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## Liminal representation

Michael Seward

In politics, representation is as representation does. Or – it is the contingent product of what is done with it, or in its name. Against this background, efforts by theorists to extract representation's essence from its contexts and functions do not necessarily advance our understanding (Derrida 1982, 301). Likewise, neat distinctions between (e.g.) two or more types, forms or qualities of representation are common in democratic theory, but the practices which produce representation often traverse and disrupt static and neat distinctions. Consider the example of “self-appointed representation” (SAR) (Montanaro 2012) and its implied opposite “other-appointed representation” (OAR). SAR, to *be* representation, depends in some form on recognition by others. OAR, to be representation, depends on a presentation of a self adequate to representation. This is one instance of representation's diverse and common *liminal* qualities, which see it traversing and complicating neat categorisations.

Bearing consequences for how representation is understood, analysed and evaluated, liminal qualities are evident in the instability of a number of key distinctions in the study of representation. It renders as fragile a number of efforts to fix and limit the concept's meanings and range of reference. The diversity and changeability of practices and experiences of representation pose a basic challenge to would-be boundaries (be they empirical or conceptual) between, for example, the formal and the informal, and the normative and the descriptive. I argue that we can productively *embrace* representation's liminality, developing fruitful analyses which *track* its changeable character.

After elaborating the idea of liminality and briefing defending an understanding of representation as practice, the chapter will focus on four distinctions often deployed to divide up and map conceptually the field of political representation. Representation's liminal

character presses us to question the neatness and the realism of many such distinctions. For each of the four distinctions I focus on the transitional or intermediate nature of representation, and the consequences that follow for theoretical analysis. Finally, I show how these four contribute to a larger and more encompassing distinction between *representative democracy* and *democratic representation*, arguing that the former – often the sole focus of debates on representation – is one (crucial) part of the latter.

### **Characterising the liminal**

According to the OED, the “liminal” is “characterized by being on a boundary or threshold, especially by being *transitional or intermediate* between two states [or] situations” [italics added]. The notion of the liminal gained prominence with the anthropological work of Victor Turner, who (drawing on the ideas of van Gennep) discussed “social dramas” such as initiation rituals where participants undergo a *transformation* from one cultural state or role to another. We may understand a liminal time, phase or space as one which (variously) features uncertain or indeterminate identities and outcomes (a realm of *possibility* rather than certainty, established fact, or known outcome); a moment where the normal undergoes a degree of *suspension* (Turner 1981, 159-61). The idea has since been deployed in a variety of styles and contexts, capturing “*in-between* situations and conditions characterized by the *dislocation* of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and *uncertainty* about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes” (Horvath, Thomason and Wydra (2015, 2), emphases added). Liminal states may feature *hybrid* identities and an *ambivalence* in subjects and observers (Giesen 2015). Accounts of liminality and liminal states carry an emphasis on the close reading of contexts and events and on the experiential dimension. Liminality can be understood and applied to contexts and events in a great variety of ways. It can also have maximal and minimal interpretations – on the one hand, liminality may be used to

characterise normality; on the other hand, it may describe a particular, shorter, special moment – in-between more stable or regular states. I do not enter these wider debates, as my discussion of liminality follows close readings of specific places or events.

### **What is representation?**

My argument is premised on the account of political representation as the contingent product of “representative claims”<sup>1</sup>. According to this perspective, representation’s political presence arises primarily by virtue of its being *done* – practiced, performed, claimed.

Representative roles and relations gain a presence in our politics because myriad actors make claims to speak for others (and for themselves). Representation is a performative product in two linked senses: it is performed in the theatrical sense (i.e. it is both done and shown to be done (Schechner 2002)) and in the speech-act sense (it is a speech or other act which establishes, or contributes to establishing, a state of affairs) (Austin 1975; Butler 1997). Representation’s meaning, in a given time and space, is a contingent sedimentation of meanings within an ecology of more or less public claims, acts and events about “representation” and cognate terms. The ecology of claims (and responses to claims) consists of who stands or speaks for or symbolises whom or what – more or less familiar, more or less institutionalised, and so on. The contingent meaning of representation in such a context reflects predominant senses of its instantiation and purposes.

The claim-based approach avoids: (a) privileging historically contingent modes of representation as the heart of the phenomenon; and (b) the settled dictates of academic disciplinary and sub-disciplinary conventions. A number of attempts to fix and to limit representation’s meaning and reference – historically, institutionally, or according to the received wisdom of academic disciplines - are strongly challenged by its basis in practice and its liminal qualities. Hence the importance of generating definitions and norms of

representation which track its liminality. There is no loss in precision or rigour in such an approach to definition and evaluation; and if the arguments work, the gain is in versatility, purchase and indeed the realism of our concepts.

