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Editors' introduction: Rethinking the future of representative democracy

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The fusion of representation and democracy

The invention of representative democracy is often said to be among the distinctive achievements of modern politics. It came as no easy victory. In its European homeland, it took seven centuries (and quite a few rebellions and revolutionary upheavals) to consolidate representative institutions. Church hierarchies had to be resisted in the name of true religion. Monarchs had to be brought under the control of assemblies. Legislatures then had to be subjected to democratic election, and in turn these democratic elements had to be grafted onto pre-democratic institutions of representation. The model of representative democracy that resulted is today familiar – within the European region, the United States, Chile, Japan, India and other countries – as a cluster of territorially bound governing institutions that include written constitutions, independent judiciaries and laws. These institutions guarantee such procedures as periodic election of candidates to legislatures, limited-term holding of political offices, voting by secret ballot, competitive political parties, the right to assemble in public and liberty of the press.

Compared with the previous assembly-based forms of democracy associated with the classical Greek world, representative democracy was different. The ancient world knew nothing of representation; it did not even have a word for it. The citizens of Athens, for instance, thought of their democracy as direct and participatory. Besides, it was highly exclusive and restricted to less than one-third of the population, with foreigners, slaves and women excluded from the *demos* (Meier 1995). Representation as a political language and set of institutions sprang in various and conflicting ways from the fields and towns of medieval Europe, but initially it had little or nothing to do with the egalitarian ethos of democracy. The practical fusion of democracy and representation did not begin to take place until the late sixteenth-century acts of resistance to monarchy in the Low Countries. It dates especially from

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the time of the great American and French revolutions of the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the struggles they unleashed for the extension of the suffrage during the next two centuries (Pitkin 1967 and 2004; Dahl 1989; Keane 2009).

The invention of representative government and its subsequent democratisation was something of a marriage of convenience. The marriage was supposed to serve the cause of both representation and democracy by improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of government. It was certainly of epochal political importance. It greatly expanded the geographic scale of institutions of self-government; it also fundamentally altered the meaning of democracy. Representative democracy came to signify a type of government in which people, in their role as voters faced with a genuine choice between at least two alternatives, are free to elect others who then act in defence of their interests, that is, represent them by deciding matters on their behalf. Much ink and blood was to be spilled in defining what exactly representation meant, who was entitled to represent whom and what had to be done when representatives snubbed or disappointed those whom they were supposed to represent. But what was common to the new age of representative democracy that finally matured during the early years of the twentieth century was the belief that good government was government by representatives of the people.

Often contrasted with aristocracy and monarchy, representative democracy was praised by a wide spectrum of political writers and public figures. Thomas Jefferson, the Marquis de Condorcet and James Mill were among the best known defenders of the view that representative democracy was a way of governing better by openly airing differences of opinion – not only among the represented themselves, but also between representatives and those whom they are supposed to represent. Representative government was also hailed as an effective new method of apportioning blame for poor political performance; a new way of encouraging the rotation of leadership, guided by merit. Right from the beginning, some critics thought of it as a form of elected aristocracy, but that rather understated another claimed advantage of representative democracy: that it cleared space for political minorities and competition for power that in turn enabled elected representatives to test out their political competence in the presence of others. For those who disliked the restricted (male, property-owning) franchise and who therefore found these arguments suspect, the earliest champions of representative democracy also offered a more pragmatic justification of representation. It was seen as the practical expression of a simple reality: that it wasn't feasible for all of the people to be involved all of the time, even if

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they were so inclined, in the business of government. Given that reality, the people must delegate the task of government to representatives who are chosen at regular elections. The job of these representatives is to watch over the expenditure of public money, domestic and foreign policies, and all other actions of government. Representatives make representations on behalf of their constituents to the government and its bureaucracy. Representatives debate issues and make laws. They decide who will govern and how – on behalf of the people.

