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## Review study

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# Representative Turn: New Way of Thinking about the Relationship between Representation and Democracy<sup>1</sup>

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Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim*. New York, Oxford University Press 2010

Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2008

Mónica B. Vieira – David Runciman, *Representation*. London, Polity Press 2008

**Abstract:** The three reviewed books constitute part of a representative turn that attempts to restore the value of representation to democracy in changed circumstances under which representative democracy operates, such as the rise of new actors (non-governmental organizations, social movements), non-electoral forms of representation or the existence of representatives beyond boundaries of the nation-state. I argue that the authors of representative turn manage to respond to current challenges by conceptualizing representation as a dynamic process of making and receiving representative claims that include new forms of representation while still keeping a significant role of traditional formal representative institutions.

**Keywords:** democracy, interests, judgement, NGOs, representation, representative turn, will

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The review essay considers three books that constitute part of a representative turn in democratic theory that introduces a new way of looking at political representation. The purpose of this essay is to introduce the main features of the representative turn and argue that it can help us think about current challenges that representative democracy is facing. This approach counters classical arguments against the idea that democracy can become representative or that we can have a democratic political system of representation. Apart from finding overlapping moments in the reviewed books, I also pay attention to the differences among them.

The key point of representative turn is that it suggests that representation need not be based on election in order count as representation. This approach offers a way of looking at political representation in more than formal, parliamentary, nation-state terms and it takes into consideration non-electoral modes of representation. As a consequence, representation is seen as a dynamic, shifting process and as crucial to the constitution of politics, not as a mere static fact of political life resulting from elections.<sup>2</sup> Last but not least, at the heart of this approach is the idea that political representation is a process of constructing the represented, the active making of symbols or images of what is to be represented.

I have chosen these three particular books because they capture the representative turn while showing its broad range. At this point I will shortly explore the distinctions among the three reviewed books. First of all, the authors differ in terms of the aspects they apply within the concept of representation. While in the case of Vieira, Runciman and Urbinati, a significant part of their text is devoted to the historical origins of representation and the relation between democracy and representation, Saward concentrates more on the analytical tool suitable for representation and does not deal with history of the idea of political representation.

Particularly Nadia Urbinati provides an in-depth analysis regarding the genealogy of representative democracy – from ancient Greek and Roman republics through Rousseau, Kant, Sieyès to Paine or Condorcet. The argument made by Urbinati as well as by Vieira and Runciman is that representation came before democracy in the history of modern politics and that representation is the key concept for understanding the workings of modern democratic states. The main focus of Saward's book constitutes an application of the tool of representative claim. He approaches representation as a dynamic process through representative claims. This tool has the advantage in that it takes into consideration that interests are rather a product of the system of representation than a precondition for it and that it pays

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2 Saward, M., *The Representative Claim*. New York, Oxford University Press 2010.

attention to representation both within and beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

### **New challenges and democratic accountability**

In the past few decades, we have witnessed a change of the conditions under which representative democracy operates - such as a decline in voters' turnout and a disaffection with representative politics, the decline of party loyalty and a rising distrust of politicians, the rise of populism, the appearance of self-appointed representatives, the increasing role of non-governmental organizations, especially in global politics, which are often seen as unrepresentative, or demands for better representation of marginalized groups such as women and minorities.<sup>3</sup> I claim that instead of perceiving altered conditions under which representative democracy operates as new constraints and symptoms of the crisis of representative democracy, theorists of the representative turn see them as opportunities for reassessing the relation between representation and democracy by reconsidering the concept of representation. All factors mentioned above actually require fresh thinking since it seems that traditional prevailing ideas about representation are challenged as outdated and do not correspond to the world we live in nowadays.

