
Article

The inter-est between us: Ontology, epistemology, and the failure of political representation

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Abstract In recent decades, theories of representation have undergone a constructivist turn, as many theorists no longer view the represented subject as prior to but rather as an effect of representation. Whereas some critics have claimed that lacking an ontologically pre-given subject undermines the theory of representation, many democratic theorists have sought to reconceptualize representation and its democratic possibilities by turning away from ontological questions altogether. By focusing instead on how representatives come to know the public interest, many scholars now contend that an epistemological account best explains how political representation can foster democratic participation. Yet, theorists of representation have not assessed whether this turn to epistemology has overcome the ontological problems that initially motivated it. This article tracks epistemological defenses of representation to outline two models of political representation that attempt to tackle the epistemological problem of constituent interest without positing a foundational ontology of the subject. I argue that both theoretical tendencies ultimately remain caught in the problems of ontology, thereby undercutting their normative aspirations to foster political participation. Turning to Hannah Arendt's comments on public interest and her writings on council democracy, the article retheorizes the concept of political representation to avoid the ontological problems that beset current accounts.

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Recent concern over the health of representative democracies has generated renewed interest in political representation, sparking what some call a 'representative turn' in democratic theory (Näsström, 2011). At the heart of this turn is a rethinking of the relationship between action and interest. As Hanna Pitkin's oft-cited definition indicates, political representation denotes 'acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them' (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209).



Historically, as Pitkin argues, political representation has oscillated between two understandings of interest: objective and subjective (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 156–163). The distinction between the two can be understood in ordinary language by the placement of the word ‘in’: e.g. healthcare is *in* her interest (objective) vs. she has an interest *in* having healthcare (subjective). Rather than simply promote the latter, representatives may act against the subjective interests of their constituents in order to further their objective interests because, as one political philosopher puts it, ‘it may be in a person’s interest to want what he does not want’ (Benditt, 1975, p. 254). Consequently, much thought on representation seeks to establish the appropriate line between independence from and acquiescence to the subjective interests of constituents for the purposes of promoting their objective interests.¹

In recent decades, however, critique of the representative subject has inspired a dilemma for the concept of representation, which long took for granted the existence of a subject with knowable objective interests. Lacking an ontologically given subject such as ‘women’ for whom the representative can act, what justifies the representative relationship? More troubling for democratic theory are current arguments that representative discourses construct the represented subject (cf. Castiglione and Pollak, 2018), which raise questions regarding the represented’s ability to participate in their own representation. In other words, if representation constitutes its constituency, then what prevents this relationship from being a constitutive imposition of the representative’s will?

In light of these problems, thinking on representation has shifted away from ontological issues of the subject and on to epistemological problems of discerning public interest. Rather than focus attention on the ontological question of *who* is being represented, concern revolves around *what* is being promoted, namely, public interest. In so doing, many theorists of representation now argue that conflicts surrounding knowledge of group interest require citizen participation (e.g. Young, 2002; Urbinati, 2006; Saward, 2010). As such, representation’s ability to foster democratic activity is best understood through an epistemological account of the representative process. Where thinking representation via the ontology of the subject risked undermining political participation, epistemological defenses now purport to provide the best means to secure representation’s democratic credentials.

Democratic theorists have not assessed, however, whether this turn to epistemology has overcome the ontological problems that initially motivated it. In this article, I track epistemological defenses of representation in a range of contemporary political theory to outline two popular articulations of representation as a participatory political relationship. The first I call representation-as-mediation and is exemplified in the work of democratic theorists such as Iris Marion Young and Nancy Schwartz. This model conceives of representation as a mediated exchange between representative and represented that aims to discover the public interest. This mediated process, they claim, makes possible a democratic politics of constituent participation. The second vision of representation I call radical



representation, which is illustrated by the work of Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau and Nadia Urbinati. This conception of representation argues that any epistemological claim to know the public interest will necessarily fail. Far from being a disadvantage, this failure, they contend, opens up space for democratic contestation.

These two tendencies for theorizing representation offer two different epistemological accounts of public interest to secure the democratic participation of the represented. Both accounts attempt to tackle the epistemological problem of constituent interest without positing a foundational ontology of the subject. This article argues that both theoretical tendencies nonetheless remain caught in the problems of ontology. On the one hand, I argue that accounts of representation as a mediated process of discovering public interest end up relying on a structural ontology of the subject, and in doing so, risk negating alternative and conflicting claims of constituency interest that may originate from the represented. On the other hand, I argue that accounts of representation as an epistemological failure presume a political ontology of the activist subject, and thus have difficulty attending to problems of apathy and non-participation. As such, both theoretical accounts of representation return to a foundational ontology of the subject, ultimately undercutting their normative claims to foster democratic participation.

In order to overcome the tendency of contemporary theories of representation to backslide into ontological questions of the subject, I claim that a theory of representation must not only shift from a question of *who* is being represented to *what* representation promotes (i.e. public interest), but also rethink the grammar of interest itself as a question of *where* it emerges. Deepening current debates on the topic of public interest, I turn to Hannah Arendt's etymological comments on 'interest' and her discussion of council democracy to reconceptualize interest not as a property internal to the subject but rather as the space between citizens. In so doing, I provide new conceptual resources for rethinking representation to avoid the problems of ontology that plague current accounts.

The first section of this article provides a brief description of the ontological critique of the subject that has restructured the field of political representation. In the second section, I outline the epistemological defense of representation which I call 'representation-as-mediation'. Employing the Marxian heuristic of class-in-itself becoming a class-for-itself, the third section argues that representation-as-mediation ultimately recuperates the subject and thus undercuts possibilities for political action by relying on a structural discourse of interest. In the fourth section, I explore attempts to overcome these problems through the reconfiguration of representation into what I call 'radical representation'. The fifth section argues that radical representation relies on an ontological understanding of the activist subject always ready to contest representation's failure. In the final section, I turn to Arendt's work for an alternative account of public interest to better enable a theory of political representation to achieve its democratic aspirations.



