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Political Representation from a Pragmatist Perspective: Aesthetic Democratic Representation

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the advantages of a theory of political representation for a pragmatist theory of (global) democracy. I first outline Dewey's disregard for political representation by analyzing the political, epistemological and aesthetic underpinnings of his criticism of the Enlightenment ideal of democracy and its trust in the power of the detached gaze. I then show that a theory of political representation is not only compatible with a pragmatist Deweyan-pragmatist perspective on democratic politics but also that Dewey's concept of "publics", if applied to contemporary circumstances of globalized politics, requires such a theory. I suggest a pragmatic theory of political representation that combines elements of Dewey's aesthetics, particularly his own theory of vision, with Michael Saward's conception of representative claim-making into the notion of aesthetic democratic representation.

Keywords

political representation – global democracy – aesthetics – pragmatism – John Dewey

Introduction

What can political representation mean from a Deweyan-pragmatist perspective? Nothing, we might be inclined to say. Pragmatists usually have little use for the concept of representation. Quite contrarily, they reject it in different contexts (epistemology, philosophy of language, metaphysics, and also political philosophy) as something that belongs to a dominant Cartesian-Kantian Enlightenment philosophy that they want to get rid of. Furthermore, the

concept of *political* representation is almost entirely absent from the politico-philosophical vocabulary of the main political pragmatist, John Dewey. He champions concepts such as self-government and active participation, but certainly not passive delegation or representation. So it seems that the answer to the introductory question is that a pragmatist perspective on democratic politics can do without the notion of political representation, or even that the concept of political representation should be avoided, because it is directly opposed to the pragmatist view of democratic politics. This answer has recently been reinforced by Roberto Frega (2017), who urged that the very concept of political representation belongs to a vocabulary of “methodological nationalism”, which, in Frega’s terms, relies on the “conceptual apparatus developed to account for the normative legitimacy of territorial forms of power” (ibid., 723), and one which that does not go well together with a pragmatist understanding of democratic politics.

However, I want to argue in this essay that this answer overlooks the potential the concept of political representation has for a pragmatist understanding of democratic politics and that a Deweyan theory of democratic politics can and should integrate the concept of political representation.

The structure of the essay is as follows. The first two sections explain the reasons why Dewey disregarded political representation as a valuable theoretical concept for democracy. After having presented an outline of the pragmatist theory of democracy, I reconstruct the two main motives for Dewey to dismiss political representation. The first grows out of his concerns about the spectator theory of knowledge in epistemology; and the second is his criticism of the Enlightenment ideal of democracy, which according to Dewey falsely foregrounds the power of the gaze as the means by which citizens would be empowered to govern through a transparent government (Ezrahi 1997, 315)—a criticism that rests on Dewey’s criticism of the theory of vision that underpins this Enlightenment ideal. In the third section I take up his notion of “publics” and show that it is a more adequate way of conceptualizing democratic interaction than his own favored way theorizing it, namely to give priority to the local community over other forms of political associations. Based on the notion of publics, I try to show that the focus on local communities is not necessary, and also that the idea of publics involves the idea of political representation. In the last two sections I explore how a theory of political representation might look like that fits both the public-based understanding of democracy as well as Dewey’s alternative theory of vision. I discuss a contemporary theory of political representation by Michael Saward, which understands political representation in aesthetic terms. I claim that his theory might well complement a pragmatist theory of democracy in a global world.

In a fifth and conclusive section, I corroborate this claim by showing that Seward's conception of aesthetic political representation and Dewey's public-based theory of democracy as well as his theory of vision are more closely linked as has been recognized yet.

The Deweyan-Pragmatist View of Democracy: Participation Instead of Representation

In an early essay on democracy entitled "The Ethics of Democracy" (Dewey 2008a), Dewey famously distinguished between democracy as a form of government (majority rule, regular elections, wide suffrage, etc.) and democracy as a broader social ideal of democratic culture integrated into civil society and individual lives. The difference between democracy as a form of government and democracy as a social ideal, in contemporary terms, is that the former denotes the decision-making procedures of a political people, where all citizens have the right to participate in shaping the rules and actions that guide them and to check political authorities; and the latter denotes the general normative ideals of a social way of life that is egalitarian, inclusive, deliberative, non-coercive, free from oppression and exploitation, just, etc.

