

The Modernity of Political Representation

Its Innovative Thrust and Transnational Semantic Transfers during the Sattelzeit (Eighteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)

SAMUEL HAYAT AND JOSÉ MARÍA ROSALES

Representation is a major and multifaceted concept of modern politics. Through open and regular elections, it shields the democratic character of representative governments, compelling politicians to pursue the interests of their constituencies and become responsive to their demands.¹ But since the concept of representation is so embedded in the day-to-day workings of democratic regimes, it has largely lost significant traces of its history that shed light on its political dawn. The instrumentalization of the concept by representative governments in order to assess their democratic legitimacy obfuscates its seminal ambiguities and the history of conflicts about its meaning and institutional functions.

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1. Heinz Eulau and John C. Wahlke, *The Politics of Representation: Continuities in Theory and Research* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1978); Bernard Manin, Adam Przeworski, and Susan C. Stokes, "Elections and Representation," in *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, ed. Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 29–54; Jane Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (2003): 515–528.



Representation before/beyond Representative Democracy

Dismissing its origins and institutional complexity, representation is often considered synonymous with elections and elections with democracy. Although this pattern of equivalences makes sense as a legitimizing principle for representative government, it overshadows the plurality of meanings the concept of representation gained over time and its manifold institutional adjustments in democratic regimes.² In this regard—though Hanna Pitkin’s masterpiece on representation remains a landmark in political theory³—little attention has been paid to Hasso Hofmann’s conceptual history of the term,⁴ a study in line with the research program of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. On the other hand, in recent years, the pattern of equivalences between representation, elections, and democracy has become the target of populist and anti-liberal criticisms claiming that representation distorts true democracy. While this opposition between representation and democracy is far from new and may be linked with the inherent complexity of the term *representation*,⁵ the rise of right-wing populism in Europe makes such rhetoric even more prevalent and disturbing.

This challenge has been addressed by political theorists who show that political representation goes together with citizens’ participation and should thus constitute the basis for any thick conception of democracy.⁶ This “democratic turn,” produced since the late 1990s in the theory of political representation, was soon followed, and sometimes rivaled, by a “constructivist turn” that focused on “representative claims,” irrespective of the presence of electoral authorization, which challenged the parallel between representa-

2. Nadia Urbinati and Mark E. Warren, “The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 387–412; The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2018: Me Too? Political Participation, Protest and Democracy*, <http://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index> (accessed 7 February 2020).

3. Hanna F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1967).

4. Hasso Hofmann, *Repräsentation: Studien zur Wort- und Begriffsgeschichte von der Antike bis ins 19. Jahrhundert* [Representation: Studies on the history of words and concepts from antiquity to the nineteenth century] (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1974).

5. Didier Mineur, *Archéologie de la représentation politique: structure et fondement d’une crise* [Archeology of political representation: Structure and foundation of a crisis] (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2010).

6. David Plotke, “Representation Is Democracy,” *Constellations* 4, no. 1 (1997): 19–34; Nadia Urbinati, “Continuity and Rupture: The Power of Judgment in Democratic Representation,” *Constellations* 12, no. 2 (2005): 194–222; Sofia Näsström, “Representative Democracy as Tautology: Ankersmit and Lefort on Representation,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 5, no. 3 (2006): 321–342.

tion, elections, and democracy.⁷ Indeed, advocates of this constructivist turn emphasized the performative aspects and the potentially democratic role of representative claims not based on elections. While not incompatible with democratic values, constructivist accounts of political representation pose a new challenge for political theory by undermining the normative foundations of representative governments.⁸

Both consecutive turns, along with the criticisms of representative government, have put the concept of representation at the top of the agenda of current democracies. Yet to address the political and theoretical challenges of reassessing, and somehow reinventing, democratic representation in a time of crisis is seriously hindered by the vagueness of the knowledge at hand about the historical roots and functional aims of representative democracy. The naturalization of the representative system based on elections as the sole possible democratic institutional arrangement makes it, ironically, an easy target for political adversaries of liberalism and proponents of constructivism alike. Its assumed ahistorical character may have been a strength as a legitimizing principle; it is now a serious flaw that weakens democratic rule itself.