### **Liminal representation**

To show that liminal spaces and phases are evident, and consequential, in a range of features of political and democratic representation, in this section I select four key areas where a strong black-and-white conceptual contrast has generally been maintained by political theorists and others: between the elective and the non-elective, the formal and the informal, the institutional and the non-institutional, and the normative and the descriptive. My critique focuses on an indicative demonstration that paying due attention to liminality in such cases and areas undermines the fixity of common distinctions and categories. In so doing, it also demonstrates that representation is a practice and process that has critical liminal qualities, and that this fact has important lessons for the analysis of representation.

#### *Elective and non-elective*

For representative democracy, citizen political choices conventionally are seen as expressed through the mechanism of voting in elections, while in the wider societal domain they are seen as operating primarily through voice in more informal settings. Maintaining a sharp and clear distinction between elective representation, on the one hand, and non-elective representation, on the other hand, is a familiar step in political science and political theory thinking (and also in the wider world of politics). Doing so serves different purposes, not least establishing a major and ongoing source of legitimacy for democracy. If democratic legitimacy is founded on the clear and open practice of political equality, entrenched within voting procedures which provide one person, one vote, one value, then free and fair elections are at the core of such legitimacy. Major historical struggles for democratisation have, of

course, been over access to this franchise, as the latter represents practical and symbolic acceptance as a social and political equal in the polity. In this normative context, politics which is not (in some reasonably direct sense) electoral is pushed to outer margins of arguments for democracy's legitimacy. So, for example, "civil society" activity and organisations – depending on how they are configured – may make a positive contribution to the maintenance of quality of democracy, but their presence and features are not formally electoral and therefore not at the core of what legitimises democracy<sup>ii</sup>. In this line of argument, representation to be democratic and legitimate must be electoral representation; non-electoral representation, by virtue of *being* non-electoral, may be either undemocratic, or at best a marginal contributor to the broader democratic character of a system.

Consider how this standard position fares, however, if we set aside the presumption that representation is defined by its formal institutionalisation in representative democracy. If we take *practices* of representation as the primary analytical focus, unpacking the politics of representative claims and their reception, this normatively-driven, narrowing and sharp electoral/non-electoral distinction loses purchase on political reality. Framed in this way, representation has distinctive liminal qualities. First, the non-electoral realm of civil society contains many and varied types of electoral practice. Depending on the society concerned, a great many clubs, corporations, unions, education establishments, policing and health bodies, interest groups, and so on, have an elective component to their practice. An elected official to (say ) a local education or police advisory board occupies a liminal position – elected but in a realm of practice where elections are not typically understood as contributing to democracy at the national or systemic level. Further, there are across civil society many forms of accountability in small and large non-state organisations which to a degree may act as functional substitutes for (and indeed, supplements to) formal election – Montanaro (2012) for example discusses voice, exit, hierarchical, financial, supervisory and legal

accountability. A range of unelected actors will find themselves, by such means and to varied degrees, answerable to constituencies (used in a broader sense) even if there is no electoral component to their position.

Second, elected actors may or may not act in accordance with the specific constituency-representative electoral relationship which has put them in their legislative post. Mansbridge (2003) has elaborated influentially on the notion of “surrogate representation”, where an elected official chooses to act for a “constituency” which may overlap little with his or her specific electoral constituency. For example an Aboriginal member of the Australian Federal Parliament may take it upon himself or herself to speak for Aboriginal communities and interests more widely (Sawer 2001). Note, in this context, that Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) preferred definition of representation - as a “substantive acting for others” – does *not* in principle require election (as distinct from others she discusses which do, notably the “authorisation” and “accountability” definitions). Pitkin does not pursue this point, but arguably a substantive acting for others is different from the means of achieving it, and in certain contexts electoral means may be inferior ones.

There are likewise many respects in which elective representation contains, or is perhaps haunted by, a non-elective or supra-elective component. All electoral systems have some non-competitive component; the normative account criticised above tends to skate over this fact, and to side-line widespread debates about how different electoral systems and arrangements may or may not enhance equality through free and fair competition for votes and offices. Incumbency effects, non-majoritarian practices, undue hurdles to voter, candidate or party registration, gerrymandering and vote-buying are factors are variously at play across democratic systems. It still matters greatly to democracy that an elected official may have the

formal and constitutional status of a parliamentarian, but bases other than equal votes of equal value will commonly contribute to the achievement of the status. In reality, a semi-elective status, in-between electoral and non-electoral, built on a significant but also thin or fragmentary manifestation of political equality, will influence representative status and practice (e.g. “non-democratic” post-electoral influence by big campaign donors). To return to a distinction noted earlier, in these and other respects there is probably no such thing as a pure “self-appointed” representative (Montanaro 2012), or indeed a pure form of “other appointed representative”; even if there are strong examples of the latter, who are the “others” who do the effective “appointing” will often not stop with the voting members of an electoral constituency.

