Good Symbolic Representation: The Relevance of Inclusion

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Defining good representation requires spelling out the normative criteria necessary to count as representative. According to Dovi (2007, 5), good representation must advance the legitimacy of democratic institutions "to resolve conflicts within a pluralist society fairly and peacefully." This contribution investigates good *symbolic* representation, a dimension which has often been neglected in representation studies. We argue that the understanding of good representation requires taking symbolic representation into consideration due to its relation to the substantive and descriptive dimensions, and we propose inclusion as our normative criteria of good symbolic representation.

Symbolic representation is traditionally defined as the representation of a principal, a nation for example, through a symbol, such as a flag, that evokes particular meanings and emotions about the nation (Pitkin 1967). Starting from this definition, we take a constructivist approach that reveals how the construction of public symbols makes some people feel included and represented in a political community while others feel excluded (Young 2000). In line with other scholars working on political symbols (Puwar 2004; Rai 2011), we argue that symbolic representation influences how particular social groups are recognized as members of a political community. Consequently, symbolic representation underlines the subtle power dynamics that may affect the other dimensions, namely descriptive and substantive representation. Symbolic representation sets the context of symbols and norms that surrounds a representative's position and action, influencing her or his legitimacy. Such context articulates power relations that may constrain the representative through the meanings, norms, and emotions that symbols shape and evoke, without these constraints being directly palpable. Symbolic representation should thus be considered when reflecting upon good political representation. We propose that good symbolic representation advances the value of inclusion of non-hegemonic social groups in the symbolic representation of the nation so as to counterbalance the power of the privileged (Dovi 2007).

CONSTRUCTING THE SYMBOL

Symbolic representation is a process in which an object "standing for" something else conveys meanings. For instance, a flag with white stars on a blue background and the red and white stripes stands for the United States. Symbolic agents, such as a nation's currency or the shape of public buildings, convey a meaning that people associate with the principal for which those agents stand (Pitkin 1967). The meaning of symbols used in political representation is constructed throughout the years in different social practices so that it becomes attached to particular objects or subjects. As Kertzer (1988, 7) states, "a flag is not simply a decorated cloth, but the embodiment of a nation; indeed, the nation is defined as much by the flag as the flag is defined by the nation."

Symbols do not only stand for, but also evoke that principal. By standing for the latter, the symbol not only represents it, it also *presents* the principal in a particular way (Lombardo and Meier 2014). In line with the constructivist turn in political representation studies, this means that representation constructs the principal in a particular way (Disch 2015; 2012; Saward 2006). In symbolic representation the issue is not so much one of making present someone or something that is not present, as Pitkin (1967) defines representation. It rather is an issue of presenting someone or something in a particular way that elicits specific ideas about the principal and suggests emotional reactions about the represented. As Saward (2006) argues, an agent represents the idea of a principal, not the principal itself. A flag, then, is a symbol that presents specific *ideas* regarding the nation. This selective presenting of the principal fosters processes of inclusion and exclusion by expanding or narrowing notions of who belongs in a political community.

PRODUCING AND CHALLENGING SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND PRIVILEGES

Symbols in politics help to construct identity (Kertzer 1988). Banknotes, for instance, play a role in constructing a state-sponsored vision of social identity. As Hawkins (2010) demonstrates for Tunisia, banknotes were designed to promote a discourse about national identity that frames Tunisia as an open cosmopolitan nation, yet rooted in its history. As can be seen, symbols are often carefully selected and constructed to convey specific meanings.

The choice of public symbols can purposely reproduce or counteract existing power relations. Typically, symbolic representation generally includes some—but not all—social groups of a given territory, and does so in particular ways. Some social markers tend not to be used as symbols or only in specific ways, reproducing existing privileged and marginalized groups. They mark privileged groups as embodying the

public life of a community, while marginalized groups tend to be absent from public displays and celebrations of power. The selective character of symbolic agents and their role in replicating or undoing privileged and marginalized positions is well illustrated through the controversy around Quinn's marble statue of the disabled artist Allison Lapper, temporarily placed on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, London (Parkinson 2009). The inclusion of her naked, pregnant, and disabled body as part of a series of statesmen on the other plinths led to controversy about the way the nation was to be represented. As the proposer of a war hero as candidate for the plinth expressed: "That a naked woman should be filling the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square is ridiculous. Trafalgar Square should be a place where men who have served their country should be honored" (Lyall 2005). The statue violated the unspoken norm that only warriors, politicians, poets, or other heroes, commonly understood to be white able-bodied men, represent the nation.

