

Representative politics : An exhausted paradigm?*

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There are not many truisms in political science, but the view that representation is intrinsic to political mobilisation and beyond that any system of governance is probably among them. Some people will hold power; other people will be subject to it. Some people will speak on behalf of a group, political cause or identity and thus represent it; others will recognise themselves as being the object of this discourse and be represented by it. ‘Speaking for others’ and ‘being spoken for’ is, according to Hanna Pitkin, fundamental to understanding the dynamic of politics. As she puts it: ‘In modern times, almost everyone wants to be governed by representatives ...; every political group or cause wants representation; every government claims to represent’.

Few readers of the text would have had grounds for querying such an analysis when it first appeared in 1967. Now it appears problematic. As is becoming increasingly clear, the idea that almost everyone ‘want to be governed by representatives’ is countered by a body of evidence that suggests that this far from true. Suffice to say that in terms of four key measures used to measure the health of representative politics in mature democracies, electoral turnout, membership of political parties, interest in politics as measured by readership of broadsheet newspapers, and trust in politicians, the prognosis suggests otherwise. Compared to the era to which Pitkin’s analysis relates we vote less - when we vote at all. We are highly unlikely to join a political party, to be interested in the affairs of the state or the political class (unless it is in the context of a scandal). We trust politicians less than any other professional grouping including lawyers, second hand car salesmen and estate agents.

As for the second half of Pitkin’s statement (‘every political group or cause wants

* As will become immediately obvious, this paper is designed to provoke discussion and feedback rather than to present new findings prior to publication. It’s for this reason that I have not populated the paper with notes or references. Any reader who would nonetheless like to follow up on any of the references or materials alluded to here is welcome to contact me by email.

representation'), many emergent political groups, initiatives and causes now explicitly identify themselves as opposed to 'representation', 'representatives' and reject the notion that they 'want' to represent. We can put to one side for a moment the issue of whether and to what extent such responses achieve what they set out to do: avoid, query or 'move beyond' representation. Of interest here is the discourse and repertoire of devices, manoeuvres and gestures groups use to distance themselves from the rhetoric and practices of 'representative politics'.

The acceptance of the 'representative claim' whether by those who would or might represent (leaders, spokespeople, activists, celebrities) or by those who would or might be represented (the public, 'the people', the group or cause) is coming to be questioned in a manner that is novel, persistent – and also puzzling and thought provoking. In place of representative or 'mediated' modes of politics we now find a plethora of *immediate* politics: direct action, flash protests, twitter-led mobilisations, ping-pong, hacking, squatting, boycotting, occupying and other interventions of a direct, practical and non- or un-mediated kind. Increasingly, we don't vote, we act (or want to act). We don't join a party, we take part in events or we find other ways of demonstrating our affinity, solidarity, unity with others. We don't read the media, we (to quote Indymedia) *are* the media. We no longer trust politicians, but rather we harass, deride, resist and oppose politicians and the political class ('the pollies' as they are unaffectionately known here in Australia). Many would, it seems, rather listen to the likes of Bono, Geldof, Zizek, Jeremy Clarkson, Zac de La Rocha, System of a Down, Michael Moore, Gore Vidal (RIP) – not least because they style themselves as 'ordinary' people as opposed to representatives. Of course they are far from ordinary. They are global celebrities with access to the means of making themselves heard and thus as acting as 'unofficial' representatives. Contemporary politics resounds with such paradoxes, and the phenomenon of the 'non-representative' representative is one of them, as is the increasingly popular 'anti-party' party (*Die Piraten* in Germany, Beppe Grillo's 5 Star Movement).

How should we read these developments? Should we see the current crisis of representation as a merely temporary, contingent phenomenon – a hiatus brought about perhaps by the conjuncture of unfortunate circumstances – the GFC, austerity, economic slowdown, multiplying political scandals indicating an increasingly decadent political class (Berlusconi, News International, John Edwards, Peter Slipper etc.)? Or should we see the paradigmatic status of representative politics as under threat? If the latter, then how can we think the

outside of the paradigm, or less aggressively, this way of ‘doing politics’? Is there an ‘outside’ of representation?