The constituted subject

Emerging in the late 20th century, critical theory lobbied a critique of the subject that fundamentally transformed the concept of representation by rejecting the notion of an ontologically pre-given subject in favour of a vision of the subject as a product of diverse practices of subjectivation.² Underlying this claim is a vast literature that details the ways in which the subject is gendered, racialized, colonized, sexualized, disabled, etc. – that is, constituted. While theories of subject-formation vary, political theorists rarely take for granted an ontologically given or natural subject. As such, it is not surprising to see this critique influence theories of political representation. For instance, Iris Marion Young recommends scholars to forego the belief that ‘a constituency is an already formed cohesive group with a single will’ that the representative can know (Young, 2002, p. 130). Similarly, Michael Saward argues that the tendency to ‘take the represented as having a clear, readily accessible, and largely stable set of interests ... has led to subsequent attention being deflected from the constituted, constitutive, and dynamic character of representation’ (Saward, 2010, p. 10). We can witness the commonsense status of this critique in the frequency with which theorists ask: ‘Does this move rely on an implausible essentialism which presumes that all women have identical interests, or that all black people think the same way?’ (Phillips, 1998, pp. 23–24). The critique of the subject thus forms a key axis around which many contemporary theories of representation revolve.

Consequently, claims about the constitutive power of representation saturate the literature. In addition to Young, Saward, and Phillips, consider the following authors. David Runciman writes that the ‘collective identity of the state is fashioned out of representation rather than being a precondition of it’ (Runciman, 2010, p. 30). Nadia Urbinati describes how representation ‘facilitates the formation of political groups and identities’ (Urbinati, 2006, p. 36). For Nancy Schwartz, ‘political representation can be conceived as an ongoing founding, as the constitution of community’ (Schwartz, 1988, p. 127). It appears, therefore, that the most significant change to the landscape of political representation in recent years has not simply been a redefinition of *who* counts as a constituency (Urbinati and Warren, 2008), but more importantly attention to *how* constituencies are formed.

This critique of the subject means that many contemporary theorists of representation take it as given that the subject is an effect of representation. For some, this entails that ‘representatives can no longer rely on some ultimate truth about the subject on which to base their claims of representativeness’, thus undermining the theory of representation as such (Baker, 2006, p. 169). If a politician lacks the ontological category ‘women’ on which to base her claims, then what enables her to speak for women in the first place? Moreover, without a prior



subject to represent, how can theories of representation avoid the charge that they violate democratic commitments by imposing pre-given identities upon the represented? Far from negating the concept of representation, I show how constructivist theories of representation engage with the critique of the subject to re-think representation's democratic potential.

Representation as mediation

Refusing to posit a foundational subject with transparent interests, many contemporary theorists now portray representation as an epistemological question of interpretation. Without any essential truth of the subject to which the representative can access, every representative claim is an attempt to '*interpret* the group's interest, and in so doing put forth a claim to be representing it' (Vieira and Runciman, 2008, p. 101). As Urbinati puts it, 'representational politics renders democratic society an intricate fabric of meanings and interpretations of citizens' beliefs and opinions about what their interests are' (Urbinati, 2006, p. 30). Unable to objectively assert the truth of their representative claims, representatives must therefore persuade their constituents as to the correctness of their interpretative judgments. The 'responsibility of the representative', Young argues, 'is not simply to tell citizens how she ... served their interests, but as much to persuade them of the rightness of her judgment' (Young, 2002, p. 131). Indeed, persuasion is especially necessary when representative action departs from constituent desires. Given that 'wishes and interests ... inevitably conflict', Schwartz writes, representatives must 'persuade' their constituents of the 'legitimacy' of their 'choices' (Schwartz, 1988, p. 37). Accordingly, representation describes a mediated relationship between the representative, who must interpret and act for the public interest, and the represented, who pass judgment on these actions. As Young argues, the process of action and response means that 'representation consists in a mediated relationship', a temporally 'deferring relationship between constituents and their agents' that 'moves between moments of authorization and accountability' (Young, 2002, p. 129).

As a mediated relationship, representation describes a cycle of responsiveness that opens up space for political participation. The represented 'can assert their presence by *objecting* to what the representative does on their behalf' (Vieira and Runciman, 2008, p. 77). Responsiveness institutes a mediated relationship of mutual response: the represented responds to the representative's action, who then responds accordingly, and so on. Contrary to participatory critiques then, the 'representative ... acts in place of another without excluding him' (Pitkin, 1967, p. 133). This back-and-forth process of responsiveness has thus led to characterizations of representation as a mediated process of democratic 'discord' or 'agonistic' politics (Urbinati, 2006; Tambakaki, 2015). Accordingly,



epistemological access to the question of public interest has been democratised: far from excluding the represented, representation requires their active participation in the ongoing process of action, response, judgment, and critique. As David Plotke puts it, ‘Representation is Democracy’, since representation requires the central condition of democratic politics, that is, the responsiveness of every individual potentially affected by a political decision (Plotke, 1999).

According to the accounts explored so far, representation describes a mediated relationship that fosters participation. Given that representative ‘judgment is always in question’, the validity of the representative relationship requires citizen participation: ‘representation’, Young states, ‘is strong when it bears the traces of the discussion that led to authorization’ (Young, 2002, p. 131). For instance, a descriptive representative, such as a woman acting in the interests of women, creates a space of contestable judgment vis-à-vis any representative decision that affects women. In so doing, ‘the specific representation of disadvantaged groups encourages [their] participation and engagement’ (Young, 2002, p. 144). Since ‘the shared experience of women as women can only ever figure as a *promise* of shared concerns’, Anne Phillips argues, ‘the strongest protection for women’s equality lies in the mobilization of women to make their (various) voices heard’ (Phillips, 1998, pp. 83, 139). The interpretative moment contained in any representative decision ultimately opens a (promised) space of responsiveness, where constituents can contest their representation and participate in the ongoing process of democratic politics.

