

Descriptive Representation Revisited

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I realise that this may not seem entirely convincing in the Japanese context, where the proportion of women currently elected as political representatives remains around 10%, but I start this talk with a claim: democracy is now widely understood as involving at least some component of 'descriptive' representation. It is now more widely accepted, that is, that democracies are failing to fulfil their promise when the decisions shaping our lives are made by assemblies composed overwhelmingly of men, or overwhelmingly of those from the society's ethnic majority. Politicians, political commentators, and citizens alike now routinely comment on the gender and ethnic composition of elected assemblies, and seem to take it as self-evident progress when an election generates a higher proportion of women or more ethnically diverse legislature. Over the last three decades, there has been particularly effective mobilisation against the under-representation of women in politics, and some significant success. There are now countries where women outnumber men in the national parliament – Rwanda with 61%, Bolivia with 53% - and there is an increasing number of countries where women regularly make up 40-45% of the elected politicians, and also assume substantial leadership roles. The Nordic counties – Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland - have been world leaders in this respect. My own country has recently pushed the proportion up to 32%, and the global average is now over 23%.¹

Less than one in four of the world's elected politicians is not equality, and I am not suggesting that the normative arguments are now settled. Globally, men are still very much over-represented in politics, while approximations to ethnic proportionality have been largely restricted to countries that have had to address this because of the threat of severe ethnic or religious conflict. The very term, 'descriptive representation', conveys a lack of conviction about just how much this component of fair representation matters, for it invites a contrast with substantive representation and thereby suggests that there is something rather cosmetic about the change.

Indeed, one point to note from the outset is that 'descriptive representation' is not the chosen language of many of those who have contributed to these debates. Essays on the topic commonly reference theorists who work with 'inclusion' or 'the politics of difference' (Young, 1990, 2000); who write of 'group-based representation' (Williams, 1998); the 'tyranny of the majority' (Guinier, 1994); or 'the politics of presence' (Phillips, 1995). In all these cases, there is a shared critique of the homogeneity that has characterised those in positions of power; and a set of arguments about the damage this does to our claims to equal citizenship, and its narrowing effect on the policies our supposedly representative institutions adopt. In all cases, there are proposals for opening up the democratic system by changing not just structures but personnel, with an insistence that *who* does the representation can be as important as the ideas or visions they represent. In the process, a 'politics of presence' increasingly supplements a previous 'politics of ideas' (Phillips, 1995).

The presumption, in some cases, is that it is impossible for those who have not shared an experience of disadvantage, discrimination, or exclusion to speak adequately for those who have. More typically, however, it is recognised that advocacy is not restricted to those who directly share the experience. There are male politicians who have fought tirelessly for women's rights; female politicians who disdain any suggestion that they might speak for women; and white people who have given their lives to struggles for racial equality. The core argument is not that political perspectives are *determined* by one's location in gender or racial hierarchies, hence that failing the participation of members of disadvantaged groups, no one speaks in their name. The argument, more modestly, is that the capacity to recognise and challenge these hierarchies depends on exposure to them, whether this be direct or mediated through others.

We can all learn from the experiences of others, including by reading about them, but those who have experienced marginalisation have concerns, interests and perspectives that those lacking this experience may not even understand, let alone be able to represent. There is, in other words, an underlying epistemic argument about the ways in which experience enables and constrains the understanding of political issues; this epistemic argument often precedes any claim about people constituting distinct or competing interest groups. Many contributors to the literature prefer the 'more fluid and open' language of perspective over

that of interest, because, as Iris Marion Young puts it, ‘a perspective is a general orientation on the political issues without determining what one sees, and without dictating particular conclusions’ (Young, 2000, 148). But whether the focus is on interest or perspective, the central argument is that there can be no substitute for the presence of those with the more direct experience in decision-making assemblies. Failing their participation, we cannot be confident that the issues arising from their location in gender or racial hierarchies will be adequately identified or vigorously pursued.

