

UTKU B. DEMIR, 0848242

WORD COUNT: 1650

THE PEOPLE OF CHILE: THE CRITIQUE
OF SAWARD'S REFERENT REVISITED THROUGH
GABRIEL BORIC'S CAMPAIGN

Introduction

Gabriel Boric's successful campaign for the presidency of Chile in 2021 marked a pivotal moment in the nation's political transformation. As a former student leader emerging from the 2006 Penguin Revolution and the 2019 social uprisings, Boric's political ascent took place against the backdrop of demands to dismantle the inequalities entrenched by Chile's neoliberal economic system and to rewrite the Pinochet-era constitution. Central to Boric's campaign was the construction of 'the people of Chile' as a unifying referent that encompassed historical revolutionary factions and previously under-represented groups such as feminists, indigenous communities, and youth movements. This campaign offers a unique case to evaluate how representative claims function in transitional democracies.

Michael Saward's concept of representative claims provides a framework for understanding representation as a performative and constructive process. Saward argues, among other elements of a representative claim, that the referent—often seen as the “thing being represented”—is not a fixed entity but is instead discursively constructed. However, Thomas Decreus critiques this notion, questioning whether the referent is a coherent concept or even a necessary element for representation, emphasizing its contested and fluid nature. Boric's campaign, with its ability to adapt and include diverse constituencies, provides fertile ground to examine these theoretical debates.

This essay explores how Boric's campaign aligns with Saward's framework while addressing Decreus's critique of the referent. It argues that Boric's campaign exemplifies the utility and limitations of the referent in constructing collective identity during periods of political and social transformation. I examine this problematic via the following question:

RQ: To what extent does Gabriel Boric's campaign to construct a collective identity align with Decreus's critique of Saward's concept

of the referent?

Saward's Claims and Decreus's Critique

Michael Saward's concept of representative claims redefines representation as a performative act, emphasizing that it is not a static reflection of pre-existing realities but a process of constructing meaning and identities. In a constructivist relationship, the representative and the constituency are in a bidirectional process, whereas the representative (or the representation itself) forms the constituency as much as it *stands for it*.¹ A representative claim involves a maker (the individual or group asserting representation), a subject (who they claim to represent), an object (the issue or value being represented), a referent (the entity or idea being represented), and an audience (those who evaluate the claim). The referent, often seen as the "thing being represented," is not a fixed or independent entity; instead, it is discursively constructed through the claim-making process (Saward 2010, see 37).

¹ As much as a reference to Pitkin has been used here, I would like to underline that contrary to arbitrary sentence-wise picks, Pitkin's analysis of political representation includes potentially non-unidirectional and constructivism-relevant aspects. By noting representation as making something latent apparent, Pitkin already refers to non-linear forms of representation.

Box 2.1 The general form of the representative claim

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

Figure 2.1: The general form of representative claim (Saward 2010, p. 36)

In Saward's formulation of the representative claim (see Figure 2.1), the referent constitutes the variable I am focusing on. While the referent plays a crucial role in the construction of the representative claim, it arguably also constitutes the substance of the representation itself. Saward first refers to the object as an interpretation of the *referent* (*ibid.*, see 49), then as *constructed verbal and visual images for and about their constituencies by the representatives* (*ibid.*, p. 51). As in Benedict Anderson's (Anderson and Mergel 2005) sense, the imagination of the constituency is prior, and the referent is making the constituencies *imaginable* (Saward 2010, see 49).

Saward's constructivist approach highlights that the referent exists only in relation to the claim and the cultural, social, and political context in which it is articulated. This fluid and performative nature of the referent underlines its central role in shaping representation.