The response of mainstream political science seems to me to pose more questions than it answers. Where political scientists are not in denial that something fundamental is going on, they repose on some or other variant of what I am calling ‘adjustment’ or ‘incorporation’ in the hope that the paradigm can be maintained or restored. In my view, however, we are not in the midst of ‘another’ crisis of representation. Rather the paradigmatic status of representative politics, one that permitted Pitkin to declaim with great certainty our desire for representatives and representation, is waning. Whilst this has been accelerated by contingencies such as the GFC and economic crisis, the causes of the crisis lie deeper, more specifically in the shift from what social theorists such as Bauman, Heller, Beck and Giddens term first modernity to second or ‘reflexive’ modernity. The unsettling is acute because it is not at all clear whether and to what extent some other new way of ordering our affairs will be able to establish itself locally, nationally, globally in the manner that representation was able to do on the back of processes of state formation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Alternative paradigms such as ‘deliberative democracy’, ‘strong democracy’, ‘associational democracy’, ‘radical democracy’, ‘Parecon’ have their followers, as do variants of more traditional radicalisms. However none of these alternative models has anything like the momentum needed to flesh out the oft-heard demand for ‘real’ or ‘true’ democracy into a significant movement. There are few signs in contemporary protest movements or political developments of an affirmation of something, as opposed to the desire to resist or oppose the existing state of affairs. To mobilise Marcuse, the signs of a Great Refusal are there; less so of a Great Acceptance of something else. If there is to be a paradigm shift in terms of how we organize ourselves, then it is likely to be disjunctural, uneven, disruptive.

It is within this frame that we should understand the rise of ‘Post representative’ politics of the kind referred to above. Post-representation is both the marker for the waning appeal of representative politics and an indication of the kinds of emergent styles and modalities of politics that reflexive modernity gives rise to, what we might term disorderly or liquid politics. These styles and forms of politics are in my view misread as *supplements* of representative politics, new forms of ‘participation’ that may serve to invigorate existing, mainstream and representative politics. Nor, however, do they unproblematically prefigure a new paradigm such as ‘strong democracy’. Rather as the term implies they problematize the object

following the prefix. 'Post-representation' is an analogue for what 'post-modernism' meant in terms of debates in the sociology of knowledge: the unsettling of existing ways of thinking and acting without implying the inevitability or even desirability of a new normative or foundational paradigm. Lyotard who popularized the term, described post-modernity as a condition, not an ideology, set of beliefs or new normative schema. It's this sense of the 'post' that I think is relevant here. We live in an unsettled moment, a moment when it appears unlikely that we may go back to recapture that enchantment with representation that was such a feature of early modernist discourse, but at the time where the future is hazy. 'Post-representation' is, perhaps, a 'future of present'. It indicates an 'in-between', not a point of arrival.

The end of the paradigm?

So representation is in crisis, certainly if the four key vectors we discussed above are anything like 'representative'. How do political scientists respond? What is the future of representation in view of these much documented tendencies?

On the basis of a light run through the materials looking at the prospects for representative politics *per se* - as opposed to the prospects for a given representative system, modality or practice as such - the dominant responses would seem to be, respectively, *denial*, *adjustment*, *incorporation*. I want to look briefly at each in turn to set up the remainder of the discussion which seeks to advance my own hypothesis, i.e. that we should see representative politics as a paradigm in the process of collapsing under pressures associated with second or reflexive modernity.

Denial - Denial has a number of different forms. There's denial that there is any kind of crisis at all in terms of representative politics. This is particularly the case where political scientists and commentators are concerned primarily with presidential elections or, in parliamentary systems, with general elections. Since numbers participating in such elections are a) relatively stable over time and b) almost invariably higher than for other kinds of elections, the relativities may give us an impression of 'health'. Thus with regard to the British system the fact that around 60% turn out for the general election as opposed to 35% for European elections and just over 30% in local elections allows one to draw the conclusion that representative politics at the national level gives only minor cause for concern. What we

should be concerned about is the low turnout for certain *kinds* of election as opposed to worrying about the health of ‘representative politics’, which of course includes general elections.

A figure of 60% for a national election is hardly much cause for celebration, particularly when one recalls that the figure was 80% as recently as the late 1970s. Given the centrality of Parliament in a unitary political system like the UK’s, the absence of 40% or nearly half the electorate is clear enough evidence of the waning appeal of mainstream politics. What lurks behind the bare numbers is the draining culture that sustained the legitimacy and credibility of representative politics over the past century or so. As is clear, those who vote, do so with a much shallower investment than earlier generations, and thus with much less sense of a stake in the outcome. Sticking with the UK, the membership of both Labour and the Conservatives has dropped between 80 and 90% since the 1960s, leaving roughly 1% of the voting age population as paying members of one of the main political parties. Whereas the broadsheet newspapers of the 1960s devoted 7-8 full pages to politics, by 2010, this was reduced to a handful of columns in a context where the overall circulation of broadsheets is in steep decline. One could go on. The point is that using the turnout for general elections as a guide to the health of representative politics is a particularly one-eyed way of making an assessment. On every other measure representative politics in mature or advanced democracies like the UK is, as *The Guardian* newspaper in a recent survey of these trends puts it, in ‘terminal decline’.