It is relatively easy to see why the many theorists who have argued versions of this do not all adopt a language of descriptive representation. That term has been employed, from its beginnings, in a contrast with more substantive understandings of representation, in ways that then suggest something rather cosmetic. This was indeed implied in Hanna Pitkin’s use of the term in her influential work on *The Concept of Representation*. One of her key distinctions was between representation as ‘acting for’ and representation as ‘standing for’. In the first of these, the quality of the representation can be judged by how well the representative acts for those he or she represents: this might be a matter of how well she articulates their needs and concerns, how responsive she is to their preoccupations, how accountable, how effective. There is, in this, no particular imperative towards ensuring that representatives *also* reflect their constituents as regards gender or class or race. In the second, by contrast, the representative ‘stands for’ - one might say ‘stands in for’ - those who are being represented, and in this understanding, it looks as if the quality of the representation is to be judged simply by how closely the representative mirrors the represented, by the nature of the resemblance, the degree of likeness. As Pitkin then notes, this suggests a somewhat passive understanding of representation. ‘The representative does not act for others; he “stands for” them, by virtue of a correspondence or connection between them, a resemblance or reflection. In political terms, what seems important is less what the legislature does than how it is composed.’ (Pitkin, 1967, 61)

This distinction between ‘being there’ and ‘doing something’ is, however, significantly misleading as a characterisation of the concerns that drive recent initiatives regarding the composition of decision-making institutions. In most of the arguments, it is precisely because representatives *do* act, *do* make choices, *do* exercise judgment, that being able to ‘represent’ the gender or ethnic composition of the electorate so much matters. If

politicians were mere ciphers, their role no more than to pass on a message from constituents, it might indeed not matter who they were, for their gender, ethnicity or class would make minimal difference to their arguments or voting records. It is precisely because representatives must act that the knowledges they draw on from their social experiences become relevant to their political decisions.

In an earlier –somewhat idealised - version of party politics, the party label alone was supposed to provide voters with the necessary information about what their politicians would do, and having representatives who shared one’s party allegiances was considered enough of a predictor of their future actions, without any additional assistance from shared social experience. Even in the ideal version, the case is flawed, for politicians always have to establish priorities and exercise judgment in the face of unanticipated issues; if we regard knowledge as to any significant degree ‘situated’, we then have good reason to seek the additional representativeness given by some shared characteristics. But the case for this has been markedly strengthened by the decline of a left-right spectrum that more readily bundled judgments and preferences around the organising axis of class. In her analysis of the growing demands for women’s political representation, Nadia Urbinati argues that women previously felt more confidence in the ability of their political parties to pursue policies that would address their concerns, and did not therefore worry so much about their own virtual absence from parliamentary debates. With the declining role of political parties, the greater fragmentation of issues, and the declining trust in political parties, this changed. ‘When women demanded a greater presence on party lists or in elected institutions, it was because they no longer trusted their party...They no longer believed that their absence from decision-making institutions was irrelevant to the fulfillment of their demands.’ (Urbinati, 2012,473). Jane Mansbridge (1999) makes a related point about trust in her argument about why having female or black representatives matters. When we cannot predict views on abortion or multiculturalism or civil rights or immigration from positions on the nationalisation of the banks, we begin to seek additional sources of ‘representativeness’.

All this links fairer representation to fairer outcomes, and has given rise to numerous studies exploring whether and in what ways descriptive representation really does promote substantive representation (eg Lovenduski, 2005; Celis, Childs, Kantola and Krook, 2008). Evidence here is still mixed, in part because there are few ‘natural experiments’ to draw on.

Even the paragons of gender representation – the Nordic countries – have not been able to sustain full parity between women and men in their legislatures; the country with the highest female participation is Rwanda, still grappling with the fall-out from a brutal civil war; and increases in the number of female parliamentarians are not always (indeed rarely) combined with advances into positions of leadership. Meanwhile, initiatives to address ethnic imbalances are much less developed, so there is even less experience to draw on here.

But evidence about the consequences for policy is not the only issue, for there is always an additional argument that does not depend on this. This is sometimes described in terms of justice (Okin, 1995), sometimes political liberty (Urbinati, 2012), sometimes parity of participation (Fraser, 2003). It is generally captured by the observation that those currently marginalised in political decision-making should not have to ‘prove’ that their entry transforms political life in order to justify their inclusion. The case stands even if this were to make no difference at all to practices, debates, or policies, for it is not simply a matter of policy outcomes; it is a matter of equal citizenship. As Nadia Urbinati (2012, 469) puts it, ‘The achievement of reparative justice may or may not be the outcome of the citizens’ political presence. Yet *whatever the outcome*, it should certainly not be what justifies justice in representation.’