Dewey wrote this early essay explicitly against the view of democracy as a form of government developed by Henry Maine in his *Popular Government* (1976 [1885]). Maine's conception of democracy included three main tenets, which Dewey all rejected: (1) democracy is only a form of government; (2) government is simply that which has to do with the relation of subject to sovereign, of political superior to inferior; (3) democracy is that form of government in which the sovereign is the multitude of individuals. Dewey rejected Maine's conception of democracy because it understands democracy as little more than a numerical aggregation of individual preferences:

To define democracy simply as the rule of the many, as sovereignty chopped up into mince meat, is to define it as the abrogation of society, as society dissolved, annihilated.

DEWEY 2008A, 229

In contrast, Dewey urges us to picture democracy as a way of life inscribed in the practices, habits, and customs of culture and society. Without such a cultural or societal basis, he insisted, any form of governmental political democracy becomes meaningless.

Against the background of these two meanings of democracy, this much seems clear: democracy as a form of government is only meaningful on the basis of democracy as a form of life, and thus the former is dependent on the latter. Understanding democracy primarily as a form of life or as a social ideal rather than as a mere system of government implies that for Dewey democracy carries the traits of social interactions between humans that account for the diverse sections of communal life, from everyday social interactions to social institutions based on habitual action. What matters for Dewey in these social actions *politically* is that social actions take the form of self-organization. Self-organization is key for Dewey, because only through self-organization within publics the individual can avoid being captive of social relationships and social structures that render the individual a passive, alienated, and subordinate entity. In that sense, democracy refers to principles and rules that enable environments and practices that are necessary for the self-organization of publics, by means of which the public can participate in the coping with problems that it identifies.

Hence the key component of democracy, for Dewey, is the self-organization of publics, which presupposes the empowerment of individuals in their ability to act as members of publics. This suggests that even in terms of democracy as a form of government, Dewey had something in mind that rather resembles direct democracy than representative democracy, because locally situated forms of deliberation and will-formation seem better suited to realize the principle of self-organization than political representation would be able to do. The local community, the victim of industrialization in *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 1954), was at the same time the entity that Dewey saw as the redeeming seed, out of which something like the Great Community could emerge. Later, advocating a Jeffersonian republican ideal of small, self-governing communities by suggesting to sub-divide counties into small ward republics, Dewey again reinforced the importance of local communities. Such wards for Dewey would be deliberative associations with certain organizational powers on the model of the New England town meeting, with its confidence in direct participation of citizens and rejection of representation (Westbrook 1993, 454f.).

The Epistemological and Aesthetic Underpinnings of Dewey's Disregard for the Concept of Political Representation

We might already see here why Dewey treated *electoral-based* political representation with disdain. It is because electoral-based political representation

leads away from the principle of self-organization. Dewey was right about this. However we want to conceptualize electoral-based political representation, as a concept it inevitably involves an element of heteronomy. In the form of Hanna Pitkin's (1967) famous definition, to represent is simply to make present again; in other words, to make present what is absent. This definition also helps to explain why political representation needs to be instituted in the first place. The reason is that political representation enables those who are absent from the place in which the representation takes place to be present.

The question what it means 'to make present' has been extensively discussed in the theoretical literature on representation in terms of the question whether representatives should act as *delegates* or as *trustees* (Dovi 2017). Conceptualizing representatives as delegates pictures them to straightforwardly track the expressed will of their voters. To make present again what is absent in this understanding implies that representation is successful when the thing that is represented is made accurately present by the thing representing it. In terms of political representation, representation is successful if the representatives mirror citizen's voices, opinions and will in public policy making processes. The easiest way of making present the citizen's will is to ensure the transparent transmission of the citizen's will to the representative understood as a delegate. In contrast, conceptualizing representatives as trustees pictures representatives to follow their own judgment of the best decision to make. While delegate conceptions of representation take representatives to follow their voters' will, trustee conceptions require representatives to follow their own judgment about the proper course of action.

From Dewey's point of view, both conceptions of political representation, the delegates-conception as well as the trustees-conception, are not attractive. Dewey would reject the trustee-conception of political representation, because it puts the broad mass of citizens into a passive spot of being a represented audience, who's only function it is to judge the elected representatives based on observations of the performed political spectacle, listening to their rhetoric, looking at their performances and at the images they portray. Political representation understood as trusteeship, it seems, denies the ideal of self-organization of citizens (locally situated forms of deliberation and will-formation), because it institutionalizes being governed under the sway of others. Instead of active, participative citizens, political representation understood as trusteeship produces passive citizens, estranged from the political apparatus. Their relationship towards government is not one of autonomy, but heteronomy.

