

## Descriptive Representation Revisited

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It is now part of the shared understanding of liberal democracy that representation involves at least some component of what is known as ‘descriptive’ representation. Politicians, political commentators, and citizens alike now routinely comment on the gender and ethnic composition of elected assemblies, and take it as self-evident progress when elections generate a higher proportion of women or more ethnically diverse legislature. Initiatives to achieve the latter remain relatively rare, but the Inter-Parliamentary Union has been collecting data on the proportion of women in parliaments around the world since the mid-1980s, and the idea that this is at least salient information is now widely accepted.<sup>1</sup> At the latest count, some form of gender quota was in place in 128 countries, and in many cases, not just as voluntary adoption by individual political parties but as a legislative requirement on all parties participating in elections.<sup>2</sup> France, Spain, Portugal and Ireland are among the countries in Europe that have passed electoral laws requiring parties to achieve a specified level of gender balance when selecting candidates for election. In Latin America, these electoral laws are the norm. The global figure is not stunning – at the time of writing just 23.5% of the world’s politicians are female – but figures in the high 30s or 40s are no longer so unusual. Progress *has* been stunning if one compares the predominantly male and ethnically homogeneous legislatures of the 1970s and 80s with the (somewhat) more diverse legislatures of today. (For the role of feminist political scientists in this shift, see Sawyer, 2019.)

This does not mean that the normative arguments are now settled, or that a continued upward trajectory is in any way guaranteed. Though many – perhaps even most - now accept that there is a democratic deficit when the decisions shaping our lives are made by assemblies composed overwhelmingly of men, overwhelmingly of those with no experience

of discrimination or insecurity, or overwhelmingly of those from the society's ethnic majority, there is no great head of steam building up to propel democracies towards full parity of representation. Public opinion appears largely satisfied with current slow rates of change. The arguments employed to promote fairer representation are, moreover, varied, and on some scores in tension. 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 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 the 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, and exclusion to speak adequately for those who have. Melissa Williams captures some of the force of this in a speech she cites from the Rev. Henry McNeal Turner, elected to the Georgia state legislature in 1868 but prevented from taking his seat because he was black. 'We are told,' he said, 'that if black men want to speak, they must speak through white trumpets; if black men want their sentiments expressed, they must be adulterated and sent through white messengers, who will quibble and equivocate and evade as rapidly as the pendulum of a clock.' (Cited in Williams, 1998: 279) The idea that white politicians simply cannot be trusted to represent black interests is an especially strong version of the argument - though entirely plausible in that context. 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 re-present. 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. Indeed, 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. Increases in the number of female parliamentarians are not always (indeed rarely) combined with advances into positions of leadership. And as the literature on the new institutionalism demonstrates, numbers alone do not guarantee transformations in institutional culture (Annesley, 2010; Chappell and Waylen, 2013). Other essays in this section provide fuller accounts of what is now known as regards both gender and minority representation. The point to stress in relation to the normative arguments is that there is always an important additional component that does not depend on evidence about outcomes.

This is sometimes described in term 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 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.’ ‘Representation is a means of defending or promoting interests, but it also has a value that is not reducible to the interests it may help to protect or voice, or fulfill. It is... a question of political liberty: being in the game and playing the game as citizens who are equal in power.’ (2012,475).

‘Equal in power’ sets the stakes considerably higher than the more minimal– and now hardly contested – claim that a democracy is *unrepresentative* when its politicians are overwhelmingly male or overwhelmingly of one ethnicity. Resistance to the stronger argument partly reflects vested interest (people do not like to relinquish power), but also continuing areas of uncertainty about the precise implications. In what follows, I address some of the perennial – though in my view also exaggerated – worries about essentialism; disagreements about the extent to which a politics of presence implies a form of group representation; and questions about whose exclusion then matters, including a division in the literature and politics over questions of intersectionality. I turn finally to some pressing questions about how the still growing body of initiatives to address political under-representation by gender and ethnicity relates to the populist politics that characterises much of democracy today.