The represented-in-itself

Representation-as-mediation rejects the view of a constituency that pre-exists the representative relationship and affirms representation’s constitutive effects. In refusing these ontological assumptions, however, this approach raises concerns about the constitutive imposition of representative claims on the represented. Representatives must first create a tentatively stable constituency in order to later claim to act in its interest. Only after this constituency has achieved saliency can the represented (who previously did not exist as such) contest their representation. In other words, individuals can declare ‘not in my name!’ once representatives have crafted the conditions for this ‘name’ to be intelligible. As Schwartz writes, the ‘work’ of political representation is to ‘creat[e] constituencies out of people who never before considered themselves together’ (Schwartz, 1988, p. 130). It is this initial representative action that initiates the representative relationship by creating the imprints of a represented collectivity that requires investigation if we wish to understand representation’s current defense.

Representation crafts a contestable subject, but what enables theorists to argue that such a subject must be called into being in the first place? Mobilizing the



Marxian heuristic of class-in-itself and class-for-itself, I argue that theorists of representation-as-mediation remain wedded to a Marxian architecture of representation.³ According to these accounts, representation seeks to constitute a class-for-itself on the basis that there exists a prior class-in-itself unified by a common set of structural interests but lacking a conscious identity of these interests. Far from contesting the subject then, I show how representation-as-mediation surreptitiously recuperates an ontological account of the subject through a structural discourse of interest.

In his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx confronts the problem of representation via the smallholding peasant. Initially aligned with the bourgeoisie against feudal oppression, 19th century peasants have since become exploited by capital and so ‘find their natural ally and leader in the urban proletariat’ (Marx, 1963, p. 128). However, in the 1848 revolution, Marx argues, the peasants betrayed the workers by electing Louis Bonaparte president against their class interests. This disjuncture between the peasants’ action and their class interest plagued Marx throughout his writings (Hammen, 1972), and he elsewhere formulates the problem as follows: ‘for the peasant proprietor does not belong to the proletariat, and even where his condition is proletarian, he believes himself not to’ (Marx, 1986, p. 294). ‘Where he belongs but believes himself not to’ is the difference that Marxist theorists, often turning to the following passage in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, name as the difference between a class-in-itself and a class-for-itself.⁴

In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, *their interests* and their culture *from those of the other classes*, and put them in a hostile opposition to the latter, *they form a class*. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these smallholding peasants, and the *identity of their interests begets no community*, no national bond and no political organization among them, *they do not form a class* (Marx, 1963, 124, emphasis added).

Sharing the same economic conditions, the peasants have a set of ‘interests’ in ‘opposition’ to other classes and so form a class-in-itself – a group exploited by capital. Lacking knowledge of their class position, however, their actions are severed from their general interests as a class. The ‘identity of their interests’ fails to engender a ‘political organization’ of struggle, and so they do not form a class-for-itself, where a conscious connection holds between action and class interest.

While the peasants have interests and so form a class(-in-itself), they lack knowledge of these interests and so cannot act in their defense as a class(-for-itself). Consequently, Marx argues, the peasants are ‘incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name.... They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented’ (Marx, 1963, p. 124). Unable to act in favour of their own interests, a representative who knows their interests must act for them. For Marx, therefore, the question of representation is not an ontological problem of who the peasants are,



but rather an epistemological problem of knowing class interest. The justification for representation thus relies on the disjuncture between conscious action and class interest – the epistemological gap that differentiates the class-in-itself from the class-for-itself.

To see how this Marxian framework structures representation-as-mediation, we must first differentiate between two sites of subject-constitution: structural and representative. Prior to any claim about representation's constitutive effects, Iris Young acknowledges that structures of social and political exclusion create group identity. A 'structural social group', she explains, 'is a collection of persons who are similarly positioned in interactive and institutional relations that condition their opportunities' (Young, 2002, p. 97). While subjects maintain the capacity to shape their own lives, she argues that 'social processes and interactions position individual subjects in prior relations and structures, and this positioning conditions who they are' (Young, 2002, p. 101). Just as Marx did not consider the proletariat a natural group but an effect of the relations of production, Young argues that social groups in general are not pre-given entities but 'are constituted' through various 'social structures' that differentially distribute opportunities and resources (Young, 2002, p. 94).

For Young, these structures not only constitute groups but also group interest. Viewing conflict as a result of 'cultural differences', she argues, 'has diverted attention from a more common source of deep disagreement: structural conflict of interest' (Young, 2002, p. 118). Like the 'structural inequalities of gender', the 'structural fact' of differentiated relations between workers and owners in 'capitalist structural relations' create 'structural conflicts of interest' (Young, 2002, pp. 118–119). Structural inequalities in relations of gender or capital not only produce the subjects of these structures (workers and bosses, women and men), but also their interests. Acknowledging the critique of the subject while defending representation, Young and other feminist theorists argue that group interest emerges from the structural relations that constitute group identity (cf. Phillips, 1998, p. 68).

According to the Marxian framework, reading group interest from the structural differentiations that constitute social groups translates to understanding these groups as different manifestations of a class-in-itself. That is, these groups are structurally produced, and these structures determine group interest. The problem is that these groups lack a conscious identity of their structural interest and so cannot act in their favour. As such, they require representation. As Virginia Sapiro put it in her 1981 research frontier essay, 'When are Interests Interesting?'

To say that women are in a different social position from that of men and therefore have interests to be represented is not the same as saying that women are *conscious* of these differences, that they define themselves as



having *special interests requiring representation* (Sapiro, 1981, p. 704, emphasis added).