Dewey would also have rejected the delegates-conception of political representation (the idea that representatives mirror their voter's preferences). This

is so because Dewey would have urged that the idea of representation as delegation rests on a powerful and seminal but still wrong paradigm of imagining human action, perception and cognition, to which (the paradigm) he famously referred in terms of the “spectator theory of knowledge,” the dogma that reality has an intrinsic nature and that knowledge involves seeking accurately to represent that nature: that “what is known is antecedent to the mental act of observation and inquiry, and is totally unaffected by these acts” (Dewey 2008c, 19).

New Epistemology

Dewey’s analysis of the history of philosophy culminates in the reproach that cognition has hitherto been characterized as an act of observing, a characterization that dominated western philosophy. The metaphor this traditional account of cognition heavily relies on is the gaze or the view as the tool by which we humans can know things. Empiricists urge us to use the eye to see what evidently manifests itself in front of us, Cartesians and other rationalists urge us to look inside of us by using our inner eye to see clearly and distinctly the fundamental, axiomatic principles we carry inside of us. Against this, Dewey counters that cognition is not a passive notarization of the world but rather consists in actively intervening with it. As the goal of thinking, the role of knowledge is to solve problems:

Thinking is a kind of activity which we perform at specific need, just as at other need we engage in other sorts of activity.

DEWEY 2008B, 299

Thinking and knowing are components of human experience. Even if we engage with the world in the mode of abstract and theoretical thinking, we still are a part of that world and our efforts have specific consequences. If we alter our beliefs as a result of this thinking, a change of consciousness takes place. Yet the situation where only our beliefs change, but the environment remains the same is only a limiting case of experience. By rejecting the spectator theory, Dewey argues that inquiry should be thought of not as an attempt to accurately correspond to the world but to *act* successfully within it. We are involved in inquiry as part of a struggle with a precarious and incomplete environment. Inquiry is required when we face an “incomplete” or “problematic” situation, that is, one in which common habits may no longer be able to deal with the situation reliably enough.

As much as Dewey in the context of epistemology insists that cognition is not a passive notarization of the world but rather consists in actively intervening in it, the idea of active intervention becomes even more important

for Dewey in the context of politics. The analogue of the spectator theory of knowledge in politics is the Enlightenment ideal of democratic politics, which ideally pictures governments' actions and their consequences to be transparent to critical, democratic citizens.

For Dewey this ideal of the public as an observing agency is not only hopelessly naïve in light of the real circumstances of modern mass democracies, but also it ultimately remains normatively undesirable. It is naïve, because the institutions of modern democracies cannot respect the ideal of perfect transparency. This was not only evident to Dewey, but also to Walter Lippmann in *The Phantom Public* (Lippmann 2017), where Lippmann analyzed the hiatus that factually exists between those privy to insider information unavailable to outsiders and all others, who are distantly positioned and for which the actual workings of government are not fully transparent. The best thing outsiders can do, for Lippmann, is to surmise what is actually going on inside of government by judging the external perceivable appearances of the actions and words of the insiders. Given these conditions, a government completely observable by the public does not mean that the factual-instrumental consequences of the representatives' actions are transparent to the observing citizens, but rather that the gestural, theatrical, and in general aesthetic aspects of appearing in politics are much more important to the images of political actors than that the connections between public actions and their consequences would be visible to the public.¹ Thus, Dewey's deliberate disregard for the concept of political representation is rooted in a deeper conscious rejection of the broader concept of representation as such in epistemology and political philosophy.

The problem of modern democracy for Dewey was that it suffered from an "eclipse of the public" (Dewey 1954), a fact that cannot simply be fixed by removing the veils that hide power from seeing it. The problem of modern democracy (and postmodern or contemporary democracy) is not the problem of not having power clearly in view, the problem is that we today still imagine democracy in terms of the metaphor of the eye only. Seeing understood in terms of observation alone clearly has only very limited normative democratic power for Dewey, and hence democracy cannot depend on the belief in the power of the gaze to uphold the relations between government and their citizens.

1 For a reconstruction of Dewey's critique of democratic visual culture see Yaron Ezrahi's brilliant essay "Dewey's Critique of Democratic Visual Culture and Its Political Implications" (Ezrahi 1997).

New Theory of Vision

In relation to Dewey we can say that this Enlightenment hope that the power of the gaze would empower citizens to govern through a transparent government not only is based on a false understanding of democracy; it is primarily based on a false aesthetics. What is wrong with the aesthetics that underlies this hope is a wrong theory of vision, which understands vision as the passive reception of what is given. Against this Dewey offered a radically revisionist theory of vision, which understands vision as a, at least partially, constructive process.