Third, there are liminal statuses and actors in a range of electoral contexts. A “candidate” is already one such; in-between ordinary citizen and elected representative in a state of active suspension or uncertain transformation. This may demand shifting among different and hybrid personas for different voter audiences. A president-elect, or a presumptive party nominee, occupies a liminal position of transformation and possibility; a defeated candidate too, prior to concession, may be similarly regarded. Former elected officials also carry with them something of the status which they no longer hold formally; for example, ex-US president Jimmy Carter carried out high-profile international humanitarian work for decades after he left elective office, leading to his Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. Distinctive features of democratic transitions may throw up unusual liminal roles – consider the Burma/Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi, undisputed leader of the winning party in the national elections of 2015 but barred from assuming formal office. Figures who gain their political credibility and impetus in part from resisting the blandishments of electoral politics may run in elections in insurgent mode, gaining office as “outsiders” occupying the citadels –



such as Spanish anti-austerity activist turned Barcelona mayor Ada Colau in Barcelona. One might likewise note the campaigns of 2016 US presidential candidates Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders as “outsiders”, in a way insurgents, or rhetorically in the case of Sanders “revolutionary”. These examples raise a range of issues about liminal representation’s challenges and opportunities, and illustrate the commonality of not only being representative but also claiming, becoming, ceasing to be, and acting “as if” representation.

To be clear: the formality, regularity, publicity and transparency of free and fair elections remain a profound source of strength for representative claims for the duly elected. There is nothing in the claim-based perspective on representation which runs counter to this fact. But a range of statuses and practices of representation are – in different ways – located in between the strictly electoral and the strictly non-electoral. Political figures that seek and hold the statuses, or enact the practices, are best seen as liminal figures, negotiating transitional or ambiguous zones of practice.

#### *Formal authority/informal authority*

Representation consists of variable claims that one person or group can or does stand or speak for another - across different spaces, times and scales, and importantly *across and between degrees of formality*. The making and reception of such claims in myriad ways *unsettles* fixed ideas of representation. The unsettling can be understood in three interlinked senses.

First, both the so-called formal and the so-called informal rest upon common and contestable grounds. Even widely accepted, institutionalised and familiar instances of representation depend for their acceptance or legitimacy on a claim or set of claims, and no claim is beyond reasonable contestation.<sup>iii</sup> Even an elected parliament representing the people or demos of a nation-state is dependent upon more or less incessant and minimally

effective claim-making to underscore its representative status. *Explicit* representative claims for parliaments are often made by officials working for them, or (for example) architects of the buildings housing legislatures, rather than the elected members themselves, whose claims tend to be more specific and partisan. From a different angle, a venerable and well-established parliament without active members whose practices symbolise the *implicit* claims by them and by the institution to represent would in short time be little more than a relic, and perhaps a physical symbol of its own impotence. As recent events in Egypt and Tunisia attest, such representative status can be disputed and shattered in short time.

The formal-informal distinction may not overlap at all neatly with the institutionalised-noninstitutionalised distinction with which it is equated, or upon which it is sometimes built. Informal and non-electoral politicking can characterise state as well as non-state governance and politics. Formality, including electoral formalities, can characterise non-state governance and politics, as suggested above (there are many more electoral events and relations in many contemporary societies – under the radar of studies of democracy – than the most prominent national and local ones). In line with its liminal quality, claims and practices of representation operate in and across all of these modes and domains.

Second, efforts to pinpoint the boundaries of the formal are likely to founder; so-called informal claims can invade, or cut across, the realm of the formal. Conventional senses of who can represent, and how they do it (or how it is claimed that they do it), are shaken up. Disparate informal claimants, for example Indian Ana Hazare and Pakistani education advocate Malala Yousafzai<sup>iv</sup>, may be highly unconventional “representatives”. But their “informal” claims can become part of local, national and international formal politics, posing questions about the mix of constraints and opportunities attending (degrees and manifestations of) formality and informality. They show how highly resonant claims can cut across standard representative accounts of institutions, nations and cultures. Claims for such

actors as Hazare and Yousafzai push the envelope further than political theory and political science work on political representation is prepared to do; but we face the unsettling fact that there is no non-arbitrary way to pinpoint a cut-off point to assert that one type of acknowledged claim is an instance of representation, and another is not, regardless of their location in a nominally “formal” or “informal” space, phase or manner.

Third, both so-called formal and so-called informal representation rest on critically unstable and unsettled “subject effects” and “object effects”<sup>v</sup>. Subject and object are *effects* of the act of claim-making, whether understood as formal or informal. Ana Hazare may be many things, but the subject effect in his claim to speak for India highlights his grand ideals, and courage. What matters in political representation is this subject effect, Hazare’s capacity to create and sustain it, and the extent to which it resonates with audiences. Yousafzai likewise is many things – no doubt courageous, and poised and confident beyond her years – yet representative claims will (necessarily) select or construct a subject effect, a picture of her attributes to support the claim to stand for a certain group, aspiration or cause.