According to Sapiro, women have interests tied to their social position but are not conscious of these interests. As such, they form a class-in-itself. For women to become conscious and ‘develop a sense of their own interests’, and thus form a class-for-itself, Sapiro argues that they ‘requir[e] representation’ (Sapiro, 1981, p. 704). Accordingly, the purpose of representation is to bring into consciousness unrecognized structural interests, and in so doing transform a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself.

Returning to Young’s account, we can find this Marxian architecture similarly undergirds her argument. The purpose of representation, she claims, is to articulate ‘diverse social positions ... [in order] to reveal and confront’ the interests tied to these positions (Young, 2002, p. 119). Representation, in other words, aims to ‘reveal’ structural interests previously unknown or undiscovered. That representation also constitutes the subject for Young suggests that this process of revealing group interest to the represented is the discursive event that begins to constitute the constituency. That is, representation articulates interests tied to a structural position but unknown to its subjects (class-in-itself), and in so doing makes these subjects conscious of their interests (class-for-itself). Accordingly, when Young explains that a represented ‘constituency exists at best potentially’ (Young, 2002, p. 130), this potentiality indicates a subject not yet present but already identifiable by its structural interests, making the constituency a class-in-itself that will become actualized as a class-for-itself via representation.

In addition to Young, Nancy Schwartz likewise follows this Marxian chain of reasoning. Schwartz maintains that political representation creates groupings that previously did not exist: the ‘work’ of political representation is to ‘creat[e] constituencies out of people who never before considered themselves together’ (Schwartz, 1988, p. 130). She also argues that these constituencies have ‘a material base, of concrete people in a specific place with definite interests’ (Schwartz, 1988, p. 143). The conjunction of these two claims – that constituencies simultaneously have a material reality defined by their interests and that representation constitutes these constituencies – falls squarely within the model of a class-in-itself becoming a class-for-itself. Consequently, Schwartz claims that representation brings into actuality that which only exists in potentiality, making groups conscious of what they already are:

How do you frame and form a people, making them what they are? ... The institution of political representation provides a way of doing this.... It is a process in which a people makes a choice about how it will be recognized politically, and hence becomes self-conscious about who they are collectively (Schwartz, 1988, pp. 128–129).



Representation for Schwartz captures the process of transforming a class-in-itself, defined by material interests but not conscious of them, into a class-for-itself. Political representation, she writes, means ‘acting for an objective entity – a constituency of citizens – which is constantly in the process of becoming itself’ (Schwartz, 1988, p. 143).

Underlying these accounts of representation is a mediated temporality of interest: interests are not immediately present to the representative but become present through deliberative exchange. Consider the process of responsiveness. The representative claims to act in the interests of the represented, who then respond to these actions. In turn, the representative responds to these responses and adjusts her action accordingly. Either she continues contrary to constituent desire and justifies her action in the name of public interest, or she recognizes that she acted incorrectly and changes her action. Underlying this process of mutual response is a framework of interests becoming present. That representation *reveals* these interests through mutual adjustments by the representative and represented thus logically presupposes that interests structurally pre-exist the representative relationship.

The problem with this logic of representation appears when we consider it through the class-in-and-for-itself distinction. Consider the following facets of representation-as-mediation:

1. Representation is constitutive. It transforms a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself.
2. Representation is revelatory. Interests *become* present via the representational process.
3. (1) and (2) presuppose an idea of interest as prior to the representative relationship.

Representation-as-mediation begins with opaque interests whose clarity emerges over time through mediated exchange. Accordingly, interests ontologically exist, but the represented do not yet know what they are. A representative relationship must first be instituted in order to begin the process of revealing the represented’s interests. Those who lack knowledge of their structural interests (the class-in-itself) cannot initiate this relationship, and so they require representation. Insofar as interests are structurally prior to the representative relationship and define a class-in-itself, theorists have thus smuggled an ontological understanding of the subject back into the theory of representation – if not as an actuality, then as a potentiality awaiting realization. These constructivist accounts of representation thus respond to the problem of the representative’s constitutive imposition by presuming that the represented subject will come to exist as a result of the representative relationship. In other words, the problem of imposition seemingly disappears as a problem



because one cannot intelligibly speak of imposing that which was always and already bound to emerge.

By mobilizing a discourse of structural interests, then, representation-as-mediation ultimately undermines its participatory aspirations. In order to participate in the mediated process of representation, the represented must understand themselves as the group for whom the representative acts. They must, in other words, achieve some form of saliency. To jumpstart this process of constituting the constituency the representative must claim epistemological access – however opaque – to a set of interests to which others currently lack access. This initial act relies on the belief that the representative has knowledge of the structural interests that constitute the class-in-itself. Given the ontological claim that the subject exists in potentiality, the representative aims to bring this subject into actuality and the structural discourse of interest surreptitiously outlines the course of its materialization. Consequently, a teleological vision of representation, ostensibly rejected by the critique of the subject, still holds. While representatives may encourage the participation of the represented, this participation cannot extend to a re-definition of the class-in-itself. Indeed, such re-definition risks undermining the legitimacy upon which representatives base their claims of representativeness in the first place. Representation-as-mediation thus undercuts the possibility of conflictual accounts that may depart from the representative's own claims concerning the structural interests upon which the representative relationship is formed.

Interest in radical representation

Inspired by post-structural theories of deconstruction, several scholars often grouped under the nominal category of radical democrats have tackled the concept of representation to overcome the problems of structuralism that trouble the above accounts. In this section, I explore Gayatri Spivak's deconstructive reading of the concept of interest in her famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?',⁵ and argue that Spivak provides an exemplary account of interest that grounds representational thinking as seen in the work of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Nadia Urbinati.⁶ Following the literary conventions of deconstruction, I argue that Spivak presents a vision of *interest* as under erasure, indicating that any attempt to know the interest of the represented is always already a failed endeavour. Far from a reason to lament, radical democrats will contend that this failure enables citizens to contest their representation and thus offer counter-claims on the public interest.