Viewing for Dewey occurs within a larger realm of human action, in which humans try to cope with problems and try to adapt and improve rather than merely observe, mirror, or record. Hence, Dewey in principle dissolves the dichotomy between spectator and performer, between those who observe at a distance and those who are involved in some kind of action. Human action and interaction are processes of repeatedly modeling and remaking experience for pragmatists, and viewing is part of this process. Because for Dewey experience is not only doing but also undergoing, humans are not only involved in the creation of what they see but are also altered themselves by their experience of seeing. What they visually experience shapes the prospective conjectures, arrangements, and choices of the perceiving eye. The construction goes both ways, so to speak.

Dewey's theory of vision furthermore proceduralizes the experience of seeing. Instead of conceptualizing the act of seeing as a one-time occurrence whereby what is seen is the accounting of an outwardly given and fixed object, he conceptualizes it as a flexible, open-ended process of interaction with the world:

Perception and its object are built up and completed in one and the same continuing operation.

DEWEY 2005, 184

And, he goes on:

Receptivity is not passivity. It, too, is a process consisting of a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment. Otherwise, there is no perception but recognition. The difference between the two is immense. Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely. (*ibid.*, 58)

Recognition, that is, too early closes down the act of perceiving, by attaching a label on the object of perception and thereby fixing it "as a salesman identifies

wares by a sample" (ibid. 59). But that is a mistake for Dewey, because such perceptual closure wrongly presupposes that both, the perceiving subject and the object that is perceived, are immutable and fixed realities.

Dewey's insight that perception is not a fixed instantaneous moment nor directed towards fixed entities is especially important when considering his social ontology, which is concerned with the question what social and political realities are. Reality in general, for Dewey, is in principle knowable but never fully known (hence the difference he conceptually draws between primary experience and secondary experience), because it is never fully experienced, neither by the individual nor by a collective. Social and political reality continuously emerges from human habitual interaction. As Italo Testa has put it, social and political realities for Dewey are created by a "process of habituation that creates social entities in their initial existence, maintains them in their continued form of existence, shapes their form, and has to do with their transformation" (Testa 2017, 44). Hence, Dewey's aesthetics situates perception in the wider context of a social-ontological conception of social reality, which pictures social reality to be constructed by social interaction.

Furthermore, seeing for Dewey works in tandem with our other human bodily and mental activities and is not detached from them but is embedded in our habitual coping with social realities, with imagination and emotions.² Dewey's conception of seeing as both doing and undergoing is important for the realm of society and of politics, because it rests on a social-ontological conception of social reality, which pictures social reality to be constructed by social interaction (and thus is not just a perspective on reality or an aggregate of partial views to a total picture). Based on Dewey's aesthetics that stresses the special affinity between perception and temporality as a continuous flux withstanding all attempts of shutdown, as well as on a social ontology that sees social and political realities as something emerging from an open-ended sequence of individuals and collectives participating in experimenting and adapting, he can disqualify the Enlightenment ideal that political power can be scrutinized by conclusive observations of a fixed reality.

2 Dewey's theory of vision, which is embedded in the larger notion of aesthetic experience, was set against notions of experience that understand experience as primarily contemplative and spectatorial. The Kantian notion of aesthetic experience, for example, took disinterestedness to be the hallmark of the aesthetic.

Democratic Publics and Political Representation

Against the background of this, we can understand that Dewey's cure for what he considered as the decline of the democratic public into a mere phantom public was not more of the same medicine. That would be for him to correct the failures of the Enlightenment ideal by ensuring more transparency, more accountability, and more visibility. The intellectual and practical work that was needed to correct the eclipse of the public for Dewey was not reformatory, but rather revolutionary: rather than correcting the Enlightenment ideal, we should get rid of it. We should replace it with a conception of democratic politics that relies on the sense of hearing instead of relying on the sense of seeing.

Dewey considered the remedy for the eclipse of the public to consist in the power deliberations between individuals in small publics, as he made clear in *The Public and Its Problems*:

Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator. ...There is no limit to the liberal expansion and confirmation of limited personal intellectual endowment which may proceed from the flow of social intelligence when that circulates by word of mouth from on to another in the communications of the local community. That and that only gives reality of public opinion.