All representations are claims, however sedimented and institutionalised - “formal” or “informal” – they may be. The reliance of representation on practice, the presence of the “informal” in the “formal” and vice versa, and its trading in effects rather than identities underlines its liminality – its “in-betweenness”, between protean or shifting boundaries.

Further, note that the implicit assumption of this distinction is that the formal+informal exhausts the manifestations of representation in or across the political community. But we might equally argue that the formal+informal constitutes a continuous political sphere (including varied modes of semi-formality, for example) *of the included*. The excluded may not (be able to) participate in the formal+informal, being outside the community of representative politics, or effective or recognised representative claims.

Consider also the *latency* of the formal in the informal. The civil sphere gives rise to movements or bodies which enter the state (political parties, green or social democratic, for example). It may germinate and grow representative practices and functions which, in time, become statal. As Rosenau (2000) has made clear in the context of transnational politics, we do not know which of the emergent institutional configurations may crystallize into widely accepted and lasting forms of democratic practice. By the same token, institutionalised formal representation may be present by proxy in the informal sphere, for example through what Americans sometimes call “astroturf” campaigns. Such actors, movements, organisations or campaigns may possess liminal qualities (whether to their political benefit or disbenefit), and operate across liminal political spaces.

Our sense of what the subjects (that which represents) and objects (that which is represented) of representation are or could be is, in this light, not reasonably confined to a given set of institutions or relationships, as important as (for example) democratic elections and representatives parliaments are.

The elective/non-elective and formal/informal distinctions are at the heart of Urbinati’s effort to sustain a narrower conception of representation in her contribution to this volume. It is worth attending to that argument briefly to see the work that conventional normative approaches to representative democracy must undertake to cleave to tenuous and narrow definitions. Urbinati argues that a claims-based approach is only relevant to “expressive” politics which seeks “attention” outside formal elective and state structures. As such it is not genuine representation; only formal electoral, decisional, and judicial procedures and institutions can house genuine representation and indeed democracy. In this argument, however, “representation” and “democracy” are simply stipulated as statal properties alone in order to sustain a specific normative stance, an ideal image of strictly

party-based and national democracy which, despite the nostalgic tone, has probably never been realised. The claim-based approach makes it clear that statal and non-statal processes (e.g. electoral and non-electoral) involve claim, counter-claim and support with regard to representation. This is the complex dynamic of representative politics. Do not electoral candidates most fundamentally make claims to represent? Are claims not made for and about the representativeness of legislatures? Is not voting in elections and referendums not a central mechanism of citizens pronouncing on these claims?

Urbinati also argues that claim-making is only about audiences, but it is clear that it is constituencies (closely defined, and including but not limited to formal electoral constituencies) and not audiences that in a democracy may reasonably judge claims to represent (Saward 2010;2014). Likewise, for Urbinati, claim-making is merely about rhetoric and performance. Aside from its apparent alignment to the “anti-theatrical prejudice” (Barish 1981), these remarks suggest that electoral candidates and other public officials do not use rhetoric, do not perform, do not pose claims, and so on. This line of thinking has also not caught up with well-established political science critiques, such as that political parties are often today “cartel” rather than “mass” responsive or representative entities (Bartolini and Mair 2001), and that the substantive representation of women more significantly depends on “critical actors” rather than “critical mass” in legislatures: “Who these “critical actors” are remains an open question. Taking their role seriously, however, requires careful attention to a wide range of possible players, including male and female legislators, ministers, party members, bureaucrats, and members of civil society groups” (Celis et.al. 2008, 104). Urbinati’s sweeping appraisal of the Internet does not acknowledge (for example) the highly significant uses of interactive media in the Obama and Sanders US presidential campaigns. Specifically from the angle of the present chapter, Urbinati’s contribution shows how much realism, how much *politics*, how many instances of representative (and potentially

democratic) practice must be expunged from a selective normative-led picture to sustain an account where ambiguity, shifting roles, indeed liminality play no part in representative democracy.

### *Institutional and non-institutional*

Representation also displays liminal qualities with respect to its practices in-between “institutional” and “non-institutional” sites. An institution is not an institution without the constant practice which defines and sustains it. With the possible exception of the workings of memory and anticipation, a parliament building and a legislative procedure for example which is empty of legislators is no longer a functioning institution. Practices animate, but they do more – they reconstitute the institution on an everyday basis.

