drastic simplification of representation which in democratic systems should be seen more as a process than as a static relationship. As signalled particularly by constructivist approaches, we should rather see the positions/identities of the two sides as constantly reshaped through the process of representation. This happens both in a top-down and in a bottom-up direction. In normal times, in particular, we may expect the top-down influence to be especially strong, as representative elites are in a better position to propose and suggest representative contents in simplified formulas to which the would-be represented can more easily react. On the other hand, however, we should not underestimate the extent to which, in times of accelerated change, representative elites can be under the unexpected pressure of new orientations and demands originating from below and be stimulated to redefine their offer.

TENSIONS BETWEEN NORMATIVE AND EMPIRICAL DIMENSIONS OF REPRESENTATION

As we have already mentioned, the debate on representation entails both normative as well as empirical dimensions. The distinction between them, but also their important connections, must be underlined. On the one hand, it is quite clear that the concept of representation, particularly when linked to that of democracy (which redefines it as *democratic representation*), is strongly charged with normative content but at the same times acknowledges the constraints of reality. It proposes, in fact, an answer to the crucial problem of the relationship between rulers and ruled, which is highly demanding as it combines the idea of popular sovereignty (and all the expectations deriving from it) with the acceptance of the fact that governing is in the hands of a relatively restricted group of (elected) politicians. On the other hand, if we look at representation from the empirical side, we can observe a set of phenomena which are surely inspired by normative ideals but in their working are even more strongly conditioned by the 'hard laws' of politics. The limited information of citizens and the failures of collective action compared to the much greater resources of political elites and the weight of their self-interest obviously contribute to the factual experience of representation and to the structural imbalance in the relationship between represented and representatives.

This means that expectations as to the working of representation generated by the norms are necessarily going to be disappointed to a greater or lesser degree. The quality of representation ordinarily supplied by representatives will easily attract the criticism of (both supportive and hostile) observers as being below the proclaimed normative standards. It will be simple to show that representatives fail to act in the interest of the represented, that they rather pursue their own goals, in particular that of preserving their seat, or that they are not men (and women) of the people but a privileged caste, and so on. In view of these failings, the voice of populist movements offering, as an alternative, direct identification with the leader or the party as a close community may have easy appeal for many citizens.

A more realistic perspective, however, would suggest that ideal norms, rather than defining an empirical model that can be fully achieved in real life, should be seen as a 'pull factor' which can

constantly help to make reality less distant from the ideal. They can also be used as a criterion of evaluation in the comparison between different political experiences. In this perspective, what we call representation may in real life offer a very imperfect representation of citizens and their interests but still appears to be the most effective instrument available to citizens for exerting a continuous influence over rulers.

THE *HANDBOOK* SECTIONS

In the first section of the *Handbook*, the theoretical and normative debate is widely discussed. There is little doubt that the scholarly debate on what political representation is and what it does has never been so heated as in recent years. The broad consensus reached in the 1960s on the concept and practices of representation, as defined by the likes of Pitkin and Dahl, persisted almost unquestioned until the end of the last century. This is not to deny that within the Western world several political actors and thinkers criticized representation and its institutional form, questioning their democratic credentials; nevertheless, the theoretical language to discuss these issues was shared among all parts. This gradually changed at the turn of the century, when several pillars of the standard account were brought into question and, more or less at the same time, the difficult social and economic conditions in which democracies had to operate cast doubts on the capacity of political institutions to accommodate citizens' needs, giving voice to old and new critiques. All in all, the chapters in this section highlight that while representation is still a contested concept, whose fundamental aspects can be questioned and redefined, no coherent theoretical or institutional alternatives to surpass it have yet been advanced.

The second section is devoted on the one hand to a detailed discussion of the historical transformations of parliamentary representation, and on the other to exploring other models of representation which coexist with the former in contemporary democratic polities or which adapt or simulate this model in authoritarian regimes. With regard to the first aspect, the first chapters of this section discuss the changing meanings and institutional implementations of parliamentary representation from pre-modern experiences to the gradual developments linked to the process of democratization until the stage of party democracy. As to the second aspect, other chapters will analyse how corporatist and technocratic ideas offer the bases for other forms of representation which are partially complementary and partially antagonistic to the parliamentary one. The special case of non-democratic regimes and how they cope with their problems of legitimation, consensus building by exploiting some typical democratic institutions in a manipulative way, is also discussed.

As representation in contemporary democratic systems has been implemented through a set of specific institutions, the third section provides an articulated discussion of variations in the design of these instruments and how they are related to different aspects and interpretations of the representative idea. Special attention is paid to electoral systems, to the territorial dimension of representation, to the relationship between size of jurisdictions and democracy, and to the problems of ensuring the representation of different types of minorities.

The fourth section offers an overview of the most consolidated empirical programmes studying political representation, while also reserving some space for some relatively new research agendas. A first group of chapters focuses on individual representatives, reviewing existing typologies and the factors shaping parliamentarians' behaviour, such as methods of selection and electoral systems. A second block of chapters shifts the focus from dyadic to aggregate forms of representation, looking at what interest groups, parties and governments do: in this vein the methods and findings of the rich body of literature on interest representation, policy congruence and government pledges are reviewed. Finally, the section also gives attention to less consolidated but promising fields of enquiry including studies concerning policy and non-policy responsiveness, citizens' expectations about representation and the relationship between representation and deliberation.