The class-in-itself is marked by a disjunction between an objective understanding of interest (abolishing capitalism is in the peasants' interest) and a subjective one (the peasants do not *yet* have a *conscious* interest in abolishing capitalism). As we have seen so far, many constructivist theories of representation aim to align a constituency's objective interests with their subjective desires. Turning back then



to the critique of the subject by way of a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, we find that one response to the theory of representation is to deny the split between these two understandings of interest. The ‘thrust of Marxism’, Deleuze explains, ‘was to define the problem [of power] in terms of interests.... But of course, *we never desire against our interests*, because interest always follows and finds itself where desire has placed it’ (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977, p. 215, emphasis added). Affirming Deleuze’s denial of the split between subjective interest (desire) and objective interest, Foucault goes on to reject the position of the intellectual-as-representative. ‘The masses’, he says, ‘no longer need him to gain knowledge: they *know* perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves’ (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977, p. 207).

In response to this exchange, Spivak critiques Foucault and Deleuze’s rejection of the concept of interest and therefore of representation. By collapsing desire and interest, she argues, Foucault and Deleuze ‘tacitly reintroduce the undivided subject into the discourse of power’ (Spivak, 1999, p. 254). Without a notion of interest to push back against claims of desire, Foucault and Deleuze succumb to a view of desire as ‘undeceived desire’ (Spivak, 1999, p. 254). That is, they simply invert the idea that the masses need representation because they desire against their interests (desire is deceived). Rather, Foucault and Deleuze believe that the masses do not require representation because ‘we never desire against our interests’. By collapsing desire and interest, Spivak argues that Foucault and Deleuze reintroduce an ontological account of the subject as ‘a pure form of consciousness’, where desire is unmediated by power and always expresses the correct interest (Spivak, 1999, p. 274).

In contrast, Spivak wishes to retain the concept of interest undergirding the theory of representation. Turning to the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, she argues that ‘Marx is not working to create an undivided subject where desire and interests coincide’ (Spivak, 1999, p. 258). Rather, Spivak contends that the split between the subjective and the objective is what enables critics to ‘expose’ those representatives who we may desire but who do not act in our objective interests (Spivak, 1999, p. 260). While Spivak’s aim in this text is to defend the possibility of ideology critique, she also wants to salvage political representation. If a structuralist account of interest undermined representation-as-mediation, then what idea of interest does Spivak mobilize in representation’s defense?

While Spivak’s essay does not explicitly present an alternative account of interest, we can nonetheless derive one from her argument. Rooted in deconstruction, Spivak maintains that the ‘subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous’ (Spivak, 1999, p. 270). As such, any representative action that bases itself on subaltern interest will inevitably fail to transparently interpret this interest. ‘All speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception’ (Spivak, 1999, p. 309). As Ewa Ziarek



shows, for deconstructionists this ‘moment of failure is interpreted as an interruption of the totality of knowledge’ (Ziarek, 1995, p. 40). Epistemological failure means that every representative speech will leave a trace of alterity, something unspoken and unaccounted. Consequently, every representative action contains an aporetic opening that enables a different response.

This deconstructionist view follows the model of representation-as-mediation: the representative act is an interpretation that seeks to understand the interests of the represented, but as interpretation, it cannot claim any epistemological access to these interests and thus is bound to falter, necessitating the responsiveness of the represented. Spivak’s commitment to deconstruction, however, entails a rejection of representation-as-mediation’s structural vision of interest. For Spivak, the concept of interest is marked neither by a temporality of presence (whether fully present or becoming-present) nor of absence. Following the deconstructionist convention of writing under erasure (Spivak, 1974), *interest* is simultaneously present and absent. Akin to Jacques Derrida’s idea of the specter, *interest* is present in its absence, as it never fully presents itself and yet never disappears (Derrida, 2006; Thomassen, 2007). Neither present nor absent, *interest* haunts representation and remains open to a future of different interpretations.

Ghosts aside, does the concept of *interest* meaningfully change the theory of political representation? Of the theorists explored, Nadia Urbinati’s work best exemplifies a theory of representation as acting in the public *interest*.⁷ On the one hand, Urbinati affirms an objective account of interest as separate from any particular group’s subjective interests:

The interests of the people are objective in the sense that they exist even if the subjects are not actually aware of them or do not desire them expressly; they are unattached because they are relatively separate from the ... desires of particular individuals (Urbinati, 2006, p. 123).

On the other hand, Urbinati sidesteps the understanding of interest as ontologically given for the class-in-itself. She describes interests as ‘fictional’ in the sense that they are fabricated or constructed but also in the sense that they are not transparently given or true (Urbinati, 2006, p. 125). That interests have a fictional status does not deny their reality, but rather ontological presence prior to representative action. As such, she argues, interests are ‘not existential or ontological’ but we must act ‘*as if*’ they were so (Urbinati, 2006, p. 125). Like Spivak’s account of *interest* then, Urbinati’s claim of acting ‘*as if*’ denies the ontological existence of interests while nonetheless maintaining their possibility.

Alongside Urbinati’s reconceptualization of interest, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s concept of hegemony similarly captures this logic of *interest*. Rejecting a structural understanding of interest, they state that ‘political meaning ... is not given from the beginning: it crucially depends upon its hegemonic articulation’



(Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 77). Hegemony, they argue, works on ‘an absent totality’ – *interest* – and consists in ‘overcoming this original absence’ in order ‘for struggles to be given a meaning and for historical forces to be endowed with full positivity’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 1). The original absence, however, is never overcome into full presence. ‘No discursive formation’, they argue, ‘is a sutured totality’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 93). Given its necessary contingency, every representative-*qua*-hegemonic claim defers closure on the question of *interest*, ensuring that contestation always remains possible.