To what extent can institutional models – especially normatively-inflected models of democracy that are built on a privileging of a specific set of political practices, such as “deliberative democracy” – be selective or in certain ways held separate from a range of experiences, perspectives and practices of representation? If the models contain or recommend “rules”, there is a danger analogous to the relations between rule utilitarianism and act utilitarianism – it is difficult to defend holding the rule to be prior to acts where the directions of the two (if not the overarching normative goal) diverge for a given choice or strategy. The general norm is reducible – needs to be reduced to – the practices or acts on which it is founded. I take account of the phenomenological call to attend to the specific things and acts that appear to us, and how they do so: “to the claims themselves!” one might say. There are no doubt varied ways of going to the claims themselves. The assumption I make here is that, if representation is made and disputed in real-world politics on larger and smaller scales, then it happens daily and in detail, below the standard-issue radar of political theory and in a realm more akin to that of the political anthropologist. To build a model of

democracy on a small sub-set of claims is to risk oversimplifying and reducing the relevance to real-world democratic and representative practice.

As John Parkinson suggests, it is a mistake to equate the institutions of government with a fixed set of roles and personnel. First, formal representative roles do not automatically map onto state organisations. Secondly, “it is important to separate democratic roles from the actors who perform them”. And third, democratic roles - such as “deciding what to do”, “defining collective problems” or “articulating interests” – are not the privileged areas for action of set or fixed institutions or institutionalised positions (Parkinson 2015, 21-24).

If practice is at the core of institutions, consider the dynamism of representative roles within the institutions of the representative democracy, such as (classically) “trustee” and “delegate” roles performed by members of parliament or cabinet members. Liminal representation works between and across such seemingly fixed binary options. Arguably, *categories* of representation are parasitic on a performative or role-oriented conception of (for example) *acting as* a trustee or a delegate. A representative claimant plays the *role* of delegate or trustee. In the practice of a would-be representative such roles can be mixed and matched by “shape-shifting” claimants and actors outside and across their original theoretical or political points of departure (Saward 2014). The would-be *representative’s* shape-shifting, and consequent movement through phases of transition and ambiguity *as* a would-be representative, contributes directly to the transitory, in-between, liminal character of *representation*.

What seems solid – the types, the roles – become more malleable (de- and re-attachable) than binary or other familiar typologies suggest. For example, representative roles are often best conceived as malleable resources for use by would-be representatives in their claiming and jockeying for position. In this light, for example, an election candidate, or a

social movement figure, or a “shock-jock” political talk radio host, positions him or herself as a subject with respect to constituents, supporters, or listeners; in other words, they adopt not so much “roles” as *subject-positions*. Subject positions are intersubjective, culturally and discursively constituted stances that are (differentially) available for adoption by actors. For example, the subject position of descriptive or sociological likeness, and another of trusteeship, is available to potential Western representative claimants (at least) as a social resource. If Chabal and Daloz (2006) in their comparative three-country study of representation are right, for example, a claim such as “I can speak for you because I am like you an ordinary person, doing the things you do and concerned with the things that concern you” expresses a local cultural resource within which a Swedish politician may fruitfully position herself but would be less likely to work in Nigeria.

Subject-positioning introduces into work on representation an interactive dynamism: claims by representatives position themselves and their audience, and claims by the represented position both them and the representative. Representatives do not so much have or occupy roles as “pause at” or “move through” available subject-positional resources, which in turn they play a part on creating or reshaping. Consider for example Fenno’s (2003) view of “trustee” and “delegate” not as representative roles but as resources for congressmen to use to justify their actions to constituents. In this way, the shape-shifting representer, in-between and in transition, contributes through his or her liminality to the liminal character of representation.

### *The normative and the descriptive*

In a different vein, we can also trace the liminal quality of representation with respect to analytical approaches to the subject. The dominant styles of analysis are normatively-driven (there are varied examples in the present volume). Representation is framed in such



work by a prior stipulation of why and where it ought to appear and be regarded as acceptable within a certain conception of democracy (or perhaps of justice or equality). But unless such an account is descriptively at least plausible, it risks revealing (the extent of its) characteristic detachment from real-world representative politics. Representation's liminality rests in part on its occupying spaces in and in-between the normative and the descriptive. The descriptive blends in to the normative, and my claim here is that descriptive depth and breadth in analysing representation is more important than normative approaches tend to embrace or provide. The normative blends into the descriptive, but (I argue) evaluative work can most appropriately *trace* representative practice in all its real-world multiplicity, embracing the important element of analytical co-location or overlap between the two.