For example, Jane Mansbridge, in an effort to capture new empirical realities of representation, outlines besides the traditional "promissory" account of representation three alternative forms of representation - anticipatory, gyroscopic and surrogate. Whereas promissory representation, which is based on promises that the elected representative makes to the electorate, follows the traditional dichotomy of mandate and trustee, the three new forms of representation challenge our traditional understanding of democratic accountability. In case of anticipatory representation, the representative tries to anticipate the preferences of future voters and tries to please them (in some cases representatives use their power and influence to affect the preferences of voters). In the second form of alternative representation, gyroscopic representation, voters select representatives who can be expected to act in ways the voter approves. The representatives are not accountable to their constituencies, their accountability is only to their own beliefs and principles. Finally, surrogate representation occurs when legislators represent constituents outside their own districts. For example, gay and lesbian citizens could identify with a gay representative and his actions

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3 Näsström, S., Where is the Representative Turn Going? *European Journal of Political Theory*, 10, 2011, No. 4, p. 501.

around a common experience of discrimination or social stigma although he is not a representative from their district. Obviously in this particular case, the representative and the represented have no electoral relationship and accountability is also completely absent.<sup>4</sup>

Monica Vieira and David Runciman refer to surrogate representation in order to highlight new empirical realities as follows: „*Those who are the electoral losers in their own district, are increasingly turning to representatives with whom they identify, but have no electoral relationship, to help advance their interests, whether material or value-based. We thus see within formally territorial representational systems increasing signs of individuals identifying with representatives who are not accountable to them in any traditional way.*”<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the representative turn builds upon such innovative theories, on the other hand it shows the limits of current thinking about political representation. Unlike for instance Hanna Pitkin in her seminal work *The Concept of Representation*,<sup>6</sup> the authors of the representative turn do not provide us with a taxonomy of types of representation.

### Representation as a dynamic process

The representative turn shows that viewing representation in standard principal-agent terms remains a narrow framework and emphasizes instead the dynamic character of representation. The representative process is seen as interactive and dynamic.<sup>7</sup> As a result, theorists of the representative turn stress the need to move beyond constraining typologies such as mandate-independence and delegate-trustee frames because such perspectives assume a fixed, knowable set of interests for the represented.<sup>8</sup> As Monica Vieira and David Runciman point out: „*... Interests do not need to constitute an objective category, established prior to representation. Indeed, they hardly ever do. They are rather established within the process of representation itself.*”<sup>9</sup> Since interests are never absolutely objective and are constructed in the

4 Mansbridge, J., Rethinking Representation. *The American Political Science Review*, 97, 2003, No. 4, pp. 515–528.

5 Vieira, M. B. – Runciman, D., *Representation*. London, Polity Press 2008, p. 119.

6 Hanna Pitkin remains the most cited theorist of representation in literature on political science. She recognizes formalistic views of representation (with two categories – authorization and accountability), descriptive representation, symbolic representation and “acting for” account of representation. Pitkin, H., *The Concept of Representation*. Los Angeles, University of California Press 1972.

7 Vieira, M. B. – Runciman, D., *Representation*, op. cit., p. 73; Disch, L., Towards a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation. *American Political Science Review*, 105, 2011, No. 1, pp. 100–114.

8 Saward, M., The Subject of Representation. *Representation*, 44, 2008, No. 2, p. 95.

9 Vieira, M. B. – Runciman, D., *Representation*, op. cit., p. 101.

process of representation itself, they become a contested category. When representative interprets a group's interest, s/he puts forth a claim to be representing it. This claim is then open to be challenged by rival claims made by different representatives.

The representative turn presupposes that representation is constitutive in a way that images of the people and their interests are created through the act of representing itself.<sup>10</sup> Instead of conceiving representation as simply standing for a predefined constituency, representation is better understood as practices of constructing social groups and claiming legitimacy as a representative of such constructed identities and interests.<sup>11</sup> As Sofia Näsström puts it „*The central point is that constituencies do not exist beforehand, but they are constantly made and remade through representative politics. Who 'we, the people' are is an ongoing thing.*”<sup>12</sup> This is what marks out political representation as a dynamic form of politics.