The concept of the referent has been discussed and challenged from different angles. The discussion ranges from whether the referent is truly necessary for the construction of representation ² to whether the distinction between the object and the referent is truly necessary since we are always perceiving a constituency on an abstraction layer ³. However, in order to frame practical challenges to Saward's *referent*, I turn to the critique of Thomas Decreus 2013. Decreus introduces several arguments building on each other, some of which are as follows:

- There is a contradiction between the reflective nature of representation, which assumes the elements of the referent must pre-exist. Yet, by including the referent as a pre-existing entity, Saward introduces a tension: if representation is constitutive, then no stable, independent referent should exist outside the representational process (*ibid.*, p. 37).
- If the referent is engrained in the cultural aspects of society, then instead of the referent being a "thing in itself" (Saward 2008), it is just another representation curated into a new one (Decreus 2013, p. 38).
- If the referent is destined to be constantly fluid, and representation functions without a stable referent, is there a real need for a concept of the referent? Decreus uses examples such as Lenin's claim to represent "the proletariat" or Tahrir Square protesters' claim to oppose Hosni Mubarak, which worked without relying on a fixed definition of these referents. The referent becomes superfluous, as its meaning is always contested and reconstructed.

² Or to claim a representation

³ The working class is always an abstraction of the individuals in it to some extent, like the "hard- working people" concept.

3

Boric's Campaign

I refer to Gabriel Boric's successful campaign in Chile to reflect on the concept of the *referent* through Decreus' argumentation. Gabriel Boric's ascent to the Chilean presidency in 2021 is deeply intertwined with the nation's complex political history. Salvador Allende's socialist government (1970–1973) was overthrown by General Augusto Pinochet's U.S.-backed military coup in 1973, leading to a dictatorship characterized by human rights abuses and neoliberal economic reforms. The 2006 Penguin Revolution, a series of student protests against the privatized education system, marked a significant moment in Chile's social movements. Boric, a former student leader, emerged from these movements, advocating for free and equitable education. These experiences culminated in his presidential campaign, which emphasized dismantling the inequalities entrenched by Pinochet's neoliberal model and rewriting the constitution (["Gabriel Boric" 2024](#)). I argue that this unique background makes Boric's case ideal to emphasize important aspects of Saward's definition and Decreus' critique without *loss of generality*.

Boric's campaign was primarily about constructing a national identity relying on different aspects of historical and contemporary occurrences. "The people of Chile" in his campaign was the referent of the campaign (Manzi and Nohales [2024](#); Peña González and Silva [2024](#); Zilla [2022](#)). This referent was firstly constructed through the identity of previously existing revolutionary factions in the country, which were under heavy pressure during Pinochet's regime. This part of the referent was reignited during the Penguin Revolution process by the student movement. However, Boric's successful campaign wasn't only relying on this single, already established referent; his movement managed to introduce groups such as feminists, LGBT movements, indigenous communities, and youth movements (Manzi and Nohales [2024](#); Peña González and Silva [2024](#); Zilla [2022](#)). Although some of these groups were included in the previous revolutionary front, others were much less emphasized in the country's

history. In this sense, Boric's campaign managed to keep the referent fluid and open to the inclusion of new elements, which were not pre-existing in this referent. To communicate the inclusiveness of the referent, there was significant activity across different mediums, including an active community of "meme" content producers redefining the concept of "the people of Chile" (Fuentes and Mellado 2024).

Boric's framing of "hope defeating fear" (Hodgson 2021) is a direct reference to Salvador Allende's campaign, which focused on a hopeful future instead of addressing the negative aspects of the opposition, as captured in the film "NO" (*No [Film Review] | Cine Outsider* 2024). Boric's campaign curated existing societal grievances into a new, unified representation of the "new Chile." In this case, the referent is not constructed from outside with independent entities but built upon a common struggle. However, it grew to include contemporary actors relevant to this definition. In this sense, the fluid construction of the referent was built upon previous representations but extended to new objects.

Boric's campaign mobilized diverse constituencies without strictly defining "the people" as a singular, fixed referent. The question is, is there enough evidence to say the referent in this case was unnecessary to define? "The people of Chile," unlike its stability or inclusivity, communicates both a historical and contemporary spatial conjecture of inclusiveness that the object(s) of representation does not immediately communicate, as it draws a clear line against the excluded. Moreover, the referent also allowed Boric to clarify expectations regarding contemporary problems that were neither part of the political discourse in Allende's time nor addressed in subsequent years by latent revolutionary circles. For example, the revelation of Chile's rich Lithium resources is a relatively new issue. Boric's campaign's constructive process, even the referent in his representative claim, communicates a position regarding Lithium mines before officially announcing the policy. Unsurprisingly, Chile followed a nationalization program for those mines during his mandate (Villegas, Scheyder, and Scheyder 2023).