Grounded in the concept of *interest*, a deconstructive account of representation renders representation-as-mediation philosophically consistent. Whereas representation-as-mediation recuperates the subject via a structural account of interest, radical representation aims not to reveal prior structural interests but rather produce the very interests for which representatives claim to act. ‘Citizens have to see and understand that they have something in common that unifies them. They reflect upon, and therefore *create*, their common interests’ (Urbinati, 2005, p. 134, emphasis added); ‘hegemony supposes the *construction* of the very identity of social agents, and not just a rationalist coincidence of “interests” among preconstituted agents’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 48, emphasis added). Representation thus describes the production of constituent *interest* even as such interest never fully comes into being: ‘the general interest does not have a definite location precisely because it cannot be defined once and for all’ (Urbinati, 2000, p. 774); ‘Unfixity has become the condition of every social identity.... The moment of the “final” suture never arrives’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 76). Refusing closure on the question of *interest* then, radical representation purports to ensure the possibility of future action. As Lasse Thomassen puts it, representation’s ‘fictitious’ ground ultimately ‘provides a route of contestation’ (Thomassen, 2007, p. 116).

Cruel citizenship

Radical representation’s normative appeal derives from the eternal question mark that follows every action undertaken for the public *interest*. This epistemological question, in turn, depends on representation’s ability to acknowledge the contingency of every representative action – that *interest* could *always* be figured otherwise. A ‘deconstructive practice’ of representation is ‘attentive to [its] limits’, Ziarek explains, ‘because they disclose strategic places where exteriority and alterity could surface’ (Ziarek, 1995, p. 82). Recognition of representation’s contingency is therefore the linchpin behind the faith that representation encourages participation. If every representative action admits the contingency of its claims, then representation necessarily fosters a relationship of responsiveness, where the represented are encouraged to affirm or deny their representation.



But do political representatives acknowledge the contingency of their representative claims? Intuitively, it seems odd for a party to claim to represent others while simultaneously undermining its representational basis. Consider the politician declaring that ‘healthcare is in the public’s interest’ only to add, ‘I could be wrong; perhaps healthcare is not in our interest, who *really* knows?’ Indeed, evidence from various democratic regimes suggests that representatives not only avoid but often stifle attempts to create forums for interpretative conflict over their representative claims (Stokes, 1999; Maravall, 1999; Eliasoph, 1998). Far from a conflict between theory and practice, even theorists of representation concede that representatives conceal the contestability of their interpretations. For instance, Saward argues that representatives ‘impose, or encourage a belief in, a particular set of “interests” as an unavoidable precondition for speaking for those interests’ (Saward, 2010, p. 44). Consequently, they aspire ‘to avoid damaging levels of disputatious “reading back”, or contestation of their claims’ (Saward 2010, p. 53). For radical democrats too, representative ‘claims-making involves closure’, even if it is ‘only provisional because it can always be challenged’ (Tambakaki, 2015, p. 29; Thomassen, 2007, p. 121). In order to successfully speak for others, therefore, representatives tend to foreclose interpretative conflict on the public interest in favour of their particular interpretation.

Despite the representative’s attempted closure of disputatious counter-claims, the represented will ultimately make their voices heard because representation is always already a failed project. Given the heterogeneity of the represented subject, there is always an alterity that exceeds representation’s reach. As such, the ‘moment of failure’, Laclau states, ‘cannot elude the field of representation’ (Laclau et al., 1997, p. 11). Given that this remainder exposes the necessary contingency of all representative claims, the excluded will mobilize around such contingency in order to challenge their attempted representation. Consequently, even as representatives seek to undermine the contestability of their claims, they nonetheless create the conditions for constituent contestation. In other words, representation will inevitably fail because representatives foster the very interpretative conflict they seek to avoid. How then do we square the paradoxical claim that representation is democratically efficacious precisely when it fails?

Built into this theory of radical representation is an ontological guarantee for the presence of what representation is meant to foreclose: the contingency that motivates political action. Given that representatives speak about a world that is ontologically contingent, the contingency (and thus contestability) of their claims will necessarily surface despite representation’s orientation towards interpretative closure. Contingency is simultaneously disavowed and yet ensured, and so it appears that these constructivist theorists of representation want to have their cake of contingency and eat it too. Even in situations where contestation does emerge, it is unclear why this responsiveness should serve as a democratic testament to representation. We do not praise tyrants for the existence of rebels, so why do we



laud representatives for the existence of constituent contestation? Action appears to erupt on the scene not due to or because of representation but in spite of and against it. Unlike the modernist artists of deconstructionism's archive, political representatives do not have a 'fidelity to failure' (Ziarek, 1995, p. 14). Suggesting that they do not only obfuscates the representative's disposition to stymie debate on public interest but also undermines the participatory contestation that radical representation aims to foster.

I contend that this attachment to the promise of representative failure produces not so much a vibrant politics of contestation but a cruel model of citizenship. As Lauren Berlant explains, a relation of 'cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Ordinarily, an optimistic attachment to representation would suggest the belief that representative activities will promote constituent interest. This optimistic attachment could be considered cruel, given that representative claims will fail to align with and capture constituent interest.⁸ However, in the accounts under discussion, this failure of representative claims-making is the very premise of radical representation's normative success, since failure is meant to mobilize the represented into action. As such, despite rejecting the optimistic belief that representative action will align with constituent interest, radical representation maintains faith in an activist agent that will spring into action from representative failure. Hitched to the optimism of future contestation, radical representation figures citizenship as a cruel attachment to a political relationship that will necessarily fail. Representation means we will be betrayed, and for that we should be thankful.