### *Essentialism*

This is perhaps the least of the issues, for while critics still frequently object that focusing on the social characteristics of political representatives commits one to an implausible essentialism, this problem has been recognised and addressed from the early 1980s onwards. When Virginia Sapiro (1981) argued that women should be recognised as a distinct interest group, she was immediately taken to task for failing to specify in what ways ‘women’ could be said to constitute a group, or sufficiently to address the way hierarchies of gender, race and class intersect (Diamond and Hartsock, 1981). When Lani Guinier (1994) argued that all groups should have a meaningful voice in government (earning herself the epithet of ‘quota queen’ for her pains), a key point in her argument was that merely increasing the number of African American representatives was no guarantee of better minority representation. To the contrary, she argued, some of the mechanisms available to achieve this only provided safe seats for minority representatives, who were thereby insulated from challenge or debate and did not effectively represent their constituents (see also Swain, 1993; Canon, 1999). In these and many other contributions, the idea of a unified

‘women’s’ interest, or unified ‘black’ interest, is firmly repudiated, along with the easily disproved notion that any woman, merely by virtue of being a woman, can speak to the interests and concerns of all women, that any person of colour can speak to the interests and concerns of all people of colour, or any Muslim, Christian, or Jew to the interests and concerns of all Muslims, Christians, Jews. As Melissa Williams puts it (1998, 6), ‘no defensible claim for group representation can rest on assertions of the essential identity of women or minorities; such assertions do violence to the empirical facts of diversity as well to the agency of individuals to define the meaning of their social and biological traits.’

The critique of essentialism has been a particular preoccupation for feminists, and not only because generalisations about women are a central part of what we seek to contest. Claiming an essential ‘female’ identity also has the effect of obscuring major differences of experience according to a woman’s location in racial and class hierarchies, and can actively project the hegemony of one sub-group (Spelman, 1990, Narayan, 1998, Mohanty, 1984, 1992). When people suggest that an increased representation of women is necessary in order to increase the representation of paradigmatic ‘women’s issues’, this is often criticised for the seeming implication that men have no interest in – or can be absolved from any interest in - matters relating to child care or work/life balance or sexual harassment. The list of quintessentially ‘women’s issues’ is also criticised for a tendency to derive them from the experience of professional women in the global North, and then project this as universal experience.

The risks of essentialism have been long rehearsed, and no-one argues for an essential female or essential minority identity. The intersections of race with gender and class (Crenshaw, 1989); the misleading presumption that all minority ethnic citizens can rally under the banner of ‘black’ (Modood, 1994); the dangers of assuming that ‘just any woman, black or Latino will do’ (Dovi, 2002): all these have been extensively discussed in recent decades, and none of those challenging the gender and ethnic composition of our elected politicians would consciously endorse essentialism. This is not to say that the conundrum in claiming that certain social groups are politically excluded, while simultaneously refusing to specify core defining features of the group, has been resolved. As regards ethnicity, Modood (2007) offers a Wittgensteinian idea of ‘family resemblance’ as a way to avoid the essentialism of groups. As regards gender, Young (1994) offers a Sartrean distinction

between series and group, arguing that we can think of women as the those 'positioned as feminine' by a complex of varying social practices (including the local expectations of femininity, the institutionalised divisions of labour, the social rules of menstruation) without committing ourselves to the view that all women share certain attributes, or a particular identity, or experience their lives in the same way. Others have argued that it is the inescapable paradox of feminism that it must simultaneously assert *and* refuse the identity of women. As Joan Scott (1997, 3-4) puts it, 'Feminism was a protest against women's political exclusion: its goal was to eliminate "sexual difference" in politics, but it had to make its claims on behalf of "women" (who were discursively produced through "sexual difference"). To the extent that it acted for "women", feminism produced the "sexual difference" it sought to eliminate.' Nancy Fraser (1997) makes a similar point when she argues that the politics around race and gender simultaneously asserts their significance and seeks to 'put them out of business' as organising principles.

### *Group Representation*

The question of whether 'descriptive' representation aims to enhance the representation of groups links to the issue of essentialism, but is also distinct. One can talk of groups without thereby reifying them into entities defined by core characteristics (Brubaker, 2004; Phillips, 2007); indeed the point of Young's distinction between series and group is precisely to highlight the sense in which groups are political entities, brought into existence through action. But once we accept that groups are internally heterogeneous, we are left with an ambiguity in what it means to represent a group. This begs the question of which sections of the group one has in mind: the old, the young, the rich, the poor, the men, the women? There is a further complication when it comes to political representation, for most representatives are elected via geographical constituencies, and most present themselves for election as members of a political party. Except in the rare cases where there is a separate electoral roll for women and men, a constituency is never made up exclusively of voters sharing the representative's gender; and only in the most segregated of circumstances is it exclusively made up of voters sharing his or her ethnicity. When, moreover, representatives are elected as candidates from a political party, it is unclear in what sense they can be deemed to represent some other constituency. They can take it upon themselves, certainly, to speak for their gender or racial or ethnic group as well as for

their constituency and party – and many now do. But they cannot in all legitimacy describe themselves as ‘group representatives’.