The failure to exhibit privileged attributes in a particular social context, because they are women, disabled, or people of color, creates a more hostile environment for the exercise of representative activities. The absence of symbolic power can marginalize and stereotype them (Puwar 2004; Rai 2011). For example, the prevalence of women in public statues as symbolizing the nation's care and of men symbolizing its defense affects the position and authority of women representatives. Female representatives risk being associated with meanings related to the private sphere rather than to the public interests of the nation and tend to be given portfolios of family issues more than defence (Lombardo and Meier 2014).

For some feminist scholars, women entering politics are a form of symbolic representation, whereby these women stand for role models of a different conceptualization of the agent representing the principal (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2017). Similarly, the controversy over the statue *Alison Lapper*

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Symbolic representation performs an important function in constructing social identities through the *selectivity* of specific symbols that craft a particular *presentation* of the principal. In constructing social identities, symbolic representation sets boundaries by defining *who* is included—and how. If the nation is composed of citizens from different ethnic origins, classes, ages, sexes, sexualities, or abilities, and its symbols associate it with only some of these attributes, the symbolic representation of the nation contributes to shaping and replicating privileged and marginalized positions, making some people feel more included than others. The controversy around Quinn's marble statue shows how Allison Lapper was not deemed (by some) to represent the nation. The selective use of gender, race, able-bodiedness, and sexuality in the construction of agents of symbolic representation reinforces the social perception of some subjects as deviant, such as in the binary straight versus gay or white versus black (Fraser 2000, 8). The use of symbolic agents suggests what roles and positions different groups (should) occupy and who is entitled to be a publicly celebrated group.

Similarly, Puwar (2004) argued that the entry of women and other historically excluded or marginalized groups into politics went against the prevailing norm of symbolic representation, namely that (some groups of) men properly represent the people. As Pateman writes, "the political lion skin has a large mane and belonged to a male lion, it is a costume for men. When women finally win the right to don the lion skin it is exceedingly ill-fitting and therefore unbecoming" (Pateman 1995: 6; quoted in Puwar 2004: 77). This traditional symbolic context affects the acting of elected representatives.

pregnant shows that symbolic representation is a particularly relevant field for replicating or challenging privileges. It exposes struggles for representation and "the decolonization of public spaces" (Millett 2008). What bodies should appear in public spaces? The statue confronts people with the taboo of female and/or disabled bodies in public space, making stereotypes "visible and open to public debate" (Millett 2008). It is, ultimately, an agent that disrupts preexisting stabilized ideas about who should be included to represent the nation.

Individual women politicians may differ from statues or other symbols in their articulations of symbolic representation; for instance they may actively challenge the existing social order in the way they interact with norms and values on their role in politics. However, symbolic representation can shape the very context of norms and values that support a particular social order and legitimate (the privileges of) some groups over others, for example the dominant public roles of some groups of men versus the subordinate ones of women and other groups of men.

It is in this respect that symbolic representation is of relevance for good representation. It reflects the value system of a society and thereby sets the context for political representation (Lombardo and Meier 2014). Considering symbolic representation helps us understand the subtle power dynamics that may also affect descriptive and substantive representation.

GOOD SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

How can symbolic representation contribute to good representation? Dovi (2007, 5) argues that democratic institutions

foster legitimacy and fairness, and are therefore good in terms of representation, when they are able "to resolve conflicts within a pluralist society fairly and peacefully." Two of the virtues that constrain representatives in the promotion of such fair and legitimate democratic institutions are "the virtue of *fair-mindedness*, through which a representative contributes to the realization of the value of *civic equality*" and "the virtue of *good gate-keeping*, through which a representative contributes to the realization of the value of *inclusion*" (Dovi 2007, 7 emphasis in original). Symbolic representation is particularly apt for realizing the value of inclusion and for setting the context of civic equality.

