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THINK PIECE

Political representation is in its overly simplified form, involves a principal-agent relationship where representatives stand for and act on behalf of the represented, usually on a territorial basis. It is a specific operationalisation of the power deployment. Risking loss of generality by oversimplification, the political representation can be seen as the delegation of the authority from a specific group to a political entity, either a representant or an organisation. As any utilisation of power, the representation introduces the question of legitimacy in its core. In its most classical understanding in the context of electoral democracy, the legitimacy of the representation is *established* by a strictly defined authorisation process and a framework of accountability (Pitkin 1967). Yet, even in this seemingly unidirectional transfer of power from constituency to representative, still, the authorisation, the legitimacy of the source of the power, and the question of the responsibilities of the one to exercise the power to the source of the power (both in terms of constituency, and the whole society) is a subject to a broad discussion (see e.g.; Kelsen 2017; Pitkin 1967).

However, elective representation does not exhaust all forms of democratic representation (Saward 2009), nor does a unidirectional authorisation process adequately explain the nature of the relationship between representatives and their constituencies. The constructivist turn (Disch, Van De Sande, and Urbinati 2019) emphasises the dynamic and fluid nature of political representation, rather than viewing it as a static and predetermined relationship between representatives and the represented. This shift in perspective argues that representation is an active, ongoing process of creation and negotiation. Representatives do not merely act on behalf of pre-existing groups with established interests and identities; rather, they play a crucial role in shaping and defining those interests and identities through their representational activities (ibid. 21ff). Although the discussion around the constructivist turn is often not unified in its definition, it is generally agreed that the identity, interests, or preferences of the represented are not predetermined but are shaped¹ by the representatives. Representation is deployed in a much broader landscape than just the electoral realm, which necessitates a significant demystification process; this has been precipitated by the large-scale transformations that democracies have undergone (Wolkenstein 2024, 278f).

The constructivist turn, however, is not merely an observation of a shift in political representation. It represents a discovery that the manifestation of power is itself subject to ongoing negotiation and contestation, continually reshaped by both discursive and non-discursive practices. It is claimed that the constructivist element in representation is never absent. The constructivist perspective initi-

¹ Alternatively, *extracted*.

ates a discussion about the operation of power in representation and builds a new theoretical framework to examine contemporary movements. Using the terms of Foucault's Power/Knowledge nexus, in the social realm, power is never completely concentrated in a specific point, nor is it ever a unidirectional process (Foucault 1980). Power is everywhere and emanates from everywhere; it is diffused throughout the structures of society (see *ibid.*), and the manifestation of power is merely an instance of the signifier chain in society rather than a solid entity. As post-structuralist theory particularly focuses on the nature of power, questioning the subject, individuality, agency, and presence, the examination and critique of the constructivist perspective finds fertile ground here. . .

Lasse Thomassen's (2019) exploration of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's work on populism is an exemplary introduction to the post-structuralist reflection on representation. According to Laclau, populism is a political strategy that capitalises on the vagueness and fluidity of the *people* to mobilise power. Populism, from Laclau's perspective, actively constructs the identity it seeks to represent. Populism's especially prominent approach to redefine the boundaries of public discourse makes it a good example of how the production of a specific representation directly translates to the amplification of certain views and the marginalisation of others (*ibid.* 5ff). Similarly, a representation is a mapping ² which does not necessarily cover the domain it is operating on, and as the mapping happens, the production itself immediately reveals what it has excluded in the co-domain as much as what it included. Laclau's argumentation operates on the empty signifiers ³ that can be filled in by those excluded in other representations. The residue can be mapped in other mappings, leading to a common identity, a common will, a social and cultural hegemony which will eventually become a state (*ibid.*, 546f). In this line of argumentation, the populist articulation is not necessarily an obstacle to democratic or radical democratic struggles. As well as the horizontal, the vertical, hierarchical constructions of multitudes themselves potentially make struggles possible.

Thomassen's reading of Deleuze & Guattari (D&G) presents a distinct contrast to that of Laclau & Mouffe. Deleuze and Guattari propose a radical challenge to the very concepts of representation and identity. They argue that identity is not merely something to be represented, but rather something that is continuously evolving, a dynamic process of change and differentiation that resists any final fixation within a representational structure. Thus, the constructivist approach is not just about forming constituencies; it fundamentally revolves around the formation of subjects. This perspective suggests that the identity, interests, or preferences of the represented are not

² Slightly different than Thomassen's analogy to argue about mapping post-structuralism via map&projection (Thomassen 2017, p. 540), mapping is a mathematical concept which could be generally referred to as a *function* used to discuss the aspects of representation here. A mapping assigns elements from a domain to codomain. Including, excluding, being defined through the nature of its association is inherent to a mapping.

³ Or in another context also *floating signifiers*.

pre-determined but are actively shaped by representatives across a landscape that extends beyond the electoral realm. This calls for a reevaluation of representation to address the complex, diverse, and continually evolving needs and identities of modern societies (Thomassen 2017, pp. 543–547). Moreover, D&G anchor their political theory in a horizontally constructed rhizomatic understanding of the social fabric. Here, the *subject* is seen not as an individual but as a collection of dividuals ⁴ (deleuze1983). The subject is part of a network, and as such, representation itself becomes a network of networks, with the subject not necessarily connected to these networks in totality. Therefore, the subject, as well as any representation of it, is constantly undergoing processes of de- and reterritorialisation. Relevant to the constructivist argument, D&G provide a methodology and language to discuss how the subject is also produced on a specific *surface* of power, encouraging a nomadic approach and the cultivation of the desiring-production activities of subjects. This fosters connections that extend beyond the established representational structures within a given power framework.

But it is not just about the how you are represented but also "as whom". You are represented, but you are represented as the given role in a specific discourse realm.

– Lasse *ibid.*

Gayatri Spivak's critique of Deleuze and Foucault in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is particularly relevant as it questions their presumption that the subaltern can speak independently (*ibid.*, p. 543). However, the subaltern is always defined within a network of representations that have shaped their subjectivity from the margins of existing discourses. Thus, the subaltern cannot speak autonomously because they are constructed as agents within specific discourses (see *ibid.*). This provokes further inquiry into the possibilities of escaping the *hegemony*⁵, exploring paths of resistance against established power structures.

This study aims to analyse representation through its discourse under post-structuralism, particularly how it fosters an emancipatory political imaginary. Pertinent questions include: How does representation emancipate, if at all? How does a bottom-up constructed representation function? Is it feasible to deploy such representation outside hegemonic discourses? How are the dividual parts of an individual mobilised within a constructed representation? Is it possible for a subject to exist without representation, without belonging to a constituency?

In order to examine some of these questions or discover new ones along the way, this study introduces a plot device: an AI algorithm.

⁴ Or a machine constructed by other machines that seeks connections with other machines.

⁵ While 'hegemony' might not perfectly capture this concept, Deleuze's notion of 'lines of flight' refers to escaping the constraints of hegemonic discourses.

The advancements in AI have made it particularly relevant in the constituency construction processes; big data processing capabilities make these algorithms particularly useful, as they can extract and exploit our latent individuals expressed in our data. Furthermore, by managing content relevance online, they significantly influence the creation of specific echo chambers and filter bubbles, which have become influential in the constituency bonding processes. The advancements in generative AI algorithms have opened up an even broader topic, which is and will continue to influence the political sphere in myriad ways. However, this study does not attempt a case-based analysis; instead, it uses a hypothetical AI algorithm, an entity that possesses knowledge and power over the potential latent connections in the social sphere, which could also potentially construct communities. This device will allow the author to examine and discuss the reflections on political representation in post-structural political theory.

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