DEWEY 1954, 219

At this point I want to suggest that when Dewey comments here on the vital role of oral communication and persuasion in the context of local communities for the emergence of a democratic public and the evolvment of collective intelligence, he overlooks at least two different points.³

The first point is that contemporary social and political circumstances of increased scale, complexity and distance make the value of the ideal of small, local deliberative publics questionable—circumstances that were already a

3 With Ezrahi (1997, 333) we can add a third critical point, namely that speech is as much prone to distortions as vision is. Recall what the problem of vision is for Dewey. The problem of the theory of vision that underlies the Enlightenment ideal of democracy is that it causes citizens to become only individual spectators that become part of a passive audience and thus renders impossible a more authentic form of self-organization, which ultimately will force the public to disintegrate. But how can oral communication provide a remedy for this? Can't oral communication be corrupted just as visual communication can? How are sounds different from pictures in this respect? Sounds and words can just the same be manipulated and be deceptive as visual manifestations can.

reality in Dewey's times. These circumstances suggest that the fringes of communities vary corresponding to occurrences that are external to their own power, especially because under contemporary circumstances of globalization individuals living at far geographical distance are increasingly affected by the same events and occurrences. Dewey was correct in his view that the detached, elevated, and controlling eye cannot be democratic on its own. But at least the Enlightenment ocular ideal of controlling power tried to answer the challenge of how to secure democracy in mass societies in which local democracy is only a very limited practical possibility. Dewey retreated to an outdated and anachronistic ideal of local communal deliberations, which ultimately offers no answer to this challenge.

The second point is that Dewey's insistence on the importance of local communities for regaining democracy is at odds with his own reconstructive argument for democracy that is condensed in his conception of the "Public". While Dewey's retreat to a conception of local communal deliberations is no answer to contemporary circumstances of democratic politics, his notion of "publics" is.⁴

He conceptualized a "public" as "all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for" (*ibid.* 245). To simplify, a public is defined by two elements: (a) common affectedness; and (b) shared awareness of that condition. While the first element, common affectedness, is situated in causes external to the public itself, the second element is dependent on the self-attribution or the self-knowledge on the part of the public.⁵ At least what regards the first element, common affectedness, direct participation in a public is not necessary. Defining publics in terms of common affectedness has the advantage that publics can form around any form of practices in which decisions are made with indirect consequences that affect the specific public. Neither the nation state nor other formal political institutions are necessary frameworks for publics to constitute.

The process of constituting a public and of taking public action occurs against a background of social exchanges that involve all forms of communication (including visual communication). Again, this process need not be directly

4 James Bohman (2010) convincingly argued that "publics" in the plural and not "the public" are the best basis for Dewey's call for a reconstruction of democracy, despite Dewey's belief that the very scale of modern societies necessitates integration by a unitary public.

5 Italo Testa thus calls Dewey's concept of publics aptly "a kind of collective intentionality which is not defined either formally or substantially, but rather in a reactive way, since the public is identified by a sort of all-affected principle" (Testa 2017, 53).

participatory in order to be democratic. A dispersed, decentralized process of formatting and tapping experience does not favor any public in principle over any other. Whereas the Enlightenment ideal of democratic politics conceptualizes democracy as a hierarchical structure, in which the public or civil society is opposed to formal political institutions (including government), Dewey tries to dissolve this hierarchy. The decentralized model of acting and interacting politically allows Dewey to conceive processes of democratic self-government as a collection of dispersed multidimensional and open-ended adaptations. Hence, defining the basic elements of democratic politics in terms of “publics”, which together constitute a network of decentralized and temporally existing publics, needs not necessarily to imply the idea of local deliberative communities. A network of decentralized and temporally existing publics can exist without local deliberative communities and at the same time it allows for forms of political self-organization.

However, if we take seriously the contemporary conditions of international politics, the second element of Dewey’s definition of a public, the shared recognition of publics as being mutually affected, becomes increasingly burdensome. And such recognition of itself is the “primary problem of the public”, as Dewey did himself recognize in *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 1954, 117).⁶ But he did not offer an answer to this problem that could meet the requirements of the transformations in social and political circumstances that were going on in his times and are still in progress today. In order to accommodate the variety of publics democratic politics today is filled with, democratic theory should think about diverse and multileveled forms of political organization, and this involves thinking about political representation. James Bohman expressed this well when he said in the essay “Participation through Publics: Did Dewey answer Lippman?” (2010, 66):

The “problem” is not that publics do not recognize themselves as the Public, but rather one of representation: how it is that diverse publics will be able to represent the interests of all those affected once we give up the congruence of the unitary public?