Michael Saward's contribution to the representative turn lies in his concept of representative claim which is an analytical tool interconnecting five central elements<sup>13</sup> of representation – the maker, the subject, the object, the referent and the audience and enables us to capture multiple particularities of political representation. Representative claims are, according to Saward, unstable, highly variable and they depend on whether they can triumph over competing claims to represent. That is why he regards representation „... *as an ongoing process of making and receiving, accepting and rejecting claims – in, between, and outside electoral cycles.*”<sup>14</sup> Since claims to representation prove themselves in competition with one another, it is crucial to look closely at how, and by whom representative claims are made, received and judged.

The authors of the reviewed books overlap when they assert that a necessary condition for something to count as an act of representation requires an audience of some kind since it is the audience that contributes to the success or failure of the representative claim itself.<sup>15</sup> In my opinion, conceiving of representation in terms of representative claims rather than simply in terms of principal-agent relationship allows the concept of representation

10 For constitutive aspect of representation see: Bíba, J., Symbolic Representation and the Paradox of Responsive Performativity. *Human Affairs*, 25, 2015, No. 2, pp. 153–163.

11 Selboe, E. – Stokke, K., Symbolic Representation as Political Practice. In: Stokke, K. – Thornquist, O. – Webster, N. (eds.), *Rethinking Popular Representation*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2009, p. 60.

12 Näsström, S., Where is the Representative turn Going?, op. cit., p. 506.

13 Representation is often understood as three sided – a subject stands for an object that is an account of a referent.

14 Saward, M., *The Representative Claim*, op. cit., p. 36.

15 Vieira, M. B. – Runciman, D., *Representation*, op. cit., p. 80.

a greater flexibility to adjust in the face of existing non-electoral modes of representation. Therefore, there is no reason to suppose that representative politics could not incorporate thinking about the challenges the world currently faces. As we could see, the representative turn makes it possible to include all the variety of political representation's examples.

### Non-electoral representation

What about cases when a representative is not elected, does it still count as representation? The answer of the theorist of the representative turn is positive, according to them representation can be non-electoral as well as electoral. They add that representation need not presuppose the appointment of a representative. S/he could be self-selected and bring forward a claim to act on the group's behalf. Saward and also Vieira with Runciman illustrate well self-appointed guardians of those who cannot act for themselves on the example of the rock singer Bono who claims to represent the African poor. Bono explains that these people lack in representation and that they need to be spoken for because they have no voice at all. Apparently, he chose himself as a representative, he was not appointed by African poor to represent them, nor by elected officials in the poor people's home countries.<sup>16</sup> It is obvious that the example of Bono and Africa or other self-appointed public figures, acting as spokespersons, does not fit the straightforward principal-agent model. Last but not least, Bono's claim to speak for the poor of Africa also takes us beyond the nation-state representation framework.

At this point it is important to underline that the intention of the representative turn is not to downgrade the significance of free elections or suggest that non-elective representation is more democratic. Theorists of the representative turn do not reject electoral representation, but they open up the possibility to recognize and analyze non-electoral forms. Conventional representative institutions (political parties, national parliaments etc.) still remain crucial.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, in the context of non-electoral forms of representation theorists also pay attention to the role of non-governmental organizations and social movements, especially in international politics since national level does not remain the sole site of representation.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of representation has revolved primarily around the state. But state representation has increasingly had to coexist with various sorts of

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16 Ibid., pp. 146–147.

17 Saward, M., *The Representative Claim*, op. cit., pp. 82–110.

18 Cornwall, A. – Goetz, A. M., *Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives. Democratization*, 12, 2005, No. 5, pp. 783–800.

political representation that have been proliferating outside of it.<sup>19</sup> Since the second half of the twentieth century on, we have witnessed representation provided by alternative bodies, including NGOs and other kinds of international organizations that have become more significant. The representative turn in democratic theory has managed to respond to these changed circumstances by including forms of political representation that do not depend on the narrow criteria of electoral accountability. Needless to say, paying attention to new actors involved in representation beyond borders does not mean the end of the state's representative role.