From the time of the birth of representative democracy, not everyone agreed that democracy could or should become representative. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was among the first to argue against the whole idea that democracy could become representative, in his view on the ground that the sovereign will of the whole people could never be authentically represented. According to Rousseau, either the representation of the will of the whole people was identical with that will, in which case it was an unnecessary redundancy; or it was not identical with that will and, hence, a rotten fiction. Parallel complaints against representative democracy subsequently resurfaced many times, for instance in the early decades of the twentieth century in the controversies over the future of parliaments (Schmitt 1923). According to these complainants, examined in Chapter 1 of this volume by Nadia Urbinati, democracy is inimical to representation. Democracy cannot be turned into representative democracy because representation entails an illegitimate transfer of power from the principal (the *demos*) to the agent (the representative). Such a transfer of power is impossible if those who are represented are in fact to remain sovereign. The only way for the sovereign body to keep its sovereignty is to interpret representation exclusively as an act of mere delegation, as a contract in which the representative receives an imperative mandate from the represented. According to such thinking, representative democracy is therefore a contradiction in terms: democracy, the direct form of decision making among equals par excellence, is combined with indirect decision making that supposes a hierarchy of competence, that is, representation.

These arguments still seem to have bite in some political circles. They are today making a comeback, as exemplified by the theorists and advocates of 'deep' or 'participatory' democracy and 'citizens' participation' and 'community involvement'; and, in a different and inverse way, by those who deem representative government to be a way of limiting the democratic impulse and controlling the masses. Contemporary works, such as those by Sheldon Wolin (2004: 599–602; 2008: 259–92) and Bernard Manin (1997: 237–8) argue clearly in this direction, admittedly with altogether different consequences. Wolin sees the egalitarian,

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power-levelling spirit of democracy as tied to no specific institutional form. It is episodic, an ephemeral process, a fugitive that can grip citizens' lives only in small-scale settings. Representation is the enemy of democracy in this sense. It frustrates collective action by splintering the *demos* and by disconnecting the exercise of power from its rightful source; an active *demos* is replaced by political professionals who protect powerful particular interests. Representation makes a mockery of the power-principle of democracy, majority rule: 'majorities are artifacts manufactured by money, organization and the media'. By contrast, but from within the same critical perspective, Manin carefully examines the historical evolution of the key features of modern democratic institutions. Considering representative democracy as a consciously chosen alternative to popular self-rule, Manin sees representation as a tempering device, as an experiment in amalgamating democratic and aristocratic components. Representative democracy is a balanced system of government. Although it is a substitute for the democratic principle of selection by lot, a principle that provides all individuals with an equal chance of governing, representative mechanisms centred on elections enable citizens periodically to remind representatives of their presence, to ensure (says Manin) that 'the chambers of government are not insulated from their clamour'. Yet elections produce definite 'aristocratic effects'; they reserve public office for 'eminent individuals whom their fellow citizens deem superior to others'.

Among the prominent arguments offered by all contributors to this book is the proposition that the critics of representative democracy, past and present, have failed to recognise that the grafting of representation onto democracy irreversibly changed the original meaning of both. Representation, once conceived by Hobbes and other political thinkers as simply equivalent to the actual or virtual authorisation of government, had to make room for equality, accountability and free elections. For its part, at least in theory, democracy had to find space for the process of delegation of decisions to others and, hence, open itself up to matters of public responsiveness and the public accountability of leaders. Democratic representation is a process of representing the interests and views of electors who are absent from the chambers and forums where decisions are made. Representatives decide things on behalf – and in the physical absence – of those who are affected. But that is only half of the complex, dynamic equation. For under conditions of democracy, those who are rendered absent from the making of decisions periodically step forward and make their presence felt by raising their hands in public, or by touching a screen or placing a cross on a ballot paper in private. Under democratic conditions, representation is

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a process of periodically rendering or making present what is absent; it is not simply (as Burke supposed) an act of delegation of judgements to the few trustees who make decisions on behalf of those whom they represent. Representation (ideally) is the avoidance of *misrepresentation*. Representation is accountability, an ongoing tussle between representatives who make political judgements and the represented, who themselves also make political judgements. The upshot of this dialectic is that representative democracy is a distinctive form of government that simultaneously distinguishes and links together the source of political power – the people or *demos* – and the use made of political power by representatives who are periodically chastened by the people whose interests they are supposed to serve (Maravall 2008: 12).