The basic call on democracy will not provide a satisfactory answer to this question, which is why also a Deweyan-inspired framework of international

⁶ Midtgarden recently argued that Dewey’s mature conception of democracy understands democratic participation primarily in terms of membership in voluntary political associations, which not only include local assemblies, but more broadly social movements (see Midtgarden 2015).

democratic politics should say something constructive about political representation.⁷ Hence, the second condition of “publics”, namely the shared awareness of the first condition of common affectedness, demands a theory of political representation, which pragmatists have not provided so far.

Political Representation from a Constructivist Perspective

Theoretical discussions of political representation for a long time have been focusing mainly on the formal procedures of authorization and accountability within nation states. Yet, such a focus is no longer up to date, because of the international and domestic political transformations, which render conceptions that are based on the logic of formalized electoral institutions unfit for representation on the international level where novel political claims are emerging in the global political arena that lack formal representation. And, more fundamentally, they are not compatible with a public-based pragmatist conception of democratic politics.

This judgment changes, however, when taking into account the latest shifts that occurred in the debate on political representation. Recent developments in the theoretical discussion about political representation try to accommodate the changes in patterns of politics by re-conceptualizing political representation. These recent changes involve changes in scale and complexity in the processes of political decision making (see e.g. Warren and Castiglione 2004): A growing number of collective decision-making fields and topics, in both the national and international context, are now governed by expert associations with only loose ties to the conventional institutions of political representation. Moreover, increasingly influential multinational actors and decision-making arenas are out of the reach of electoral-based representation. Other transformations have to do with how people relate to their political community. There has been a dissemination of more informal occasions for democratic representation and input, which resulted in a partial shift of the meaning of what constitutes a political community from the local or national boundaries to communities of fate. This in part mirrors the smaller role of formal political institutions in social decision-making, and also the growing variation of the configurations of association in contemporary societies. On account of these transformations, it is not anymore feasible—if it ever was—to represent and

7 We could even claim that democratic politics is necessarily achieved by means of representative mechanisms too, because, as Iris Marion Young has put it, in all but the smallest of meetings, formal or informal, “de facto representation” will inevitably emerge (Young 2002, 125).

aggregate the interests, opinions, and wills of the people through elementary electoral tools. Nor does it seem probable that the electoral model of representative democracy can account for and consider new forms and meanings of political representation.

One of the most significant changes in the current debate has been the “constructivist turn” (Dovi 2017). Constructivist perspectives on political representation draw attention to the representative’s role in constructing the identities and claims of the represented. Here Michael Saward’s *The Representative Claim* (Saward 2010) is illustrative. For Saward, political representation involves a series of related subjects and objects:

A maker of representations (M) puts forward a subject (S) which stands for an object (O) which is related to a referent (R) and is offered to an audience (A).

SAWARD 2006, 302

For example, the green party (M) offers itself (S) as the guardian of the interests of endangered species (O) in view of the endangered species (R) towards governments, media and the public (A). Or, another example, in 2011 Adbusters (M) offered the Occupy Wall Street movement (S) to embody the interests of the 99% (O) in view of those who are not part of the wealthiest 1% (R) towards the public (A). In place of assuming a preceding collection of interests of the represented that representatives read off of them and bring into the political process, Saward emphasizes how representative claim-making is characteristically aesthetic and performative. He compares political representing with art. Just as an artist does not simply mimic reality, but sorts out and crystalizes reality, representatives are creative, he claims. By making claims they present us with pictures of who we are and where we are going, and as such they also depend on audiences. Someone must acknowledge their claims, watch them and assess them, affirm and act on them or reject them.

Saward’s aesthetic account of political representation has three distinctive aspects that bring the performativity of representation to the fore (Disch 2015, 492): (1) the difference between maker and subject; (2) the difference between object and referent; (3) factoring in the audience. The difference between maker and subject of the representative claim makes representation aesthetic, insofar as it highlights its constitutive character. Representation, artistic or political, contains an element of picturing. The maker of the representative claim portrays the subject of the claim and thus imagines a construction of the political subject that claims to represent. Claim-making in this sense involves an intended effort to “achieve acceptance and other effects through the

conceptions of subject and object that [it] construct[s]" (Saward 2010, 48). And in order to be successful, a claim must have "a certain resonance" with an audience by "tap[ping] into familiar, or at least recognizable or emergent, contextual frameworks" (ibid.). The second noteworthy difference, the one between object and referent of representation, also puts emphasis on the performative aspect of representation. Saward suggests that what is represented—the object of the claim—is not a 'referent' but a verbal or visual image of the represented. In other words, what or who is represented is also a construction on the part of the maker of the claim. Representing hence is "depicting ... a constituency *as* this or that, as requiring this or that, as having this or that set of interests" (ibid., 71). The idea of depicting a constituency as something underscores that representation does not directly refer to nor mirror a constituency but constructs an image of the constituency, about what it is like. In this sense the object of representation is this image and not the constituency itself. A representative claim then is always one interpretation of the referent, and never the referent *tout court*. The third element that makes Saward's theory of representation aesthetic is that it theorizes the role of the audience. Factoring in the audience stresses the theatrical sense of political representation. The acts of representation can only "work, or even exist, if audiences acknowledge them in some way, and are able to absorb, reject, or accept them, or otherwise engage with them" (ibid., 111).