The three reviewed books intend to restore the value of representation for democracy. Rather than seeing representative government as an elitist form of government<sup>20</sup> or as a by-product of the workings of democracy, they believe democracy and representation are complementary. They disagree with contemporary political thought that treats democracy as the founding principle of modern political life and representation as its mere appendage. Unfortunately, the widespread use of the phrase representative democracy also reflects a general sense that political representation is nothing without its democratic underpinnings. In other words that without democracy, representation is just a word.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, representative democracy is not, according to the authors of the representative turn, merely a pragmatic alternative to direct democracy, representation is primed to expand democratic participation and is essential to democracy.<sup>22</sup>

### From will to judgement

Finally, one of the main characteristics of the representative turn includes the notion that representation is rather a matter of judgment than a matter of will. Will and judgement are two different modes of participation in representative democracy and only the latter is in the hands of all the citizens all the time. Whereas will is mirrored in voting, judgement is reflected in forming and expressing political opinions.<sup>23</sup> Theorists of the representa-

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19 Vieira, M. B. – Runciman, D., *Representation*, op. cit., p. 140.

20 Bernard Manin shows inegalitarian and aristocratic effects of election due to four factors – the unequal treatment of candidates by voters, the distinction of candidates required by a situation of choice, the cognitive advantage conferred by salience and the cost of disseminating information. Manin, B., *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1997.

21 Vieira, M. B. – Runciman, D., *Representation*, op. cit., pp. 59–60.

22 Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2008.

23 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2014, pp. 17–20.

tive turn argue that we cannot narrow democratic participation only to the final act of voting. Compared to direct democracy, representative democracy compels citizens to be always more than voters, to transcend the act of suffrage (will). Democracy cannot ignore what citizens say when they act as citizens, not electors. The emphasis on judgement consequently means that deliberation comes to the core of the concept of representation.<sup>24</sup>

By reorienting the attention of representative democracy from will to judgement, it does not aim to close the gap between representatives and the represented. On the contrary, it is essential to retain the gap so that citizens could carry out their critical function of watching their representatives. *„Approaching representation and participation from the perspective of judgement rather than the will makes us fully appreciate the worth of indirectness in democratic politics. (...) Representation can encourage political participation insofar as its deliberative and judgemental character expands politics beyond the narrow limits of decision and voting.”*<sup>25</sup>

It is obvious that the representative turn approach pays much more attention to the time between elections compared to concepts of representation that are based on will. Nadia Urbinati compares representative democracy with direct democracy as a system of decision-making that presents citizens with yes/no questions and therefore cannot accommodate a pluralism of opinions. The direct presence of citizens is much less representative of their ideas than their indirect presence in a representative democracy.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, representation is not seen as the second-best form of government following direct democracy.

## Representative turn – new angle

From my point of view the main contribution of the reviewed books lies in the ability to include “non-conventional” forms of representation, such as non-electoral representation or representation beyond boundaries of the nation-state. Thanks to the representative turn in democratic theory we are able to conceptualize these cases of representation that have recently been on the rise and that used to be beyond the scope of thinking about political representation. On the one hand, the representative turn therefore enables us to enrich the concept of political representation with a new angle. On the other hand, authors still take into consideration the crucial role of formal,

24 Dryzek, J., *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2002; Gutmann, A. – Thompson, D., *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton, Princeton University Press 2004.

25 Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy*, op. cit., p. 16.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 113.



electoral modes of representation and representative systems based on the nation-state remain the norm. While comparing the reviewed books among themselves, I found out that they stress different aspects of representation – while books by Nadia Urbinati, Monica Vieira and David Runciman concentrate on the history of the idea of political representation, the text written by Michael Saward introduces an analytical tool for the concept of representation.