The act of responsibly deciding things on behalf of people under democratic conditions can be seen not only as an admission of the inescapability of representation in human affairs and, thus, the impossibility of so-called direct democracy. Something more is at stake: democratic representation can be seen as a marked improvement upon the key limitation of so-called direct democracy. In order to work, so-called direct democracy presumes the existence of a small political community of educated citizens with much time for politics and – a big presumption – a high degree of social and cultural homogeneity of the so-called sovereign people. On that basis, government and society are supposed to be identical, or at least capable of identification; the political representation of social interests is rendered redundant because citizens iron out their differences through ongoing deliberations and decisions that have the effect of renewing their political community. Representative democracy, by contrast, abandons the ancient fiction of a (potentially) homogeneous *demos*; it rejects the ideal of a general will in favour of the acceptance of a dynamic plurality of wills and judgements that are permanently contested and contestable, through processes of publicity, open election and the political representation of diverse social interests.

The contributors to this volume express different understandings of both representation and democracy, but they are nevertheless persuaded that a form of democracy based upon representation is the only type of government that gives open expression to the diversity that it makes possible in the first place. Quite often, those who analyse representative democracy present 'thin' accounts of its mode of operation by concentrating exclusively on the electoral procedures that enable the process of delegation of decision making to representatives. Elections are regarded as the essence of representative democracy, which is seen as an elitist form of government in which 'we are ruled by others,

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but we select them and we replace them with our votes' (Manin *et al.* 1999: 4–5). The approach of this volume is different. It favours a 'thick' understanding of democracy and representation by showing that representative democracy is based in fact not just on elections but on three core elements: the open public expression of social needs and interests; the appointment of representatives through free and fair election; and the temporary granting of powers by the represented to representatives who make laws within the framework of a written constitution. From this perspective, representatives receive their political mandate from the represented, through free and meaningful and lawful periodic elections. Yet from the perspective of representative democracy, elections do not put an end to the representative process, as a narrowly electoral conception of democracy would have us believe.

There are three reasons for this. First, the election of representatives is a dynamic process subject to what can be called the disappointment principle (Keane 2008). Elections are a method of apportioning blame for poor political performance – a way of ensuring the rotation of leadership, guided by merit and humility, in the presence of electors equipped with the power to trip leaders up and throw them out of office if and when they fail, as often they do. Every election is as much a beginning as it is an ending. The whole point of elections is that they are a means of disciplining representatives who disappoint their electors, who are then entitled to throw harsh words, and paper or electronic rocks, at them. If representatives were always virtuous, impartial, competent and responsive then elections would lose their purpose. Second, and obviously linked to the disappointment principle, is the fact that the process of delegation that takes place through elections is plagued by a difficulty that is the subject of continuing controversy among the analysts of representative democracy: whether elections are mainly a retroactive means of punishing and rewarding governments, or whether instead they are primarily a prospective mechanism for selecting good politicians (Fearon 1999). If elections are mainly a retrospective mechanism then the conclusion follows that they are an ineffective way of continuously holding the elected accountable. A vast literature has clearly demonstrated this ineffectiveness (Powell and Whitten 1993; Maravall 1999; Stokes 2003; Achen and Bartels 2004; Maravall and Sánchez-Cuenca 2008) even though, as much empirical evidence also shows, voters try hard to judge politicians retrospectively and their programs prospectively (Manin *et al.* 1999). There is a third reason why elections are not the be all and end all of representative democracy: the ability of representatives to define and interpret the interests of the many they represent depends upon a process of permanent contact and deliberation between representatives and the represented. Representation always has a vicarious dimension: it implies a relationship between the representative and the represented that goes well beyond a pure and simple face-to-face contract.