These three features bring the aestheticization of political representation to the fore. Saward's conception of representation as being creative offers an enlarged interpretation of representation as a multifaceted imaginative act. And to elucidate the actually political significance of representation, Saward proffers using a pragmatic attitude focused on learning how representation works, on conceiving the consequences of its appeal, and to highlight its dynamic nature.

In a recent paper on the advantages of a pragmatist theory of global democracy Roberto Frega shortly discussed Saward's framework (Frega 2017, pp. 732–733). While Frega acknowledges that Saward's approach "seems to resonate with a public-based conception of politics, insofar as it stresses the expressive and constitutive function of claims and acknowledges that the constitution of publics precedes the genesis of institutions" (ibid., 732), he ultimately dismisses it. The reasons he gives for his rejection are, for one, the supposedly normative under-determination of Saward's merely descriptive framework, which in the eyes of Frega leaves him without any critical substance, and second that Saward's conception does not have the resources to go beyond the nation-based framework of thinking about international democratic politics and thus is not compatible with a Deweyan-pragmatist theory of democracy.

There seems to be quite a lot of justification for this evaluation of Saward's theory. His framework seems troubling, both for normative as well as for methodological reasons. As other critics of Saward have urged, one of the main problems of his conception is that it reduces "social groups ... to passive recipients of claims" (Severs, Celis, et al. 2013, 435; also Celis et al. 2008; Lord and Pollak 2013; Näsström 2011). Thus, the critics hold, he inverts the entrenched principal-agent relationship, giving all agency to the representative, which might render his account elitist rather than democratic. In sum, the theory gives any form of claim-making activity a rhetorical camouflage, critics hold, one that provides political actors with the means to portray themselves as unelected representatives and their actions as acts of democratic representation, while at the same time they are freed from any obligation towards those he or she acts for.

Consequently, Saward's theory of representation seems to leave the represented as a powerless mass of passive recipients rather than an empowered democratic people. By that, aesthetic representation in Saward's terms does not only seemingly reject the idea that democracy resides with the people, it also deems counterproductive the practice of certain contemporary democracies to more directly involve the people. Hence, it seems accurate to evaluate Saward's theory as descriptively correct but normatively worrying, as it makes it impossible to separate "good" representation from "bad". Furthermore, giving people such a passive role in the metaphor of audiences watching the spectacle on the representative scene naturally is exactly what Dewey's fundamental critique of the ocular metaphor of democratic politics aimed at.

Aesthetic Democratic Representation

Against the background of these criticisms, however, I want to offer a more charitable reading of Saward, one that stresses the links between his constructive conception of political representation and Dewey's aesthetics and public-based theory of democracy.

The normativity in Saward's conception cannot be found in normative principles, which would allow discerning between good and bad forms of representation. The leading normative question we get out of Saward would be this: With what aspects of the discursive and institutional setting did a claim resonate so as to be approved by an audience? The term *normativity* here no longer denotes *normativity* in the accustomed sense, which involves independent validation according to a context-transcendent standard. The task of the political theorist is no longer to construct normative judgments regarding which of the

competing claims best promote the interests of a representative's constituency or audience. The task of the political theorist is a critical analysis of the conditions under which "claims are made, received, and assessed" (Saward 2010, 147).

This does not mean that we have to accept any representative-claim at face value. Saward's constructivist conception of political representation might leave some normative theorists unconvinced because he dispenses with philosophically prescribing *normative principles* on the basis of which one could determine who a constituency ought or ought not acknowledge as representing them. But it still offers *critical* tools by which representative claims can be assessed in terms of the conditions of power from which they emerge and are received.

Such latter critical assessment focuses on the collective circumstances under which claim-making occurs (Disch 2015, 495–6): Which individuals and groups are more probable to make claims? Which discursive settings and resources do enable the construction of representative claims? Which do not? Who is the target of the claims? Under what conditions are claims likely to receive public attention? What capabilities do the constituencies and audiences have to respond?