Another variant of the denial thesis is what we might term the ‘Fukuyama Manoeuvre’, which notwithstanding the discrediting of the main thesis (The end of history’) seems to be reflective of a significant portion of the political science literature concerning representation. Here the key move is to point out the spread of liberal-democratic and representative institutions across the world under the process of ‘democratisation’. Since 1945 decolonisation has promoted the establishment of democratic norms and procedures in countries that were formally colonies or fiefs of imperial powers such as Spain, France and Britain. Local populations embraced elections, political parties, the free press and all the paraphernalia of liberal-democracy. Where once there were a handful of representative democracies, now there are increasing numbers – and of course those that are not yet democracies invariably come under pressure to become so as the ‘democratic revolution’ unfolds through Latin America, the Middle East, South-East Asia and so forth. How can it be

said that there is a crisis of representative politics when one of the key characteristics of recent political development has been the displacement of autocratic and colonial rule with 'self-determination' and representative governance?

Inured as many comparative political scientists are to such a narrative, a top down, tick box meta analysis of this kind is problematic for thinking about the health of representative politics. Given space, a few observations will have to suffice. Firstly, the account fails to touch upon the critique of neo-colonialism, cronyism, clientelism and elite governance offered by many critics within the developing, 'democratising' world as well as from without. All too often the embrace of representative systems has resulted in the locking out of 'the people' as elites form themselves into biddable cliques either within a dominant party apparatus (as per Mexico, Singapore, Malaysia etc) or within a 'pluralist' system that nonetheless results in an essentially continuous 'non-representative' representation that excludes all manner of political options and positions. It's for this reason that resistance by indigenous groups, peasants, minorities, leftists, secessionists at the global periphery often finds expression as a challenge to the political system, as opposed to a set of demands that can itself find a place *within* the system of representation. Far from resulting in a happy spread of tolerant, pluralist, representative practices, many recently democratised systems quickly fall into a pattern of political instability, breakdown, conflict and police containment of 'terrorist' or 'extremist' demands from their own socio-economic, ethnic or geographic 'margin', often with the help of 'counter-insurgency' experts from the global north. 'Democratisation' has rarely been an advertisement for the health of representative politics.

Adjustment – a different kind of response is to acknowledge that there is a crisis of representation, and to work within the horizon of the representative paradigm to achieve better outcomes that in turn will 'rescue' or bolster the system itself. Political science literature is replete with all manner of solutions to the current ills of representative politics. Just thinking about the reams of work on the political participation of 'the young' gives a snapshot of the overall approach.

As has been documented the world over, the young are increasingly reluctant to engage in official, mainstream and representative politics. Being the present and future citizens whose engagement is required to maintain the health of the system, they are naturally the focus for all manner of strategies to get them to engage. There is the perennial debate in many countries concerning the age by when young voters should be given the vote. If we allow 16

year olds to vote, won't this encourage them to become interested in politics earlier, to develop good habits and to become engaged mature citizens before they are 'turned off'? Shouldn't we have more youth TV programmes about politics? Shouldn't we insist on more 'citizenship education' at school? Shouldn't politicians be encouraged to develop funky strategies to engage with youth: Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, Youtube videos, messaging and all the rest?

Adaptation and change are necessary antidotes to outright redundancy and obsolescence, but the story of how representative politics is going to be saved in such fashion doesn't look very compelling – not least to the young who seem peculiarly resistant to such strategies. The effort for example of political parties to mimic 'non' or post-representative political forms such as affinity groups and networks to make themselves look more dynamic, appealing and participatory has thrown up few successes. The Tea Party is illustrative of the conundrum. The point of representative politics is to unearth representatives, less to empower participants as actors in their own right, which is at the heart of many of today's networks and affinity groups. Populism of the kind mobilized by the Tea Party often seeks to collapse this space – the space between participatory activism and a representative mandate. Yet the energy required to sustain the illusion is clearly finite. Either such movements collapse back into coherence or figures emerge who establish themselves as 'representative' of the movement – in which case they end up in the same space as those they were recently critical of: politicians within mainstream political parties.

A different kind of adjustment is called for by Jane Mansbridge, who responds to the crisis of American representative politics by calling for the adoption of a different *style* of representative politics. Responding to the likes of Benjamin Barber and Carole Pateman who critique the system of representation and call for some or other variant of 'strong democracy', Mansbridge argues that if only the US was more like Denmark then many of the pathologies of US representation could be resolved. Politicians should behave more like ordinary citizens: they should be 'closer to the ground', more attentive to the needs and interests of their constituents. They should be more humble, adopting the tastes and sensibilities of 'everyman'. She calls short of requiring Representatives to arrive at the House by bicycle; but clearly there is a yearning for a more homespun, accessible and human politics. One's heart goes out to the suggestion, at the same time as one's head suggests that treating political cultures as items of baggage that one can import or export, reject or adopt, in the manner

hinted at here is unlikely to get us to the heart of the matter: the near-universal contempt for politicians and the political process whether in the US or in Denmark.