Representation – ideally conceived – is an act of delegation whereby the represented grant to representatives the task of defending their interests, all the while insisting that they remain directly accountable to the represented for their actions. Political representation is not a process of issuing political mandates. Representatives do not receive direct daily instructions from the many they represent, and for that reason the former necessarily define and interpret the interests of the latter. It is this representative dimension that unavoidably stands at the heart of representative democracy – and that provides grist to the mill of its many critics, both old and new. In this respect, 'free and fair elections' and the time lapsed between elections matter greatly. So, too, does the access of citizens to their representatives; the free circulation of information and the level of information that is available to citizens; their participation in the deliberation of political issues; and, by no means of least importance, the ability of citizens to respond to the representative claims made by their representatives. The more pluralistic and high quality are the sources of information, and the more citizens participate in public life, the more representatives can be held accountable to the represented (Bühlmann *et al*. 2008).

A crisis of representative democracy?

The contributions to this book by David Beetham, Philippe Schmitter and Bernhard Wessels make clear that the three core elements of representative democracy – freedom of public expression, the electoral mandating of representatives and their lawmaking powers – are nowadays articulated through institutions that have become familiar fixtures in the house of representative democracy. These institutions include free media, electoral systems, political parties and parliaments. Because acts of political representation are inherently interpretative in character, and because they involve not just individuals but relationships among different groups, the existence of political parties is fundamental to the process of representation. So too are parliaments, which are supposed to resemble a marketplace of ideas and interests, the institutional space where political parties engage in a permanent process of contestation, mediation and compromise. The contributions of Sonia Alonso, John Keane, Michael Saward and Michael Zürn and Gregor Walter-Drop further remind us that representative democracy is also supposed to operate within the power container of states with clearly demarcated territorial boundaries, ruling over a population that functions (according to many observers) as a political community, the nation.

It is today still widely believed that the historic synthesis of democracy and representation served the cause of democracy by improving its practicability, effectiveness and legitimacy in larger territorial states. Given that in 1941 there were only eleven representative democracies left on the face of the earth, this is no small political achievement. Of course, there has always been a gap between the bold ideals of representative democracy and its complex, multi-layered and defective real world forms. Some contemporary observers (Fukuyama 2006) draw from this discrepancy the conclusion that expressions of dissatisfaction with 'liberal' representative democracy are normal; even that they are healthy reminders of the precious contingency of a form of good government that has no serious competitors. Other observers (Rosanvallon 1998; Crouch 2004; Ginsborg 2005) draw the opposite conclusion: euphoria is unwarranted, they say, because the mechanisms of representation that lie at the heart of existing democracies are under severe stress, and are triggering public concerns about the future of representative democracy itself. In democratic systems as different as the United States, India, Australia, Germany, Great Britain and Argentina, these analysts point to evidence of a creeping malaise – to signs that the core institutions of representation are either being trumped by increasing concentration of power in the executive branch of government; or sidelined by unaccountable bodies; or suspected or rejected outright by citizens and unelected representatives who cannot identify with these core institutions.

Several broad types of diagnosis of what is currently happening to representative democracies are examined in this volume. Some analysts point to the growing power of so-called guardian institutions and of processes of unelected representation – neo-corporatism in labour relations and economic policy, the rise of independent central banks and advisory councils of experts in the field of government are examples – that have begun to supplant elected government bodies (Pitkin 2004: 339). Others claim that the political asymmetry in the representation of interests and groups is hollowing out democracy's core principle of political equality (Crouch 2004; Dahl 2006). Still other observers draw upon Eurobarometer and other opinion polls in support of the view that several core institutions of representative democracy (elections, parties, parliaments) are losing public legitimacy. They point out that formal membership of political parties has dipped sharply (Dalton 2004; Schmitter and Trechsel 2004) and that voter

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turnout at elections is becoming more volatile, at least in those countries where it is optional. It is also noted that levels of trust in politicians and government are generally in decline; and that citizens have begun to spot the deformation of policy making by the private power of banks and other organised business interests, and by lobbyists. When considered together, these disparate trends have encouraged some analysts to conclude that representative democracy is breeding political disaffection. Others have argued that its ideals are themselves now under siege, even that we are heading towards an epoch of 'post-democracy'.