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There are numerous continuing areas of disagreement between those who support a politics of presence and those more critical of it, and in the longer version of this paper, available I believe on the web, I address some of these. But I want now to move on to a particular challenge associated with the rise of populist politics. Across many of today’s democracies, populist movements have mobilised anger against what they see as exclusionary and exclusive elites, elites variously derided as metropolitan, cosmopolitan, overly intellectual, establishment, as detached from ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ people. The rhetoric accompanying Donald’s Trump’s election as US president is one illustration of this. The emphasis on exclusion resonates with some of the arguments underpinning the case for more descriptive representation, but in the organising narrative of populism, there is also a strong sense of the elite as snobbish, as looking down on the people, thinking themselves superior. This is a language that ‘pits the people against the elites’ (Arato and Cohen, 2017,

286). As Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2016,18) put it, it reflects ‘a loose political ideology emphasizing faith in the “decent”, “ordinary” or “little” people over the corrupt political and corporate establishment’.

On one level, this populism expresses a feeling of marginality and under-representation that is close to what has fuelled claims for a politics of presence. The focus is typically on class rather than gender or racial exclusion, or is framed as ‘rust belt versus Washington’ or ‘deindustrialised North versus booming metropolis’, but there are obvious parallels. Within most populist narratives, however, any such parallels are explicitly denied. The tendency, to the contrary, is to represent the politics around gender or racial equality as yet another elite preoccupation, not as speaking to a similar experience of political exclusion, but as bound up with those exclusive and exclusionary elites. In an oddly inaccurate depiction of what establishments actually focus on, populist movements often represent the political establishment as preoccupied with anti-racism, LGBTQ rights, multiculturalism, gender equality, or the rights of refugees, at the expense of those ‘working’ or ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ people (Sawer,2008). Populism evokes an earlier time when things were better: a time before large scale immigration, or before competition from China, or before the collapse of East Germany. This often includes nostalgia for an imagined period of racial homogeneity, and an imagined era of gender relations, when men earned enough to support their families, women were more exclusively engaged in looking after the household, and the children found themselves partners of the opposite sex. The turn towards populism then seems simultaneously to confirm the importance of descriptive representation (it expresses, in part, a feeling that representatives do not speak for those they supposedly represent), and to reject those previously associated with such claims.

It is also notable that populist anger against political exclusion has not generated the same kind of demand for ‘one of our own’ to speak in our name. As regards Donald Trump, for example, many have commented on the irony of a multi-millionaire businessman who lives in a gilded tower representing himself as the voice of the people against the establishment. It is true that he is *not* of the political establishment, and *is* looked down on as an uncultured outsider, but it is still odd to see someone who lives a life of such privilege claiming himself as the authentic voice of those devastated by economic collapse. We have here two very different discourses of political exclusion: one focused primarily on gender

and race, and looking to inclusion via representatives who bear the characteristics; the other focusing on social class, but not attaching particular importance to whether those speaking for the excluded are part of the excluded group. In both cases, there is a strong sense of our representatives as not speaking for us, not giving voice to our often very different concerns. Beyond this, the two discourses do not cohere.

One possible reading of this is to say that proponents of a politics of presence have focused too narrowly on gender, or at best on gender and race, and thereby contributed to intensified class exclusion. Nancy Fraser (2009, 2013) has been articulating for some years an argument about feminism contributing to the legitimization of neo-liberal global capitalism, producing a disturbing alliance. Global capital, in this argument, is not burdened by nostalgic ideas about the appropriate place for women, and will happily commit itself to the search for talent, at one end, and cheap labour, at the other, regardless of gender. In doing so, it coincides with what Fraser calls the 'feminist romance' that attracts 'at one end, female cadres of the professional middle classes, determined to crack the glass ceiling; at the other end, the female temps, part-timers, low-wage service employees, domestics, sex workers, migrants, epz [export processing zone] workers and microcredit borrowers, seeking not only income and material security, but also dignity, self-betterment and liberation from traditional authority. At both ends, the dream of women's emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation.' (2013, check page) In a subsequent contribution, she argues that the Brexit vote, support for Bernie Sanders in the US, and for the *Front National* in France, are best seen as movements to reject globalisation, neo-liberalism, and the political establishments that have promoted these – but that feminism, unfortunately, has come to be seen as part of that establishment. In this account, support for Donald Trump can be interpreted as a rejection of the 'progressive' neo-liberal establishment, embodied in Fraser's view in the figure of Hillary Clinton, that yoked the ideals of various social movements, including feminism, to the high end business sectors of the global economy. The feminists and progressives who rallied to the Clinton campaign 'need to acknowledge their own share of blame for sacrificing the cause of social protection, material well-being, and working-class dignity to faux understandings of emancipation in terms of meritocracy, diversity, and empowerment.' (Fraser, 2016, 283)