Like representation-as-mediation then, radical representation returns to the subject it claims to have bypassed. Cruel citizenship relies on a subject that is ontologically political: always vigilant for representative failure and always ready to resist. In failing to provide an ontological guarantee for resistance, however, radical representation cannot account for alternative responses to representative betrayal. In 2017, the American Psychological Association reported that fifty-seven percent of Americans found the political climate a significant source of stress, leading to feelings of depression (American Psychological Association, 2017). Such emotional states of despair, apathy, and ultimately political cynicism can drive voters away from polling booths (Opdycke et al., 2013). As more than four million people who voted for Obama in 2012 did not vote in 2016 (McElwee et al., 2018), we must contend with the possibility that many people 'are increasingly turned off by politics' (Stolberg, 2013). While participation can be a response to representative failure, citizens are becoming increasingly cynical, exhausted and politically depressed – staying away from even the most basic sites of political activity suggested by radical democrats.



Inter-est

In response to constructivist critiques of the subject, many theorists sought to salvage representation by turning away from ontological accounts of the subject and to epistemological considerations of interest. Despite differences in their accounts, theorists of both representation-as-mediation and radical representation view the participation of the represented as central to the process of constructing interest. Whether invited into participation by the mediated process of revealing a prior structural interest or provoked into contestation by the failed attempt at fabricating constituent interest, these active and engaged visions of democratic representation ultimately undermine their participatory intentions by remaining tethered to ontological conceptions of the subject. On the one hand, by recuperating the subject as a potentiality, a class-in-itself awaiting transformation into a class-for-itself, representation-as-mediation narrows the field of participation and excludes forms of constituent action that fundamentally contest the subject of representation. On the other hand, by staking its claims on an activist subject ready to rise to action in response to representation's failure, radical representation renders unintelligible widespread forms of political inactivity and promotes what I call cruel citizenship: an affective attachment to a political relationship that promises betrayal but cannot guarantee the salutary action that this betrayal is meant to catalyze.

To foster the conditions of democratic participation requires more than just acknowledging the constructed nature of the represented subjected or the contingency that accompanies every representative claim but in fact reconsidering the conceptual problems that motivate the need for a political theory of representation in the first place. Both models of representation figure interest as an object that is initially absent for the represented and must be constructed (i.e. actualized or fabricated) by the representative. In so doing, they claim, the representative initiates the representative process and thus engenders the conditions for constituent participation. In other words, representation emerges as a solution to the problem of mobilizing group action in a situation of presumed ignorance about group interest. What would it mean, then, to rethink representation from a starting point that does not presume the ignorance of the many for which the representative must compensate and act?

In this final section, I develop an alternative political grammar to speak about interest in order to reconceptualize the relationship between democratic action and representation. I suggest that interest need not be considered an object to which the represented lack access. Rather, turning to Arendt's reflections on the concept of interest, I argue that interest is not so much an object that one can or cannot access but a worldly space existing in-between citizens, where individuals must speak to and not for others.



Action and speech go on between men ... even if their context is exclusively 'objective', concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. These interests constitute, in the word's most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together (Arendt, 1958, p. 182).

Combining the Latin helping-verb *esse*, 'to be', with the preposition *inter*, meaning 'between or among', Arendt's comments on etymology highlight 'interest' as a verb with the spatial sense of 'to be between' or 'to be among'. Like the table around which friends gather, interest marks that which is between people. '[S]omeone talks *to* somebody *about* something that is of interest to both because it *inter-est*, it is between them' (Arendt, 1965, p. 86). Etymologically reformulated, *inter-est* does not denote the private interest writ large but describes a shared and common site that brings individuals into relation. As Margaret Canovan puts it, 'It is the space between them that unites them, rather than some quality inside each of them' (Canovan, 1985, p. 634). Accordingly, Arendt's reformulation of *inter-est* entails a subtle frame shift from ontological questions concerning the subject and its interests to political questions regarding that which relates and binds subjects together.

Far from opposing action, the worldly in-between is the focus of political activity. 'Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality' (Arendt, 1958, p. 182). As the shared object that concerns most action, the in-between involves specifically public or political relations formed and embodied in, I argue, practices of representative thinking. To better understand how this notion of interest reconfigures political representation then, I turn to Arendt's arguments for council democracy as one model that institutionalizes this alternative vision of representation.

In recent years, scholars have returned to Arendt's writings on the council system to argue that it is 'the only form of government that could make possible the experience of "the political" for ordinary citizens' (Lederman, 2019, p. 41). As an open forum for self-selected citizens to engage in public debate and opinion formation, Arendt portrayed council democracy as a participatory alternative to representative democracy's tendency to restrict political activity to the few. While Arendt's critiques of representative democracy need not be rehashed here (cf. Kateb, 1983), recent commentators suggest that Arendt does not reject representation *tout court*. Rather, as Lisa Disch argues, Arendt's council system presents 'a unique model of self-authorization' (Disch, 2011, p. 353). Yet, in the absence of a sustained engagement with contemporary theories of representation, Disch and others continue to portray citizens in Arendt's council system as putting forward a 'claim to speak for' others (Disch, 2011, p. 364). In so doing, we overlook just how



unique Arendt's model of council democracy is in refusing to posit exactly this sort of representational relationship.

In Arendt's account of council democracy, the principle of representation has been understood to appear most overtly in her discussion of federation (Disch, 2011, p. 252; Lederman, 2019, p. 187). According to Arendt, the council system is made up of lower and higher councils, and whereas any citizen can join a local council, only elected deputies can sit in the higher councils. Though it may seem as if deputies enter the higher councils based on a claim to represent the lower ones, Arendt argues that elected deputies 'were not subject to any pressure from either above or from below. Their title rested on nothing but the confidence of their equals.... Once elected and sent in the next higher council, the deputy found himself again among his peers, for the deputies on any given level in this system were those who had received a special trust' (Arendt, 1965, p. 278). Since political 'authority would have been generated neither at the top nor at the bottom, but on each of the pyramid's layers' (Arendt, 1965, p. 278), the 'highness' of a council refers *not* to any claim of greater representation or authority, but rather, as John Sitton argues, 'to the fact of including a larger territorial area as the primary, but not exclusive, focus of deliberation' (Sitton, 1987, p. 88). Accordingly, deputies are elected not as representatives who can speak for the lower councils but as citizens who have gained the trust of their peers because they 'have demonstrated that they care for more than their private happiness and are concerned about the state of the world' (Arendt, 1965, p. 279). If higher councils encompass a larger territory and hence more far-reaching issues, then elected deputies are those individuals who have theoretically demonstrated a larger capacity to care for a greater portion of their common world.