A good representative, according to Dovi, is one who decides what policies to support or oppose in light of equality, so to "attend to unjust and oppressive structural inequalities" (Dovi 2007, 101). Practicing the value of inclusion means that "Good democratic representatives will open doors as much as possible, thereby maximizing the political arena's potential to be inclusive" (2007, 147–8). Achieving inclusion requires the development of "mutual relationships" between representatives and "their political opponents, the dispossessed, and the marginalized" (2007, 25). It also requires posing limits to "the influence of those who exclude unjustly" (2007, 148). Good representation, then, is related to equality since it needs "to counterbalance the accumulation of power that, in producing systemic inequalities, undermines the legitimacy of democratic institutions" (2007, 24–5). Dovi refers to individual good representatives while this essay focuses on public symbols. Nevertheless, her reflections are relevant to our understanding of good symbolic representation.

counterbalance the power of the privileged. This leads us to argue that good symbolic representation involves *comprehensiveness* as a basic criterion. According to this criterion, the statue *Alison Lapper Pregnant* in Trafalgar Square is a good symbolic representation of the nation. It expands the concept of courage to include a wider experience. Unveiling the statue, the mayor of London said, "This square celebrates the courage of men in battle. Alison's life is a struggle to overcome much greater difficulties than many of the men we celebrate and commemorate here." The statue is more comprehensive of societal groups that are commonly marginalized such as disabled women and men. "The sculpture makes the ultimate statement about disability—that it can be as beautiful and valid a form of being as any other," said the artist Mark Quinn (Daily Mail 2005). In this respect, the statue not only comes close to a descriptive representation as a mirror of society, but it also offers proof of the symbol's recognition of, and hence, promotion of civic equality. As a second basic criterion, good symbolic representation involves the inclusion of non-hegemonic groups in ways that counterbalance their marginalization or exclusion, and it challenges the dominance of hegemonic groups. Public spheres need to be represented in many different ways so that they can express the diversity of meanings that exist in society. At the same time, the different groups that are exposed in public spaces need to be presented in a variety of ways so that they can convey a variety of meanings too, thus minimizing the potential of generating stereotypical representations of particular groups.

The question is to what extent good symbolic representation is possible when we consider that each symbol is a

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Symbolic representation, we argue, is especially apt for advancing the value of inclusion. For citizens to feel included, they must see themselves represented. While symbols can be interpreted in many different ways, they are usually selected and constructed with the intention of conveying particular meanings. They can stand for equality and inclusion as much as they can stand for the opposite. Naming public buildings and streets after women, minorities, and other discriminated groups is an example of making symbolic representation more inclusive. Portraying members of marginalized groups in non-stereotypical ways in public art is another example of making it more inclusive. Good symbolic representation requires the broadening of the repertoire of symbols that reflect the full variety of existing social demographics. This broadening changes who is recognized as embodying the nation and can help to smooth the difficulties for elected representatives that belong to marginalized groups, as their experience will resonate in people's perception of who can be a legitimate representative.

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selective presentation of the principal. A single representative symbol, for instance one flag, can hardly comprehend the diversity of (ideas of) the principal that exist in a given society. Comprehensiveness in symbolic representation can be achieved by including within the variety of possible symbols of a country (e.g., flags, statues, roads, currency) the presentation of many different ideas of the country (e.g, colonial power, ethnic origin, gender equality, disability, and so on). Whereas one specific symbolic agent may be narrow and exclusive in its presentation of the nation—even if this may be a conscious choice to counterbalance other symbolic agents representing dominant privileged groups—the comprehensive inclusion of the broadest variety of symbolic agents that exist in a given society would come closer to the goal of good symbolic representation. The criterion of comprehensiveness meets the recognition of diversity and plurality proposed by other scholars (Fraser 2000; Mansbridge 1999; Williams 2000; Young 2000) and is thus not new in this respect. However, important here is the fact that good symbolic representation contributes to good representation *tout court*, as it shapes a context open to recognition of diversity, inclusion of excluded

or marginalized social groups, and the challenging of existing privileges.

CONCLUSION

This contribution investigates the role symbolic representation can play in the striving for good political representation, as understood by Dovi (2007). It defends the relevance of studying symbolic representation because it helps us understand the power relations that pervade the other dimensions of representation. Symbolic representation constructs social identity. By doing so it shapes the roles and positions of social groups as well as the access they have to rights and benefits and to the claims that they can make within a particular social system. At issue is who is included as a member of a community and how. Good symbolic representation, then, is to be more inclusive, so as to counterbalance practices of hegemony, marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion. Selecting symbols that evoke inclusive and diverse meanings and values and by *comprehensively* broadening the social demographic markers existing in a given society can help achieve this.

While striving for the comprehensive inclusion of the diversity of symbols is what matters for good symbolic representation, it also raises dilemmas. If a normative criterion of a good representation is to counterbalance the power of the privileged, to what extent should symbolic representation present hegemony, marginalization and discrimination that have existed throughout history? These dilemmas show that symbolic representation plays an important role both in present and future discussions on how to conceptualize good political representation. ∎

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