Accordingly, the purpose of this special section is to document with the help of two case studies the semantic and institutional changes of the concept of representation throughout the crucial period of the entrance of Europe into political democratic modernity, Reinhart Koselleck's *Sattelzeit*,⁹ the era from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. The history of representation from its rise as a political concept in the fourteenth-century debates about the relations between temporal and spiritual power to Thomas Hobbes's reformulation against defenders of parliament during and after the English Civil War is well known.¹⁰ Likewise, its uses by the founding fathers of modern representative governments (in France, Great Britain, and the United States) are even better known.¹¹ However, the more underground and long-term changes of representation through the *Sattelzeit*

7. Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

8. Lisa Disch, Mathijs van de Sande, and Nadia Urbinati, eds., *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

9. Reinhart Koselleck, "Basic Concepts in History: A Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany," trans. Michaela Richter, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 1 (2011): 1–37.

10. Adalbert Podlech, "Repräsentation," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 5, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), 509–547.

11. Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable: Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* [The unfindable people: History of democratic representation in France] (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

are not as often studied. This is especially eloquent when moving from the representation debates in Great Britain or France to other European countries such as the Netherlands or Poland, not to mention the non-European uses of representation that have only recently been explored¹² and whose chronologies provide clues to revise and update the comparative knowledge of political concepts.

The great variety in the semantics of representation¹³ may well explain the stimulus to transnational comparative studies, framed within the *Sattelzeit*, in other European countries and elsewhere since the 1980s, as documented by *Contributions to the History of Concepts*; yet it also outlines the linguistic and historiographic challenges a global conceptual history of representation should face. Whereas in English or in French a single signifier, *representation* or *représentation*, can refer to several signifieds (incarnation, delegation, mental image, pictorial or theatrical reproduction, and so on), Italian distinguishes between *rappresentazione* and *rappresentanza*, German between *Repräsentation*, *Vertretung*, *Darstellung*, and *Vorstellung*, for example. The picture becomes more complex when we try to assess the cases of non-European languages: sometimes the Western concept of representation was exported and conflicted with previous words, such as *daibiao* in Chinese in tension with the traditional *tianming* (mandate of heaven).

Representation and Political Legitimacy

Yet these purely linguistic limits are not the only reasons why such a conceptual history of representation is a scholarly challenge. Our contention is that it also has to do, paradoxically, with the very success of the vocabulary of representation in modern Europe. Indeed, this flexible concept offered a unique means to legitimize very diverse governments and institutional arrangements when traditional forms of legitimacy started to lose momentum, initially in Europe¹⁴ and later on in other parts of the world. No wonder

12. See, e.g., Juan P. Luna and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, "Representation in Latin America: A Study of Elite-Mass Congruence in Nine Countries," *Comparative Political Studies* 38, no. 4 (2005): 388–416; Omano Edigheji, "Political Representation in Africa: Towards a Conceptual Framework," *Africa Development* 31, no. 3 (2006): 93–119; and Garry Rodan, "Compelling Ideologies of Political Representation in Southeast Asia," *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2012): 311–332.

13. Yves Sintomer, "The Meanings of Political Representation: Uses and Misuses of a Notion," *Raisons politiques* 50 (2013): 13–34.

14. Wim Weymans, "Freedom through Political Representation: Lefort, Gauchet and Rosanvallon on the Relationship between State and Society," *European Journal of Political Theory* 4, no. 3 (2005): 263–282.

central authors of the *Aufklärung*, Enlightenment, or *Lumières* movements during the *Sattelzeit*, such as Montesquieu or Kant, gave political representation a crucial role in their rational redefinition of political legitimacy. Representation effectively placed popular consent at the core of the political system, thus making any other source of legitimacy redundant, without necessarily questioning the existing institutional arrangements, including those of authoritarian regimes.

Through the development of popular unrest in several parts of Europe from the seventeenth century onward, deep political struggles occurred regarding representation's meaning, with different actors claiming to be the real representatives of the people or the nation. Such uses of the vocabulary of representation to justify or invalidate political actors and institutions became a central feature of revolutionary events, especially in the United States and in France where the question of representation was at the core of both the onset and the later developments of the revolution.¹⁵ Yet the inaugural revolutionary controversy about representation may well have been the English Civil War (1642–1651), during which the concept of representation was called upon to uphold legitimacy claims for both the parliamentarians and their opponents loyal to the king, first of all Hobbes.¹⁶ In turn, Hobbes's *Leviathan* contributed to giving citizens' representation a prominent role in legitimating the sovereign, in place of religious, charismatic, or traditional forms of legitimacy—thus reinforcing the importance of controversies about political representation.