While Arendt's model suggests that elected deputies do not represent the lower councils, there is indeed a type of representation taking place, namely, what she calls representative thinking. 'Political thought is representative', Arendt explains, 'I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them' (Arendt, 1968, p. 241). Having formed an opinion by exchanging different perspectives with others in the lower councils, elected deputies in the higher councils will express opinions that contain within them the standpoints of those absent, making present (again) their perspectives. Though engaged in representative thinking, deputies do not represent these absent others in the sense of speaking for them. 'Opinions', Arendt writes, 'never belong to groups but exclusively to individuals' (Arendt, 1965, p. 227). Opinions expressed in the higher councils carry the traces of those perspectives expressed in the lower ones, but however enlarged a deputy's standpoint may be, it fundamentally remains her own and not that of any constituency.

Arendt's account of council democracy clarifies how a notion of *inter-est* fundamentally transforms political representation. Rather than speaking about the interest of the many, practices of representative thinking entail speaking about the



inter-est that binds individuals together, and so, rather than speak *for* the many, one must speak *to* many others. Admittedly, the theories of representation examined in the previous sections do understand representation as a social site where subjectivity emerges in relation to others, and as such, speaking to the many does play a significant role in these accounts. Representatives speak to others when they speak for the constituencies about which they make representative claims. However, as I stressed above, the key moment of analysis for current defenses of representation is the logically primary representative action that initiates the representative relationship. In the accounts analyzed, theorists of representation posit interest as an absent property that the representative must first constitute in order to make possible the participation of the represented. A representative puts forward a claim to speak for a certain constituency, and it is only *after* she has constructed an interest *for* the represented that a participatory relationship *with* the represented can materialize in their responsiveness to the representative claim. In other words, representatives speak for others before speaking to them. As such, the initial representative act is outside any relation with others. Current models of representation thus offer a vision of representative action as logically prior to the entry of plural speech about the common world, where constituent participation emerges not from the in-between but from the future anterior – a future that is constantly postponed in the present.

While contemporary proponents of representation have attempted to defend a participatory account of political representation by shifting the terms of the debate to epistemological questions of interest, Arendt's analysis of inter-est reveals that such theories will remain entangled in ontological problems unless interest is reconceptualized as a political question of where representation takes place. As Arendt's council system illustrates, the exchange of perspectives is not about competing claims regarding the truth of a constituency's interest but rather about a common world that holds them together. Inter-est is not an object to which the represented initially lack access but an in-between space that draws citizens into relation, a concrete site upon which they act and through which such action becomes possible. Consequently, inter-est no longer separates individuals into representatives who initially act and the represented who subsequently respond. In speaking about the public inter-est, every citizen is both a representative and a part of the represented: citizens not only represent others by practicing representative thinking, but they are also represented by being included in the representative thinking of others. As such, the practice of representation does not describe a vertical relationship of one speaking for many about an absent interest they do not know but rather a horizontal relationship of many speaking to each other about the inter-est that relates them together.

Effecting a subtle but important shift away from a subject-centered frame, Arendt's reformulation of interest pushes current discussions of representation in a more participatory direction, away from recurring ontological concerns of the subject



and its interests and more efficaciously to political questions of the public inter-est shared by all. Practices of representative thinking do not rely on or center a subject of representation, whether actual or potential, and thus avoid the democratic problem of the representative's constitutive imposition. Instead, representative thinking concerns the worldly in-between, where speaking to and engaging with others is a prior condition for and not the effect of representation. By inverting the relationship between participation and representation, the grammar of inter-est makes possible the articulation of non-participation as a problem for representative politics – a problem that more representation cannot solve. Rather, as the worldly in-between, *inter-est* suggests that the loss of shared public spaces where citizens can gather and speak about their common interests is a key reason for representation's participatory troubles. Concerned with revitalizing popular democratic engagement, therefore, theorists of representation should attend more carefully to the material conditions of assembly, since it is in and through the common spaces that draw citizens together that practices of representation become possible at all.

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Notes

- 1 This debate is commonly taken up in the form of trustee versus delegate or independence versus mandate models of representation. Pitkin (1967, pp. 144–168) remains one of the best sources on these distinctions.
- 2 For a historical overview, see Oberprantacher and Siclodi (2016).
- 3 In the following argument, I use the language of class in the more expansive sense of group.
- 4 To clarify, I am not interested in whether the in-itself/for-itself distinction is an accurate reading of Marx, but rather how this Marxian heuristic functions vis-à-vis representation. On the distinction, see Andrew (1983).
- 5 I use the extended version of this essay as found in Spivak (1999).
- 6 Though Nadia Urbinati may seem like an unlikely member in this group, I argue that Urbinati's work should be viewed within the radical democratic tradition as articulated by Mouffe and Laclau. For a similar suggestion, see Lisa Disch (2018).
- 7 Consider that Spivak writes that her vision of representation 'works best within a parliamentary democracy, where representation is not only not banished but elaborately staged' (Spivak, 1999, p. 257, n. 94).
- 8 Cruel optimism is not a form of moralism or pathology but a social relation involving a self-destructive attachment to a certain promise of flourishing (e.g. a representative promoting constituent interest). Optimism is cruel when investment in this promise not only becomes harmful but is actively sustained. For instance, a constituency that consistently votes for a representative who acts against their interests and causes them harm but also believes that after the next election things may be different could be considered to exist in a relation of cruel optimism to their representative.

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