Let me pick up the second point in particular. Democratic legitimisation of representation, I argue, concerns on-going *acceptance* of representative claims by specific appropriate constituencies under certain *conditions*.<sup>vi</sup> Democracy, whatever else it may require, is based on popular power or control, so in principle evident acceptance of representative claims by the relevant constituency is the key, with no necessary or decisive place for independent criteria of what might make for a "good" representative, for example. Democratic criteria will apply within the context in which actual acceptance is given or denied to a claimant. Evidence of an *accepted or authorised* claim to representation can be taken, contingently, as an example of democratic representation. Many claims fail to be heard, fail to resonate with relevant constituencies, die a political death (often deservedly!). Evidence that they are heard and accepted (or not) by a sufficient proportion of constituents can be hard to find at times – that in itself justifies no easy assumptions, but it may justify taking the time to locate evidence. The conditions within which that acceptance is given or denied will need to be conducive to reasonably open and uncoerced choices by members of the appropriate constituency if democrats are to recognise its legitimising force. In practice

we are dealing with a spectrum of possibilities here. A choice or acceptance may be uncoerced, but none are entirely unconstrained. Following Simmons' discussion of consent, acceptance must be given intentionally and voluntarily, and without threats of violence or undue burdens (Simmons 1976, 276-7). This will be the case for a specific or discrete representative claim. It will also apply more widely across society, with a concern for the extent to which conditions conducive to uncoerced and open acceptance acts are replicated across a diverse range of spaces, sectors and groups.<sup>vii</sup>

This approach to evaluation tracks representation's liminal character, i.e. follows the texture of specific claims in context across state and society. It does not require a restricted view of representation's political instantiation. Nor does it require a defence of democratic principles – a description of such principles, and a description of practices which accord with them, suffices. The "reasonable" conditions of judgement is likewise a description of the conditions that would enable such acceptance or authorisation to operate in the real world, and the "appropriate" constituency is given a careful non-normative definition (see Saward 2010). These are descriptive evaluations (closely linked to Skinner's "evaluative descriptions"), not independently-derived normative standards; the flexibility of description enables evaluations to track representation's liminality, i.e. its traversing of the "formal" and the "informal", the elective and the non-elective, and so on.<sup>viii</sup> The sources of democratic normativity can be allowed to emerge from descriptions of the texture of representation's practices.

Normative political theory sometimes assumes a privilege that may be more tenuous than it thinks. The claims-based approach sets aside acontextual normative judgement, arguing that more detailed description of representative practice is needed. Evaluation in context matters. The claims-based approach is more phenomenological, bracketing received assumptions about normativity. A constructivist approach will precisely trace meanings of

principles and concepts as they are invoked, altered etc. in practice. In normative political philosophy, acontextual normative judgements are uncontroversial – but crucially, perhaps because they are so widely accepted, they tend not to be defended. The fact that clear and independent normative standards may be *desired* by scholars does not speak to their defensibility. As Anne Phillips writes, ‘We can hardly stake the universality of our principles on the fear of what would happen if we abandoned this claim. The case against foundationalism cannot be countered by arguments of an instrumental nature, for if ever the “preference” for firm foundations is revealed as such (we “need” universal principles, we “need” a secure vantage point from outside), the case collapses on itself. We cannot appeal to the consequences as the basis for returning to foundationalist thinking; the only basis for this return would be the knowledge of sure foundations’ (Phillips 2000: 249).

### **Representative democracy and democratic representation**

I turn finally to the wider distinction which is implicated in each of the four areas under discussion, that between “representative democracy” (the normal “home” of democratic or legitimate or proper representation, for much of democratic theory) and the wider field of which it forms a part, which I call “democratic representation” (see Figure 1). In other words, demonstrating representation’s liminality with respect to the four areas discussed also acts as a wider demonstration that representation’s practices traverse the seemingly separate realms of state-based representative democracy, and society-based political and democratic representation. Showing that much representative practice is in-between – and often in transition between – the polar elements in the four areas under scrutiny, acts also to show that “representative democracy” is in fact one, critical part of a wider set of practices encompassing the statal *and* the societal dimensions of “democratic representation” (within the field of political representation as a whole).

**[Figure 1]**

**[Table 1]**

Representation is “done” (or at least, “claimed”) by a wide array of local, national and international groups and individuals, elected or chosen or not-elected and rejected.

Democratic representation concerns a *quality of practice* which may be more or less present in a wide and diffuse set of locations, including across transnational contexts. *Representative democracy* in formal national or other governance structures enacts, but does not exhaust the enactment of, democratic representation.<sup>ix</sup> To choose to focus on representative democracy in the state more narrowly as the sole or only significant site of representation is to make a stipulative choice *from within* a wider set of significant representative practice.

Table 1 captures the ways in which characteristics of statal representative democracy become part of a broader spectrum in selected areas of concern for observers of representation and democracy. Representation’s pervasive liminality means that no one mode of choice, type of authority, or form of practice may be regarded *a priori* as *the* democratic form of political representation.