These claims about the decline, decay or disappearance of representative democracy have a sense of urgency about them, but how plausible are they? Among the distinctive features of this volume is that it launches a considered investigation of claims that representative democracy is breeding disaffection and may be in terminal decline. The research contributions presented below aim to evaluate the performance of present-day representative democracies by reconsidering not only their founding core principles, but also by using these principles to measure their current performance – and their possible twenty-first-century transformation into forms of democratic representation that defy textbook accounts of representative democracy.

There are certainly plenty of indicators in support of claims about an impending malaise of representative democracy. As already noted, elections, parties and parliaments, among the core institutions of representative democracy, are failing in the eyes of many citizens. The volatility of electoral turnouts is rising, albeit at different rates in different countries. Many citizens do not see elections as sufficiently robust instruments of control over their representatives. Electoral laws are sometimes manipulated in order to favour or guarantee particular outcomes; there are plenty of recorded cases where elections are so manipulated that they are emptied of real content. Despite the fact that citizens remain strongly interested in public affairs, they tend to be ill informed about the particular activities and policies of governments and their representatives. Political parties meanwhile find it increasingly difficult to attract the support of citizens. Membership figures have dropped dramatically and they are no longer major employers or protectors of the welfare of citizens. The corruption of party financing is ubiquitous. Cartel parties have corrosive effects by manoeuvring other political parties from the centres of electoral competition (Katz and Mair 1994). There is evidence, as David Beetham explains in Chapter 5, that parliaments are becoming increasingly unpopular, as a result, among other things, of their connection with party shenanigans, extreme partisanship (in the sense of sectarianism) and 'money politics'.

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Bernhard Wessels reminds readers that not all these indicators apply to all countries, or with the same intensity. His reminder serves to highlight the point that the institutions of representative democracy are threatened not only by endogenous forces but by exogenous factors as well. Contemporary representative democracies are evidently not performing according to their own declared standards and values. Governments are failing to deliver the economic and social goods citizens expect. Economic and social inequalities have for some time been increasing throughout the OECD region – a trend that has assumed worldwide proportions with the onset of the global economic downturn. In addition, immigrants and ethnic minorities continue to be excluded from fair representation and decision-making processes; their demands and everyday problems are often neglected. Women remain grossly under-represented in political and, particularly, economic institutions. As the case of the United States after 9/11 shows, human rights are still sometimes abused in democratic polities; this is especially true in young and 'defective' electoral democracies where the rule of law is weakly developed (Merkel 2004). All these trends produce increasing dissatisfaction and outright disaffection with the performance of existing representative democracies. In his contribution to this volume, Klaus von Beyme shows that the history of representative democracy has been marked by ongoing disgruntlement and outright attacks on its defective forms. But he pays special attention to a new and serious challenge that confronts both consolidated and unconsolidated (and allegedly non-defective) representative democracies: populism. According to von Beyme, the weaknesses of representative democracy provide the ideal soil for the growth of either right-wing ethnopopulism in Europe or left-wing redistributional populism, as in Latin America. While he warns against the false temptation of so-called direct democracy, he shows that the embrace of populism as a governing strategy is a latent 'auto-immune disease' that thrives whenever wide gaps develop between the ideals and the functional reality of representative democracy. If 'the people' are unsatisfied and increasingly angry with their representatives, some leaders or groups are easily tempted to represent themselves as the saviours of the people, and to get their hands on governing institutions to govern in the name of the people, and for the people.

The fossilising of the conventional mechanisms of representative democracy and the practical violation of its core principles are not the only difficulties presently confronting this form of government. There are growing signs as well that representative democracy is now threatened by an inhospitable international situation. The so-called third