In any strict sense of the phrase, group representation is a misnomer. It carries most conviction when allied to structures through which representatives consult with members of ‘their’ group over the policies they should pursue. Iris Marion Young’s early work on group representation (1989, 1990) comes closest to this, but only because it is not about political representation in the more conventional sense. Young argued for public funding to enable currently marginalised groups to self-organise – in effect, to constitute themselves as groups – and to formulate, through their discussions, agreed policies that decision-makers would then be obliged to take into account. It would be entirely legitimate for those who took on the role of conveying the results of these deliberations to describe themselves as group representatives. But it is hard to see how a woman of colour, contesting a geographical constituency under a party label, could describe herself as a group representative in the same way, even if she has made it clear in all her speeches and campaign literature that she intends to devote considerable energy to representing the concerns of women of colour. She has not been elected exclusively by that constituency, and failing a Young-type structure of consultation, is not really in a position to say what ‘her group’ wants. Like any group, ‘women of colour’ is internally heterogeneous, and her own vision of its needs and concerns will not be shared by all.

Suzanne Dovi (2002, 2009, 2012) has addressed one part of these concerns in work on what makes a ‘good’ descriptive representative. In earlier work, she argued that descriptive representatives should have ‘strong *mutual* relationships with *dispossessed sub-groups*’ (2002, 735). The first part meant they should not only see themselves but be seen by others as representative (so just saying that you feel you speak for group X is not enough); the second part meant they should be speaking for a group that has been and continues to be politically marginalised (so it is not open to any group to define itself as needing representation).<sup>3</sup> In later work, she sees herself as moving ‘beyond’ descriptive representation, to focus on the norms that should inform the act of representation. Her basic position is that ‘it matters who represents democratic citizens’ (2012,27). Though this could be adopted as a succinct summary of arguments for descriptive representation, the ‘who’ now refers less to social characteristics and more to whether representatives are

sufficiently committed to civic equality, self-governance, and inclusion. Inclusion remains a central pre-occupation, but in this later reformulation, it is achieved as much through the norms politicians adopt as through institutional design. 'Democratic citizens should select representatives whose advocacy is consonant with the norms and values distinctive of democratic institutions' (Dovi, 2012, 32).

Desirable as such a state of affairs would be, it moves us too far from the kind of institutional prescription that has always been part of the argument for descriptive representation. My own preference is to avoid the language of group representation altogether, both because it continues to suggest an overly homogeneous group, and because it implies clearer lines of representation and accountability than are ever available. The point is not that we need or should pursue 'group representation', but that we live in societies that are 'group-structured' (Williams, 1998) along intersecting axes of class, race, gender, sexuality, region, such that in the absence of counter-vailing mechanisms and institutions, we end up with decision-making bodies predominantly composed of members of hegemonic groups. When liberal democracies represent themselves as engaged only in the competition of ideas, disdaining any concern as to whether those doing the representation are women or men, from the society's dominant ethnic group or one of its racialised minorities, they turn a blind eye to the power structures that reinforce the status quo. Challenging these structures, whether via gender and racial quotas, or – as in the shift of perspective suggested by Rainbow Murray (2014) – by setting ceilings to the participation of dominant groups, does not, in any literal sense, produce 'group representation'. It does, however, acknowledge the group-structured nature of social and political hierarchies, and thereby opens up space for political and policy change.