It may be objected that this conclusion prevents the positive pursuit or advocacy of more democratic forms or practices of representation due to the fact that actors and practices may significantly blur the boundaries between, say, the formal and the informal. A key further factor is that non-elective representative claims involving informal modes of (potential) authority, that are not tied to or contained within a specific institution, *can* be instances of *democratic* representation. This factor may, for some observers, be a step too far in analysis of political representation; they may argue that democratic legitimacy is solely a matter of election and institutionalisation, for example, and that if we are to assess how democratic representation is (and advocate its furtherance) we need to sharpen our focus

despite representation's often liminal character. The arguments in this chapter militate against such a stipulation. However, democrats may of course look to enhance democratic representation *across* statal and societal domains. For example, given that citizen acceptance of representative claims on the basis of clear and fair electoral rules is a comparatively clear and strong form of acceptance, a reformer looking to strengthen democratic representation (and within that, representative democracy) could productively focus on improving the rules and conduct of elections. Reducing gerrymandering, facilitating voter registration, fair regulation of campaign funding, and perhaps compulsory voting might in this way be on the agenda. Similarly, our reformer may look to the uses of voting and elections in non-statal contexts – could they be expanded and improved? He or she might seek to develop measures of citizen acceptance of a variety of representative claims in more informal or non-institutional spheres, where it is normally more difficult to gauge degrees of support for an actor's representative claims. This could form part of an effort to more effectively trace representational political practice.

There are, in addition, analytical and evaluative payoffs stemming from the broadly constructivist approach set out in this chapter, adding rich strategies and questions to the representation research agenda. For example: (1) If “tracking” representative claims is an important though neglected part of advancing our understanding, we can learn more about local and specific interpretations of representation in varied contexts and cultures, “grounding” and “locating” the concept (Schaffer 2016). Extended case studies by Fenno (2003) and Schaffer (1998) are highly illuminating exemplars of this approach; (2) In what *ways*, and to what *extent*, do elections legitimise political actors? To ask this question is to assume less and press ourselves to discover more what importance elections may have for democratic representation; and (3) How can liminal statuses be *managed* by political actors

or would-be representatives – how are they deployed or disguised, for instance? Can liminality be a *resource* for representative claim-makers?

## **Conclusion**

There are further areas where representation's liminal qualities are evident, and may further inform the wider distinction and relation between representative democracy and democratic representation. Consider the *permanent* and the *ephemeral*: there is a common perception that representative democracy in the state involves permanent political presences (parliaments, departments of state, and so on), whereas the wider societal domain consists of representative relationships which are more temporary or ephemeral. But all claims to representation have a "becoming" quality; occupying liminal ground between being and not being representative, they are always "not yet" or "not quite" representation. Further, it is important to note that the statal can be ephemeral, and the non-statal can be persistent. Or consider representation as *acting for* versus *standing for*, the subject of a sharp distinction by Pitkin (1967). It would be easy to assume that "acting for" is about performing claims to represent in civil society, and that "standing for" is solidly institutional and statal (as well as including symbols like national flags). But, as the broad thrust of this chapter suggests, nothing can "stand for" another thing without action (or performance) which alleges or claims or points out that it so stands. Though they may be deeply embedded, widely accepted, and implicit and institutionalised ("We the People"), they are rooted in enacted allegations or claims of what may represent and be represented.

Representation, in these and the earlier examples, traverses familiar empirical and conceptual distinctions and boundaries. Or – by engaging in practices of representation, individual and collective actors "take representation with them" through liminal phases and contexts. It may not be an overstatement to claim that representation's liminality means that

its *primary* characteristic is to be in dynamic transition across fields defined by more static perspectives.

Critics of constructivist approaches to representation look to limit and fix the concept's meaning and reference; they centre on political or democratic representation meaning properly formal, permanent macro-level models and types within a conventional representative democracy framework, often to underline strong and singular lines of normative legitimacy. However, the liminal nature of representation renders this project vulnerable, with its key positions somewhat artificial and at times difficult to sustain. It is *political actors* who often, across many contexts, invoke representation and position themselves to speak or to stand for others. Why redouble our efforts to underscore conventional stipulations of concepts when the effort may *over-simplify* the richness of the concept in practice? Similarly, it may be objected that embracing representation's liminality expands *too much* the scope of reference or application of the concept, encompassing most forms of political action and institutions. But *tracking* representative claims – for example, through the machinations of “shape-shifting” by would-be representatives – is a far cry from *ascribing* representation to political phenomena more generally; it is a difficult, disciplined and focused research activity born of an aspiration to realism and relevance.

If my argument is right, then there are significant consequences for the analysis of representation; a need to embrace, rather than seeking to ignore or erase, representation's dynamic liminality, drawing on a phenomenological sensibility and centred on the importance of context. And a need to go back to the actual practices and claims of representation, with all their changeability and variation, avoiding over-hasty normative judgement. “Whatness” matters, and should both delay and guide assessments of rightness and wrongness<sup>x</sup>.