Normative political theory is of course a fertile ground for imagining all manner of transformations in the ground of representative politics. One thinks here of seminal works over the past couple of decades by the likes of Iris Marion Young, Anne Phillips, Will Kymlicka, James Tully and Seyla Benhabib. The common denominator is the demand to augment, replace or reform the existing systems of representation with something more germane to the needs and interests of otherwise under-represented groups such as women, ethnic or racial minorities, religious minorities, ethnic or linguistic groups, or those of some different sexual or other orientation. These accounts are laudable in the sense that they at least see the need to adapt and change in response to the growing alienation of ordinary people from their systems of governance. And it may be that the kinds of reform they offer can provide remedies for certain groups, causes or identities. However the placing of identity at the heart of the issue of political relevance and credibility has its own shortcomings. Thus the answer to the sense of alienation evinced by women in relation to political processes is to ensure that there are more women representatives; the same for black people, Muslims and so forth. The assumption is that once representation more nearly maps onto the coordinates of people's identity then we will show greater desire to mandate those representatives and more generally to show greater engagement with and enthusiasm for the political process.

It's a classically modernist set of assumptions, one based on the idea of social life as composed of fixed and stable identities, which if 'empowered' via the process of representation will elicit greater enthusiasm for existing political processes and institutions. It corresponds to the era of 'first modernity' when identity could be easily mapped and legislated for. Under reflexive conditions in which identity is subject to all manner of disruptive processes, the assumption looks stretched. The very processes that were meant to liberate the 'minority' subject – representation by, for example, 'community leaders' as per the UK's multicultural model – can now seem suffocating and inhibiting to all manner of hybridized, reflexive, supple and polymorphous identities emerging out the unruly flow of peoples, cultures, beliefs, religions and modes of communication, found at the interstices of metropolitan, post-colonial and diasporic settings. Those familiar with the work of Homi Bhabha, Arjun Appadurai, Chandra Mohanty, Dipesh Chakrabarty among numerous other chroniclers of the trends of developing post-identities will surely feel a lot less sanguine about

the prospects for 'identity politics' than an earlier generation of representative theorists. The latter looked forward to a meaningful 'politics of presence' based on a predictable account of who and what needed representing. Notwithstanding the undeniable progress that has been made to include representatives from the under and non-represented in many democracies, the decline of our engagement with representative politics continues apace.

Incorporation – we can also find a different strategy in relation to the issue by broadening our search beyond the mainstream political science and political theory literatures. In certain neo- and post-Marxian literatures for example we see an acceptance of the notion that contemporary democracy is in crisis and that that crisis very directly concerns the adequacy of existing representative systems and processes. Yet on these accounts the problem is not with representation, but with the manner by which identities and political claims come to be expressed.

Probably the most influential exponents of these views are Ernesto Laclau and Gayatri Spivak. For both, there is no 'outside' of representation. Every political demand or gesture is a form of representation – the representation of the needs, wishes or interests of a particular group of individuals. In this sense representation is implicit to communication – indeed to language itself, the function of which is to 'signify' that which would otherwise remain without the means of articulation. Without representation, there can be no political demands, political movements, political leadership. The issue is not representation – for or against. It is how best to articulate progressive political demands in contexts where the odds are stacked against particular political agents. For Laclau the success of populist movements illustrates the power of a direct appeal to the people without unnecessary layers of mediation. Progressives should therefore welcome populism, embrace it, as in a sense an unsullied, direct means of articulating progressive needs and desires.

For Spivak, the problem lies further back: How to give voice to the voiceless or 'subaltern' – to those who have no consciousness or awareness of themselves as political agents. The problem was well expressed by Marx in the distinction he took from Hegel between the agent (or class) 'in itself' and the agent 'for itself'. The creation of political demands and movements requires the representation of those demands and movements. This historically has been achieved by articulate leaders and representatives – less so by the 'the people' or groups themselves. This too is functionally consonant with the nature of the political. Some will represent; others will be represented – not least because they are functionally unable to

represent themselves. The subaltern cannot 'speak'; it has (famously) to be spoken for.

It's a compelling set of accounts, based as much on the historical sociology of emergent political demands and groupings as an ontologically informed account of the nature of language and communication. On the other hand, it leaves us with some puzzles to resolve. If representation is 'constitutive' at some level (ontological, linguistic, communicative), why are we now faced with a plethora of demands to *reject* representation and representative practices? Why would some many activists across an array of otherwise diverse political initiatives pin their colours to the mast of forms and styles of political interaction that 'avoid' or 'escape' representation? If there is not 'outside' of representation, why then expend so much energy on reaching an unattainable ideal?