4

Conclusion

I began this essay by defining Michael Saward's concept of a representative claim, with a particular focus on the *referent*. To frame the debate surrounding the concept of the referent, I introduced the key arguments made by Thomas Decreus. Using the case of Gabriel Boric's successful 2021-2022 campaign in Chile, I analyzed the following points in relation to Decreus's critique of the *referent*:

- As Decreus notes, the case of Boric's representative claim does not refer to any pre-existing elements outside of prior representations. The process and the referent itself are constructed and depend on other constructed entities.
- In Boric's case, the referent was strongly built upon previous representations, even making direct references to earlier referents. However, this did not prevent it from being adapted, expanded, and discursively constructed within the context of the current political landscape.
- The referent "the people of Chile" is indeed fluid. Nonetheless, it communicates political positioning far more effectively than the individual objects of the representative claim alone. Moreover, despite its fluidity, the referent enables connections to contemporary debates, even if they are not necessarily embedded within its original scope.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict R. O'G and Thomas Mergel (2005). *Die Erfindung der Nation: zur Karriere eines erfolgreichen Konzepts*. 2., um ein Nachwort von Thomas Mergel erweiterte Auflage der Neuauflage 1996. Campus-Bibliothek. Frankfurt/Main New York: Campus Verlag. ISBN: 978-3-593-37729-2.
- Decreus, Thomas (Apr. 2013). "BEYOND REPRESENTATION? A CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT OF THE REFERENT". In: *Representation* 49.1, pp. 33-43. ISSN: 0034-4893, 1749-4001. DOI: [10.1080/00344893.2012.742455](https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2012.742455). (Visited on 06/21/2024).
- Fuentes, Mario Álvarez and Claudia Mellado (Oct. 2024). "Between Hagiography and Self-Trolling: Multimodal Analysis of Memes for Boric in the 2021 Chilean Presidential Election". In: *International Journal of Communication* 18.0, p. 27. ISSN: 1932-8036. (Visited on 11/23/2024).
- "Gabriel Boric" (Nov. 2024). In: *Wikipedia*. (Visited on 11/23/2024).
- Hodgson, Jim (Dec. 2021). *Gabriel Boric: Hope Defeated Fear in Chile*. (Visited on 11/23/2024).
- Manzi, Javiera and Karina Nohales (2024). *Chilean President Boric's Election Was a Movement Victory*. <https://roarmag.org/essays/chile-president-boric-movement-victory/>. (Visited on 11/23/2024).
- No [Film Review] | *Cine Outsider* (2024). <http://www.cineoutsider.com/reviews/films/n/no.html>. (Visited on 11/23/2024).
- Peña González, Carlos and Patricio Silva, eds. (2024). *The Boric Government in Chile: Between Refoundation and Reform*. Routledge Studies in Latin American Development. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1-03-248297-2 978-1-03-248298-9.
- Saward, Michael (2008). "The Subject of Representation". In: *Representation* Vol.44.No.2, pp. 93-97. ISSN: 0034-4893. DOI: [10.1080/00344890802079433](https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890802079433). (Visited on 11/23/2024).
- (May 2010). *The Representative Claim*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 978-0-19-957938-9. DOI: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199579389.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199579389.001.0001). (Visited on 04/23/2024).

Villegas, Alexander, Ernest Scheyder, and Ernest Scheyder (Apr. 2023). "Chile Plans to Nationalize Its Vast Lithium Industry". In: *Reuters*. (Visited on 11/23/2024).

Zilla, Claudia (2022). "Gabriel Boric Assumes Office in Chile: A "Hinge Presidency" Launched amidst Constitutional Process". In: *SWP Comment*. DOI: [10.18449/2022C18](https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C18). (Visited on 11/23/2024).