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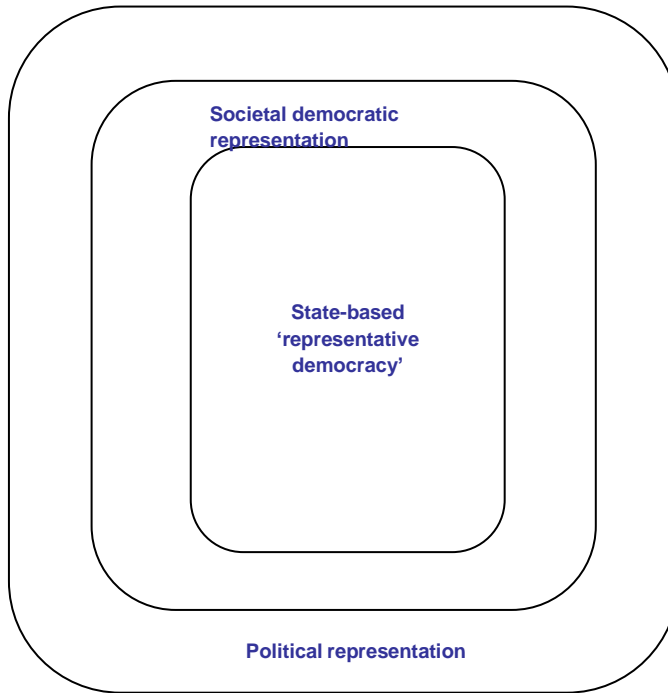
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**Figure 1 – Representative democracy and democratic representation**



**Table 1 – Key distinctions on representation**

	<b>REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY – statal representative institutions and processes</b> →	<b>DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION – includes all features of Representative Democracy plus wider societal representation practices</b>
<b>Modes of choice</b>	Elective	Non-elective and elective
<b>Type of authority</b>	Formal authority	Informal and formal authority
<b>Form of practices</b>	Institutional	Non-institutional and institutional
<b>Understanding and evaluation</b>	Normative	Descriptive and normative

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<sup>i</sup> The representative claim is defined in Saward (2010, 38) as “a claim to represent or to know what represents the interests of someone or something”.

<sup>ii</sup> Saward (2016) offers an account for distinctive types of political equality that are evident in non-electoral contexts.

<sup>iii</sup> The actual words used in a representative claim may vary, but not just any discursive act can be a representative claim. Such a claim will always assert or imply a relationship between two or more entities whereby one stands, speaks or otherwise acts for others.

<sup>iv</sup> Ana Hazare, an Indian activist and former soldier, went on an anti-corruption hunger strike in India in 2011. Hazare, according to reports, “claims inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi” and “has described his protest against corruption as India’s” “second freedom struggle” (The Guardian 28/12/11). Pressing for anti-corruption legislation in parliament, Hazare claimed that “I will live and die for India ... bigger than the parliament at Delhi is the parliament of the people” (The Guardian 28/12/11). Hazare had support from at least one major Indian political party and from demonstrators across India during his hunger strike. Malala Yusufzai, a former Pakistani schoolgirl blogger and activist, was shot and gravely wounded by the Taliban on her way to school in Sind province. She is now resident in the UK while continuing high-profile advocacy of access to education for girls. One commentator notes that “Malala represents the countless young girls in Pakistan and around the world who are unwilling to accept the denial of their basic human rights”. Former British prime minister Gordon Brown said that “Malala’s dreams represent what is best about Pakistan”.

<sup>v</sup> This idea is adapted from its use by Louis Marin in *On Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) (trans. by C. Porter), who writes that “to represent signifies to present oneself as representing something, and every representation, every sign or representation process, includes a dual dimension – a reflexive dimension, presenting oneself; a transitive dimension, representing something – and a dual effect – the subject effect, and the object effect” (256). An important contemporary pioneer of these ideas was Bourdieu (1991).

<sup>vi</sup> For detailed discussion of the “appropriate constituency” and other specific features of this account, see Saward (2010; 2014).

<sup>vii</sup> Within a democratic frame, this concern with the conditions within which acceptance is evident or denied can be broadened. The democrat should examine the extent to which there is: a plurality of sites, moments or opportunities for representative claim-making and reception (the extent of openness to many claims and their contestation); uncoerced equal access to subject-positional resources for claim-making in the given context; variation in the nature and bases of representative claims in the given context (the extent of openness to different sorts of claims, by different sorts of claimants); reflexivity, in the sense that claim-makers are responsive, and contestation is encouraged (cf Disch 2011); and evidence of extreme marginalisation which effectively excludes some groups from both formal and informal modes of representative politics.

<sup>viii</sup> Lord and Pollak (2013, 521) ask: “How can we differentiate between legitimate and preposterous claims? Is it merely left to the constituency to decide about the legitimacy of claims?” My response is: in a democracy, yes!

<sup>ix</sup> A fuller account of this point is available in Saward (2011).

<sup>x</sup> The term is borrowed from Ben Bradlee. Writing about Vietnam, he wrote: “By instinct and habit, I was more interested in the whatness of the war rather than in the rightness or wrongness” (Bradlee 1995).