Clearly, part of the answer lies in the historical legacy of representation, and the particular forms that representation took in particular contexts and for particular occasions. One thinks here of the now thoroughly discredited 'Leninist' model of the vanguard party leading the hapless proletarian masses to enlightenment, insurrection, and revolution. One thinks too of the failed legacy of social democracy – the human face of capitalist development that promised so much, delivered huge improvements in the basic welfare of ordinary people, yet failed to cement the affections of populations even where social democracy was deeply entrenched as in Scandinavia and the Benelux countries. The problem is less what representation is, or might be – but what it means or indeed *represents*: forms, style and modalities of politics that enact a separation or disjuncture between those who wield power, influence, resource and the represented, those who mandate and legitimate representation. Populism, to continue the theme, may well look like the 'political logic' par excellence; but this alone has not prevented the repudiation of the populist legacy across even Latin America where one might think it has the strongest historical resonances. Groups such as the Zapatistas, the Sem Terra, the MST make great play of their disinheritance of populism, caudillo politics, 'strong man' politics, representative politics. We don't get very far in trying to understand these phenomena if we insist, *pace* Laclau, that they are all instances of 'populism' – or more generally that they can be read as successful adaptations of the representative paradigm.

Representation and reflexive modernity

Attempts to rescue representation through denial, adaptation or incorporation are not terribly compelling either as an explanatory framework for thinking about the crisis, or as the basis for a set of recommendations concerning how politics is to be rethought, reformed or remodeled in light of the crisis. We need therefore to shade out the coordinates of the crisis in explanatory terms. What has happened to bring about the crisis, and are the factors contingent or permanent features of the landscape?

That the crisis of representation has been exacerbated for highly contingent reasons seems unarguable. Amongst the more obvious contingencies is the GFC and the unraveling of the credit fuelled boom that underpinned standards of living across much of the developed and developing worlds. The bursting of the debt bubble has unleashed an unparalleled process of deleveraging that is still working through the system. One effect of the process has been to highlight the very limited powers elected governments enjoy under conditions of global financialisation. The point of governments is after all to govern, and yet it is this very core function that seems to have become a redundancy in a context where large chunks of individual, corporate and sovereign wealth can be moved around the globe on the whim of a derivatives trader. The elected governments of Greece, Spain, Italy now appear little more as executors for policies decided upon by an array of international bodies and elites beyond the limited representative sphere of the respective electorates: the Troika (ECB, IMF and EU), the bond markets, Angela Merkel and the international financial media. It is difficult to take seriously the notion that 'representative politics' counts under circumstances such as these. Of course it might be objected that the GFC and financialisation are amongst 'contingent' factors making the 'representative claim' sound hollow. If the neoclassicals are to be believed, the market will 'learn from' and achieve equilibrium at some stage, in turn allowing the appearance of political control over economic and financial affairs to resume. The neoclassicals seem to be on the correct side of the argument. They know how little representative processes count when we are talking about where real power lies. Appearance is everything.

On the other hand, sociologists working in the frame of second modernity insist that other factors important to our response to the crisis of representation are rooted in deeper structural changes. We have already mentioned one of those above, namely the displacement of stable or core identities in favour of a proliferation of hybrid, uncertain and novel forms of identity. But this is itself a symptom rather than a cause of the erosion of the basis of representation.

More germane in causal terms are the drivers of 'globalisation': out-sourcing; skills migration and transfer; the off-shoring of variable capital; financialisation; flows of investment from the core to the margin and semi-margin; the decline of manufacturing at the core in favour of services; flexibilisation of labour markets; the decline of the industrial working class, and the rise of the knowledge economy; shifts in terms of the patterns of leisure, consumption and personal time; the emergence of social technologies that collapse communicative lag and increase expectations of immediacy, proximity, gratification. On this account we are in the midst of a shift from a world of relative homogeneity, stability and predictability to what Bauman memorably calls 'liquid' modernity in turn characterized by heterogeneity, instability, unpredictability, flow, impermanence, impatience, speed and increasing velocity. Of course we might not like it; we might actively agitate to turn the 'flow' back ('slow food', 'slow politics', 'quality time'); but without a coordinated response with clear aims and objectives to stem the tide, our efforts to do so are likely to remain piecemeal and confined to those who can afford to 'down size', 'opt out' or 'let go'.