The multiple political crises and revolutions that took place during the *Sattelzeit*—not just in Europe, but also in the United States, the Caribbean, or Latin America—radicalized the antagonisms between different understandings of political representation. On the one hand, defenders of authoritarian rule developed a conception of representation mostly based on incarnation, according to which only a single person could represent the unity of the country and thus rule it.¹⁷ On the other hand, those who contested established institutions wanted to make governments accountable to citizens, relying on regular elections to select the wisest, and often richest,

15. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962); Keith Michael Baker, Colin Lucas, François Furet, and Mona Ozouf, eds., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987); John Phillip Reid, *The Concept of Representation in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

16. Quentin Skinner, “Hobbes on Representation,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 155–184.

17. Yves Sintomer, “La représentation-incarnation: idéaltype et configurations historiques” [Representation as embodiment: Ideal type and historical configurations], *Raisons politiques* 72 (2018): 21–52.

members of society—a system soon to be called representative government. In many countries, this conceptual polarity both influenced and was a result of class conflicts and rivalries between elites, making *representation* a strongly contested concept.

Historicizing Representative Democracies

In Europe, conflicts about the meaning of political representation had distinct consequences after the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars.¹⁸ Even if monarchies eventually prevailed, leading to the strengthening of European conservatism at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, it became impossible for any government to neglect middle class citizens' demands for representation and to restore absolute autocracies. The individual rational bourgeois citizen, already at the center of the public sphere since the eighteenth century,¹⁹ became the ubiquitous legitimizing figure on which any modern government, even a conservative one, should base its power. This move resulted in a partial Europeanization of the struggles about representation and foreshadowed a relative convergence among claims, mottos, and eventually institutions in most European countries. The revolution of 1848, at the very end of the *Sattelzeit*, thus gave rise to controversies around representation that reached a truly continental scale.²⁰ In almost every European country, the concepts of citizenship, liberty, representation, and sometimes democracy or even socialism formed a new common intellectual framework for political struggles and debates.

The end of the *Sattelzeit* saw the advocates of representative government successfully impose their idea of representation. However, their apparent victory in monopolizing the vocabulary of representation was by no means a definitive one. The pattern of equivalences it established between representation, elections, and later on, democracy was continuously resisted by both radical democrats and reactionaries. Moreover, it was questioned by members of the numerous groups that were originally excluded from politics in many countries, such as women, workers, indigenous peoples, and enslaved Africans. Those resistances to representative government became an integral part of the concurrent dynamics of both democratization and au-

18. Baker et al., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*.

19. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989).

20. Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions: 1848–1851* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones, *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

thoritarian personalization of contemporary politics, leading over time to a much richer and complex form of representation than the one initially tested in the early representative regimes of the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. The Europeanization of representative controversies gave way to a spread of local, national, and regional political arrangements. Both the centrality and complexity of the concept of representation in contemporary European politics result from the intertwining of these levels and the conceptual circulation that characterized the *Sattelzeit*.

This makes transnational and global history engaging challenges, as they require dealing with the apparently opposed homogenizing and differentiating forces that took root, making every national situation singular and yet linked with regional and global changes. This section's aim is to provide some preliminary landmarks, focused on European cases, to that account. First, Bert Drejer deals with the critical conflict between local and national forms of representation in the Netherlands, when representative government started to gain momentum in the eighteenth century. Through a careful analysis of the vocabulary used (representation versus depiction), Drejer shows the conceptual scope of this dispute. Then Piotr Kuligowski chronicles the end of the *Sattelzeit*, on the eve of the 1848 revolution that brutally ended many of the controversies around political concepts. Kuligowski spells out how opposing liberal, democratic, and socialist Polish political organizations conceptualized representation through this momentous period. Both examples shed new light on the transnational understanding of the fascinating conceptual history of representation.

Samuel Hayat is a researcher in political science at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) in Lille. Email: samuel.hayat@cnr.fr

José María Rosales is a professor of moral and political philosophy at the University of Málaga. Email: jmrosales@uma.es