Inglehart and Norris (2016) also note a close connection between feminism and populism but they offer a very different reading. In their argument, populism is best understood, not as a response to economic insecurity but as a cultural backlash against the 'silent revolution' that shifted younger generations towards cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, environmentalism, anti-racism, human rights, sexual and gender equality. This intergenerational shift has triggered 'a counterrevolutionary retro backlash' among those sensing the decline of familiar norms, including norms regarding sex roles, who actively reject the rising tide of progressive values. So where Fraser calls for a realignment of feminism that will forge common ground with those whose lives have been shattered by the onward march of global capitalism, the analysis by Inglehart and Norris leaves no space for any such re-alignment. In their account, this is a battle between opposing sides, and one either sustains the feminism and anti-racism or gives way to the populist backlash.

My own view is that neither account is entirely convincing. Fraser's claims about the alliance between feminism and the 'high end sectors of the global economy' looks somewhat dubious in the light of compelling evidence about the sexism that characterises the Silicon Valley industries; while her suggestion that progressives rallied around the cause of meritocracy at the expense of social protection does not ring especially true for Europe. Feminist discourse in Europe has focused more on the socially enabling and protecting aspects of improved pre-school provision, improved maternity and paternity leave, a better work/life balance for all workers, than on the meritocratic promotion of high level professional women. Yet Fraser is surely right to identify as a problem the disconnect between the sense of exclusion that fuels contemporary populism and a politics around gender that is currently achieving some small success. The increased acceptability of arguments regarding the under-representation of women, and the slowly but steadily improving numbers in legislatures around the world, are *not* matched by similar transformations as regards race and ethnicity, and they hold out little promise as regards social class. If, however, the central epistemic argument holds true – that experience both enables and constrains understanding, and that those experiencing marginalisation have concerns, interests and perspectives that those lacking this experience cannot adequately represent - it should be seen as much true for those marginalised by class as those marginalised by gender or race.

The alternative account offered by Inglehart and Norris understates the part played by economic insecurity in the rise of populism, and overstates the progressivist tide. They are right, nonetheless, to suggest that much of the gap between populism and feminism, populism and multiculturalism, or populism and anti-racism, is unbridgeable. Short of abandoning one's feminism or anti-racism, there is no way to compromise with a politics that reasserts traditional gender roles or refuses to recognise immigrants as equal citizens. The gap is unbridgeable in another sense, for the polarisations of populism tend to invoke an undifferentiated 'people' against the establishment or elite, and typically refuse the kind of differentiated representation that starts from the acknowledgement of different groups with distinct and sometimes competing experiences, interests, and perspectives. Populism is in many ways antagonistic to representation. Urbinati (2014,129) goes so far as to represent it as 'an alternative to representative democracy', arguing that 'populism has the people, more than the democratic citizen, at its core' (2014, 133).

The future of this for the politics of representation in contemporary democracies remains unclear, but it is an important gap in the politics around descriptive representation that it has so far failed to address marginalisation by social class. There are no easy answers to this. It may be that the most promising way forward involves a decentring of the state, and a re-focus on arenas of democratic engagement beyond the central representative institutions (Dryzek, 2016). But while this could be an important corrective to the exclusive emphasis on the composition of elected assemblies, it could also undermine the real achievements of the last decades in promoting alternative understandings of what it is to be representative. That it is now so widely agreed that political representation involves at least some component of so-called 'descriptive' representation is a major advance on the ways in which democratic representation was understood fifty years ago. The challenge is both to continue this advance, and ensure that the implications are widened beyond gender.

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¹ www.ipu.org