What is the connection to the crisis of representation? Let's consider the matter from the point of view of Bauman's description of the current conjuncture. Representative politics is in most settings a predictable, periodic, regular, settled, rotational, slow form of politics whose primary function is, according to the most authoritative commentator on the matter, J. S. Mill, to produce stable, orderly governance so that ordinary people 'may not be misgoverned'. These characteristics are typical of processes and procedures in first modernity – whether they be related to politics, economics or social phenomena more generally. They repose on the slow, uncomplicated, structured reproduction of social life. They also rely on the availability of relatively stable aggregate entities that can be both the subject and object of the representative disjuncture. Where we see relatively stable populations, with deep connections and roots in a given area, low levels of mobility, high levels of ethnic, religious homogeneity and so on, then the idea of a stable aggregate like 'the people', or equally 'the community', may appear plausible. Where on the other hand, these patterns have been disturbed by high mobility, migration, *metisage*, mixing, hybridity it becomes more difficult to maintain the plausibility of an aggregative identity that can in turn be represented. 'The People' appears less as a powerful mobilizing trope and more as a fictive construct designed, with help from the media, to paper over sectional or particularistic self-interest.

So there are problems aggregating the subject of representation. This is matched by problems

convincing ourselves that would-be representatives are worth empowering on our behalf. Once stable sources of authority – whether it be the structure of parental authority, authority at work or settings in which we participate in our leisure time – are under contemporary conditions put under increasing stress. ‘Social capital’, Putnam’s handy phrase for the stock of associations and connections that gives meaning and structure to otherwise atomized individuals, erodes, decays, ebbs. Old hierarchies disappear to be displaced by new ephemeral, temporary hierarchies based on personal factors: money, wealth, relationships, networks, airtime. The old elites are subject to cold scrutiny, contempt, critique. ‘Political capital’ wanes with migration, mobility, pressures of time, competing interests, dissolving communities.

Much as the trope of ‘the people’ depends on our willingness to see ourselves as part of that aggregated entity, so the role of the representative relies on our willingness to trust and authorize others to govern on our behalf. This too requires a high degree of homology between representor and represented. We are much more likely to see this relationship as meaningful if the representor looks and sounds like us, bears the same values, evinces the same world view – hence the understandable insistence associated with ‘identity politics’ that the coordinates of contemporary society be mapped onto the system of representation. Yet, as we have already heard, the demand is an increasingly forlorn one. As identities proliferate, multiply, complexify, so the stock of expectations on which the identity politics approach depends becomes more problematic. Differences exacerbate under conditions of reflexive modernity. Individuality and individualism becomes the stock in phrase defining our aspirations. Sameness and by extension collectivism become ever more difficult to capture – and are better defined against a background of episodic events (the Olympics, national disasters and tragedies, terrorist atrocities, jubilees and so forth) that inevitably pose the question of collective identity and belonging. Increasingly, however our representatives seem more distant, less approachable, less ‘like us’ as the possible shadings of difference become ever more pronounced.

It’s against such a background that I think we can understand the waning appeal of representative politics, which as Mill rightly argues is a proxy for the elite rule he thinks is needed to maintain political stability and order against the mob. If we are ‘just as good as them’ why cede power to ‘them’? With the corrosion of secular authority, goes the corrosion of trust in authority, the unblinking assumption that one person is better than another and to

be trusted because of their up-bringing, schooling, education, station in life, insight. But it is also the act of ceding that runs counter to these tendencies. It runs against the grain of the desire for autonomy, immediacy, control and self-gratification that Bauman, Beck and Giddens tell us are essential constituents of contemporary experience. Representation is a 'proxy' practice. It is an act of *handing over* autonomy, immediacy, control and gratification to another. Yet these are the very qualities that increasingly define 'meaning' for the contemporary subject who craves the authenticity of 'being there', being present, experiencing events, taking part, participating – as opposed to having someone else participate *on our behalf*.

Inchoate and poorly formed though they may be, the demands we hear for 'real' or 'true' democracy seems to presuppose the recuperation of what Castoriadis rather aptly calls making/doing. Much of contemporary practice at the margins has this aspect to it: the transformation of the political agent from passive voter, citizen, spectator to active participant, player, actor. It also has this recuperative dimension to it, the conscious recoupling of core or key ingredients of social life to those who are subject to them. If representation is disjunctive, then this new politics is re-connective or re-assembling. Of course this process is far from linear in the manner Castoriadis and other radicals in the classical modernist tradition usually assume. More likely is that the re-connective process takes place in a variety of ways, some of which may conform to their expectations; but others that don't. The emergence of evangelical faiths and religions, the emergence of powerful 'lifestyle' world views, of self-help, intentional, autonomous communities of many different shapes and kinds gives witness less to the demand for 'self-inauguration' or small 'c' council communism, than the demand more simply for *choice* over the nature and form of our interactions with others, without limiting or determining the nature and form of the interactions. We no longer want to be part of 'the People', or if we do it is a very partial and particularistic notion of it that often puts us in conflict with different visions and definitions of it. We want to be with people like us, and we want that 'being with' to be direct and unmediated by processes over which we have little connection or little affinity.