There is one position in the literature that more adamantly repudiates the notion of 'group representation'. This is the position associated with the French movement for *parité*, which had its first success in a 2000 electoral law requiring political parties to achieve a 50/50 balance of male and female candidates in all elections involving a list system or proportional ballot.<sup>4</sup> In the dominant discourse of French republicanism, even recognising the group-structured nature of society is problematic, for citizens are supposed to be citizens, not designated by their difference, and the *paritaires* dealt deftly with this by treating gender as *sui generis*, and the exclusion of women as a unique failure of democracy. It became part of

the arguments mobilised on behalf of *parité* that this was not in any way a call for group representation. As one of the leading campaign documents put it, women ‘can’t be compared to any pressure group...that demands to be better represented...Women are neither a group nor a lobby. They constitute half of the sovereign people, half of the human species.’(cited in Scott, 2005, 62) In her critique of this, Eleonore Lépinard (2007, 392) argues that ‘parity campaigners achieved a tour de force in translating parity into republican terms. However, this strategic republicanism had a cost: it made it impossible for other minorities to take advantage of the breach women had made in the bulwark of the Republic.’ The repudiation, not just of group representation, but of the very idea that society is made of differently positioned groups, had the effect of breaking what Lépinard (395) calls the ‘chain of equivalences’ that otherwise links the under-representation of women to the under-representation of other groups.

*Which under-representations matter? The challenge of populism*

This brings me to a major continuing area of debate: which of the many possible axes of under-representation matters? Is gender to be regarded as the only significant candidate (as suggested by the *parité* movement), or do arguments about the under-representation of women necessarily apply to other marginalised groups? If the latter (as is now widely argued in the literature, and is very much my own view), then which others? Critics of descriptive representation frequently point out that we can identify any number of statistical mismatches between voters and their representatives; and that not all such mismatches matter. As Phillips Griffiths (1960, 190) put it many years ago – in a somewhat unpleasant formulation - ‘while we might well wish to complain that there are not enough representative members of the working class among Parliamentary representatives, we would not wish to complain that the large class of stupid or maleficent people have too few representatives: quite the contrary’. An under-representation of people with red hair is not, of itself, evidence of a democratic deficit - though if red hair turned out to be correlated with social disadvantage, it might well be. A mismatch between the religious affiliations of our representatives and those of the electorate is also not, of itself, evidence of a democratic deficit - though where religion is associated with a culture of systemic denigration, it probably is. Melissa Williams offers, as two criteria for identifying which mismatches matter, ‘contemporary inequality as compared to other social groups and a

history of discrimination and oppression' (1998,176). But even if we take that as a working definition, there are practical obstacles to addressing all who might then qualify.

As already noted, initiatives to address under-representation by gender are more fully developed and more widely implemented than initiatives to address other forms of under-representation. At least part of the explanation for this is the relative ease with which we can identify who is a woman and who is a man. Self-identification somewhat complicates this (at the time of writing, there are ongoing discussions within the British Labour Party about procedures for the participation of transgender woman on all-women short lists), but is considerably more of an issue as regards racial and ethnic minorities. Our ethnicity is by no means transparent. We cannot, moreover, assume that candidates from one minority group have much in common with those from another, or that people can be boxed together in broad categories like 'black' or 'white'. The alternative, however, seems unworkable: one thinks of the ever-lengthening list of ethnic categories produced by the equal opportunities industry and used in many censuses, and the multiplication of gender categories along similar lines: could any democracy plausibly embrace this multiplicity of categories and build it into its procedures? What, moreover, of intersectionality? In recent years, there has been discussion (and some implementation) of 'nested quotas' as a way of addressing intersections of race, culture, class, gender, and sexuality: some guaranteed representation of women, for example, in a quota for an indigenous or ethnic minority; or some guaranteed representation of indigenous or ethnic minority candidates in a quota for women (Bird, 2016). And at an informal level, there is some evidence that this already happens. In a recent study (Krook and Nugent, 2016) of constituencies that adopted all-women shortlists for the 2015 general election in the UK, the requirement to address under-representation by gender encouraged party activists to think more broadly about the wider range of axes of under-representation, and generated candidates (and MPs) who were also diverse in their ethnicity and social class. In Australia, the Queensland Labor Party has set a 5 per cent target for LGBTI representation in its parliamentary party, along with a 5 per cent target for Indigenous representation, and 50 per cent quota for women. But to make this kind of nesting a formal requirement, and do so over the full range of possible axes of under-representation, makes for an impossibly complicated system. It also brings with it yet more difficulties as regards who the representatives are supposed to represent.