What is the link to Dewey now? As we saw, Dewey's theory of vision is embedded in his concept of aesthetic experience. He rejects the idea that perception is passive recognition that leaves the spectator powerless. Such a passive confrontation, which Dewey calls "recognition", is an apt descriptive category for everyday encounters with the world in which perception without a deeper analysis takes place. Experience is aesthetic for Dewey when the perceiving subject interacts with his or her environment in a meaningful way. This Deweyan ideal of aesthetic experiences, or meaningful interactions between subjects, asks for a form of doing politics that is *artful*. Performing politics artfully means this: Human interactions can be done artfully or not, in a similar sense that a piece of music or a painting can be done artfully or not. Artful interactions are characterized by the actor's anticipation of the perceiver: "The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works" (Dewey 2005, 50). The artist has to do this, because the audience brings its own horizon of meaning to bear on the piece of art, in order for the artwork to be intelligible for the audience.

As an example that illuminates in what sense political representation can be done artfully or non-artfully, consider what U2 front man Bono famously said in 2004. He claimed that he "represent[s] a lot of people [in Africa] who have no voice at all" (cited in Saward 2010, 82). The audiences of this claim were many: his Western fans, whom he hoped to interest in the plight of Africa's poor, philanthropists, and also Western governments, which he all hoped

to mobilize. He acknowledged that the referent of his claim, the voiceless African poor, “haven’t asked me to represent them” (cited in *ibid.*). His claim succeeded because, audiences, including government, took him seriously. In Dewey’s terms, however, it was not artful, because the claim was not made to be taken up. Bono’s claim poses an aesthetic and also a democratic problem by its very structure: it did not need the approbation of the constituency and in fact portrayed that constituency as incapable of speaking for itself. This means that from the critical standpoint of the citizens or people, the claim was illegitimate, because it was not designed to be taken up by those who are directly affected by it.⁸ It also draws attention to the structural differences of power that are at play between those affected and audience as to whether legitimacy prevails over success in determining the widespread acceptance of a claim.

Based on Dewey’s theory of viewing and perceiving, we can say here that only when the duality of construction (the construction goes both ways) in representative claim-making is respected, we have an aesthetically adequate form of democratic representation as well as a democratically legitimate one. This means that those who are affected by a claim should be brought into a position, both by the structure of the claim itself as well as by the material conditions of equality of authority and action, in which they can actively endorse or fight the claim to be represented and act on this decision, and which should have an effect on the construction or destruction of the claim-making subject and of the object of the claim itself. This is the meaning of conceptualizing the representatives and those represented not as linked by a static relation of correspondence, but as linked by a dynamic process of constitution. The structure and quality of this relationship is partially given by the critical approach.

While Saward’s claim that political representatives are like artists in that they imaginatively create a representative image of those they take to represent echoes Dewey’s concept of aesthetic experience, Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience rejects the view that the aesthetic is passive perception that renders the audience powerless. The inter-subjective form of experience that Dewey describes with his notion of aesthetic experience necessitates a meaningful relationship between individuals and their environment. This Deweyan ideal of aesthetic experiences, or meaningful interactions between

8 That the referent is addressed in all representative claims as an audience of some kind and thereby able of confirming or challenge the claims made in their name is a necessary requirement for *democratic* representation, while political representation in general may happen without the ability of the referent to confirm or challenge the claim and at odds with the latter’s interests provided that some audience takes up the representative claim. On this difference between democratic representation and political representation see Lacey (2017, 58).

subjects, links to Saward's conception of aesthetic representation. Dewey's constructivist theory of vision and of aesthetic experience in general goes well together with Saward's constructivist conception of political representation. Based on Saward's theory of political representation and on public-based political pragmatism we can conceptualize political representation and democratic legitimacy not as properties or characteristics of regimes or individuals which satisfy criteria laid out by the observer, but as an ongoing activity of legitimation. Redescribing political representation in constructivist terms liberates the concept from the ties of the electoral-based conception of political representation. This latter conception, as we saw, took representation to consist in "making present again" what is absent. But for the constructivist there is nobody or nothing that could be made present again, because there is no pre-existing interest that could be represented but only claimed interests. The constructivist conception of political representation might solve the problem of heteronomy that is implicit in the electoral-based conceptions of political representation, and that made the whole concept of political representation problematic for Dewey. Political representation was problematic for Dewey because it undermines the possibility of self-organization of publics. Thinking about political representation in constructivist-aesthetic terms, however, understands representative claims to be part of the constructive process of self-organizing publics.

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