Representation and Post-Representation

From the ruins of representation emerge forms of political activity and being-together that

more nearly reflect the condition of reflexive modernity, a world of immediacy, fluidity, speed, individuality, together with thinness of attachment, commitment, obligation, duty, deference. A world of directness, engagement, enjoyment, excitement, passion, affinity. What sort of politics is this?

Post-representative politics is preeminently a rejection of the logic and structure of representative politics – a politics that enshrines the uncoupling of the subject and object of the political itself, and that makes disjuncture a virtue, not merely a necessity. Post-representative politics seeks to query that separation through unifying the subject and object in immediate, direct and gratifying ways – gratifying in the sense that it is a politics built on acting, as opposed to being mandated to act. It is a politics in the here-and-now, as opposed to the delayed tomorrow (election day, referendum day, the moment of the party conference, caucus etc). Typical of post-representative styles of politics are protests, demonstrations, sit-ins, flash events, hacking, guerilla gardening, carnivals, forums, billboard liberation, subvertising, buy-cotting, boycotting and of course occupying. It's early days yet for seeing how the various 'anti-party' parties such as Beppe Grillo's M5S and Der Piraten envisage negotiating an essentially post-representative set of claims *within* the context of mainstream representative politics. What certainly shouldn't be ruled out is the kind of phenomena we see in relation to the Greens and the Tea Party: a hybridization leading to several tiers or layers of interaction, some working within the mainstream, some without.

Though different in their own ways, these forms or styles of politics all share a hostility towards separation, and the mandating of some to act whilst other remains as passive spectators. The point seems to be to find ways in which each can be involved actively, to 'have their say', to be a participant. In terms of decision-making, many of these 'actions' are by their own nature individualistic or able to be advanced by small numbers of similarly minded individuals. Where larger numbers are involved, as for example in the Occupy! events, the World Social Forum, the various initiatives sparked across Europe in the name of the *Indignados* the tendency has been to seek to avoid permanent leadership or executive functions which of course mirror representative structures in favour of inclusive, direct forms of decision-making. Of course the result can be an almost comically laborious process in which every and any contribution has to be entertained, considered, relayed to outer layers of the group. 'Temperatures' have to be taken in the group, made subject to revision and amendment and so on and so forth. However as has become clear, what seems to

commentators and observers impossibly time-consuming and ‘ineffective’ is regarded by participants as the necessary price to pay for communal-collective deliberation, inclusivity and the warding off of incipient representative-like structures and processes. This is a politics that is created quite self-consciously in opposition to inherited, dominant and mainstream forms of political interaction. It seeks a radical break from the past and present, in search of a more inclusive, less hierarchical future.

Noting that the participants to the new ‘non-representative’ politics are seeking a break from the inherited practices of representation is not the same as saying that this is what is achieved in these various initiatives. I don’t think post-representation is a new paradigm for doing politics, for thinking about how politics will advance now that the old paradigm is in crisis – or not necessarily. The point about these initiatives is that they self-consciously query, question, reject the inheritance of representative politics. This is what makes them ‘post-representative’. Do they manage to achieve the aim?

At some level, Laclau and the ‘constructivists’ are right. Something has to be represented, there must be representation for a political gesture or act to achieve purchase on the actions of those around them. And clearly even post-representative initiatives and projects have representatives. Subcomandante Marcos is a representative – not least for those who agree with his analysis and the analysis of the Zapatistas that everything about representation in Mexico is corrupt, bankrupt and to be rejected. Celebrities like Bono and Geldof come to be representatives, albeit non-elected. They see themselves as representing the outraged voiceless majority appalled at the inaction of western governments in the face of poverty. And others see them on similar terms, though not all those who the former may see as their ‘constituency’. We can multiply the problematic. Occupy for example deploy some overtly representational slogans for self-description. ‘We are the 99%’ is a quintessentially representative claim. And on it goes. ‘Post representation’ does not escape ‘representation’ at one level – nor could it. Indeed the idea that it might creates problems of its own: ‘the tyranny of structurelessness’, hidden or disavowed forms of representation such as the shadowy and largely unaccountable International Committee of the World Social Forum, the phenomenon of the ‘non-representative’ or celebrity representative, and so on. How then do we capture the paradox of a set of gestures and practices that styles itself against representation whilst enacting representative politics if only in negation?