The further stumbling block is class. In an earlier contribution (1995, ch7), I suggested that there might be less urgent need for a politics of presence as regards class than as regards gender or race, if only because questions of class already framed the left/right divide that then organised so much political life. The epistemic case for electing more working class representatives might, on this account, be less compelling, because the relevant issues and policies were already more fully rehearsed. (The advocacy case, I argued, remained.) This was always unsatisfactory, and it becomes more so in the current climate, when the working-class presence in legislatures has markedly declined, and populist repudiation of 'establishment elites' has re-introduced class issues in a new guise.

Across many of today's liberal 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 emphasis on exclusion resonates with the arguments underpinning a politics of presence, 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 not so much a language of class as one that 'pits the people against the elites' (Arato and Cohen, 2017, 286). As Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2016,18) put it, populism reflects 'a loose political ideology emphasizing faith in the "decent", "ordinary" or "little" people over the corrupt political and corporate establishment'.

On one level, populism expresses a feeling of marginality and under-representation that is close to what has fuelled claims for descriptive representation. 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 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. From Peronism onwards, it has thrown up leaders who represent themselves as embodying the people's will, but there is rarely any requirement for them to resemble the people in any descriptive way.<sup>5</sup> We see, then, two very different discourses of political exclusion: one focused primarily on gender and race, and looking to inclusion via those who bear the characteristics as an important component of effecting change; the other focusing on social class, but not attaching any particular importance to whether those offering to effect the change are part of the excluded group. In both instances, there is a strong sense of our representatives as not currently 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 conjunction is to say that proponents of a politics of presence have focused too narrowly on gender, or at best on gender and race, and in the process contributed to intensified class exclusion. This is a classic move: in the early arguments in the British Labour Party over the introduction of all-women short lists, one often heard complaints that working-class trade unionists (trade unionists were always assumed to be male) were being swept aside by middle class women, who – according to this narrative – would be no different in type from the middle class men they were joining. It is certainly the case that the representation of working class men has declined in many parts of the world, along with the decline of the trade unions that were often their political training ground. But being a woman is hardly incompatible with being working class, and some of the supposed tension between prioritising gender or prioritising class seems to assume (to paraphrase an influential contribution by black feminists) that all the women are middle class and all the

workers are male. Overall, there is little evidence to suggest that a preoccupation with the under-representation of women has actively contributed to an increased under-representation of working class men, except in the obvious sense that as women get more access to a political voice, men get less.

Yet the worries remain. 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 become part of that establishment. In this account, support for Trump in the 2016 election can be interpreted as a rejection of the 'progressive' neo-liberal establishment, embodied 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; see also Norris in this volume) also note a close connection between feminism and populism but offer a very different reading. In their argument, the latter is best understood, not as a response to economic insecurity but as a cultural backlash against the 'silent revolution' in values 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. Where Fraser calls for a realignment of feminism that will enable it to 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: 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. Even in the UK, which comes closest to the vagaries of the deregulated US economy, feminist discourse 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 the meritocratic promotion of high level professional women. Yet she 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 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. Indeed their argument tends towards the kind of progressivist developmentalism that has long characterised particularly Inglehart's work.<sup>6</sup> 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, and certainly antagonistic to the understandings of representation characteristic of a politics of presence. 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 liberal democracies remains unclear, but it is an important lacuna 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 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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<sup>1</sup> [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)

<sup>2</sup> [www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas](http://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas)

<sup>3</sup> The notion of mutuality provides no cast-iron guarantee that the representative is indeed representative but, in fairness, it shares this with virtually all claims to be representative. As Michael Saward (2010) has argued, representation is as much a matter of making the representative claim, calling into existence the community that is to be represented, as it is to actual achievement.

<sup>4</sup> In effect, this meant municipalities with more than 3,500 inhabitants, regional elections, and elections to the European Parliament. Later modifications added Senate elections Senate, where parties were required to alternate male and female candidates; and introduced financial sanctions for elections to the Assembly if the party's candidates deviated more than 2% from a 50/50 rule. See Scott (2005) for a full account.

<sup>5</sup> As regards Donald Trump, 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.

<sup>6</sup> One of his recent publications defends a revised version of modernisation theory, revised mainly in challenging the excess determinism of earlier model, but otherwise continuing with much the same story of our progress towards individualism, secularism, and toleration. Inglehart and Welzel, 2005.