What it seems we are seeking to capture here is a complex collective ecology or perhaps even

psychology – one captured in anthropological works such as Pierre Clastres *Society without the State* and James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Clastres documents the ways in which stateless indigenous societies protect themselves from incipient power blocs and hierarchies through vigilant practices of recuperation and recomposition of power, a setting in motion of the political to avoid its congealing around particular individuals, cliques and groups. Such a politics is defensive: it seeks to protect the group from *itself* and from those who represent a threat to its autonomy and self-constitutivity. It's a demanding model for any kind of politics under contemporary conditions; but what we are seeking here is not recommendations, but *explanations* for why particular kinds of politics take the form they do. Post-representation from this point of view has both a backward glancing aspect and a prefigurative dimension to it. It is backward glancing because it often represents a gesture and practice of recuperation of that which was alleged to have been 'lost' in the process by which the disjunctive synthesis of representation is created, classically by conquest, primitive accumulation and colonialism, which enact a separation of peoples from materials and resources they once enjoyed access to. Often post-representative initiatives have this aspect to them in the developing world, whether it be the Zapatistas refusal of representative structures in favour of 'indigenous' practices of communal-collective deliberation, allocation and production, or in terms of the Piqueteros' recuperation of factories in the name of recuperating their own labour power. From this aspect, post-representation can seem nostalgic, a recreation of an unsullied 'Clastrean' past where the 'indigenous' (another problematic label) or 'the workers' managed 'their own affairs'.

On the other hand, post-representation can appear like a break with both past and present, and thus as an initiative that opens on to new albeit uncertain possibilities. Occupy! has a fresh and arguably uncontaminated appearance to many precisely because it looks and feels so different to activists wearied by the kinds of internecine, ideological battles associated with traditional radical initiatives. The very refusal to become what Žižek and others argue Occupy must become, namely an incipient revolutionary party or movement, might be thought less a weakness that the source of the strength and attractiveness of Occupy to many who might not otherwise have been involved with it. The ability, greatly accelerated by social networking technologies, to summon protests, occupations and initiatives from 'nowhere' in the name of an opening or space for critical reflection should be regarded as indicating an increased repertoire of possibilities for acting, being, doing that promises a significant break with the linear trajectories of traditional politics, whether mainstream or counter-cultural. This

might not be a linear politics then, but perhaps a resonant politics, or a politics of resonances that amplify fears and hopes that might be lost amidst the global cacophony of banality, celebrity, ephemerality. Concepts like ‘effectiveness’, ‘change’, ‘transformation’ are not easy to translate through the traditional means available to political scientists. They are certainly not easily captured by looking at what representatives do in isolation from ‘society’, movements, events, occupations. Perhaps post-representative politics can be effective; perhaps it already is?

Some Conclusions

I’ve characterized representative politics, aggressively, as a paradigm here for several reasons. Firstly, I wanted to draw attention to the historicity and contingency of this mode of doing politics. Reading work in political science, it is easy to come away with the impression that representative politics is all that there is and all that there will be. The issue for normatively inclined theorists is less ‘representative politics or not?’ and more ‘what kind of representative politics should we be enacting and encouraging?’ The idea of using an idea like paradigm is intended to get us thinking and reflecting on the nature of the conditions giving rise to representative politics, and similarly the nature of the conditions giving leading to its possible demise. It is to place representative politics in a contextualized historical frame.

Secondly, I’ve used the concept of a paradigm here because intrinsic to Kuhn’s understanding of paradigms is the idea of paradigm change, which on his account is accompanied by deep uncertainty, gestalt shifts, anxiety, hiatus and readjustment. Political science evinces some of this uncertainty. But political scientists don’t change the coordinates of our world; ordinary people do. And it is ordinary people who through their actions and inactions are making us rethink what the nature of any modification of our world might look like.

The suggestion in this paper is that the prospects for the renewal of representative politics are uncertain to say the least. The deep changes in the parameters and variables of social life make it increasingly unlikely that we will be able to recover the certainties that allowed J.S. Mill, the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, the Social Democrats and so on to see representation as the optimal means for organizing governance in complex modern societies. For many activists and concerned citizens representative politics is better seen as complicit in political instability, alienation and the erosion of the sense of empowerment, sovereignty and

collective trust which is at the heart of any functioning polity. The various initiatives that I am calling 'post representation' are a sign of that. This is not to say that in post representative struggles and initiatives we see the contours of a new paradigm. It may be that there will be no new paradigm, no new way of 'doing politics', that comes to replace the old. Or perhaps the 'new' way will be to reject the idea of a 'paradigm', to remain within the hiatus and disorder of the 'post' allowing an open horizon for groups to decide how best to organize themselves. Perhaps it was something along these lines when Derrida spoke of the 'Democracy to come'. Reflexive modernity is after all characterized by impermanence, volatility and liquidity - and not just as regards finance, capitalism or identity. It may be that we have to see these features as constitutive of the political, with all the risks, as well as the opportunities that that entails.

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