The object effect

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In The Representative Claim (2010), representation was viewed as the unstable product of a complex process of claim-making and claim-reception. One thing, or person or group, may well stand for or act for another (a common way of defining representation), but the prior and most salient question was how it may come to do so – how suggestions, arguments and depictions in claims may prompt into being a relationship where one thing is alleged or taken to stand or act for another. Representative claims are made or constructed, and they are watched, felt and disputed. In this light, representation can be understood as a dynamic relation between four components – maker, subject, object and audience. The maker of representations claims that a subject stands or acts for an object to an audience. Audiences, of course, may dispute or attempt to recast the claim.

Subjects and objects of representation are, in this light, made and can be remade. Even an elected parliament representing the people or demos of a nation-state is dependent upon more or less incessant claim-making to underscore its representative status. Even a venerable and well-established parliament, without acting, speaking and symbolising members would in short time be little more than a relic, a symbol of its own impotence or absence. As recent events in Egypt and Tunisia attest, such representative status can be rapidly disputed, and shattered. As unstable products, subjects and objects of representation are best understood as ‘subject effects’ and ‘object effects’ (Marin 2001, 256). Subject and object are effects of the act of claim-making (Saward 2010). A claim that A represents the interests of B poses a particular characterisation of both A and B as salient – it paints a picture of both A and B that is a contestable claim-dependent effect. For all its apparent tangibility and real force in the world – factors not to be underestimated – a subject or an
object of representation remains an effect. Such an effect may be understood, variously, as an image, a characterisation, or interpretation.

These notes offer a partial and indicative miniaturist sketch, with a defence that the fine details of representations’ dynamics matter. I examine the object effect in particular – how is it attempted and achieved? What forms does it take? I take account of the phenomenological call to attend to the specific things and acts that appear to us, and how they do so: ‘back to the claims themselves!’ one might say. The hope is to advance an understanding of what has been called ‘representative claim analysis’ (de Wilde 2013). There are no doubt varied ways of being a miniaturist. The assumption I make here is that, if representation is made and disputed in real-world politics on larger and smaller scales, then it happens daily and in detail, below the standard-issue radar of political theory and in a realm more akin to that of the political anthropologist. Micro detail may reveal not just the apocryphal devil but significant and easily overlooked features of about subjects and objects of representation.

The form the brief, selective and experimental study takes is to draw out a series of specific representative claims taken from three broadsheet UK newspapers on Sunday, 10 March 2013. The three newspapers of 10 March 2013 represent the broad left (The Observer), the broad right (The Sunday Times), and an ill-defined centre (The Independent on Sunday). Further practical limitations are that I have:

- taken print media only on the relevant day, not included tabloid newspapers
- included only representative claims that appear as direct quotations in one or more of the three newspapers, and excluded claims that are produced by columnists or in editorials. As such, I have focused on what one might loosely call ‘found objects’ or found claims, and have aimed to include all such claims that could be found in these sources.

The total of 20 found claims are listed in the Appendix.

Considering the ‘systemic’
As the theme of this workshop suggests, the subjects and objects of representation occupy material and symbolic spaces that can be both statal and societal, public and private. They can and do become manifest in a wide array of spatial and temporal registers. Recent innovations in thinking about political representation have, by picking up a particular thread in Pitkin’s work (1967), extended their analytic and normative focus out from strictly dyadic relationships between represented and representative, to engage with systemic views.¹ Two factors underlie this move. First, in terms of defining representation, it is recognised that a range of actors, for example unelected as well as elected ones, may succeed in making effective representative claims (Saward 2010, 82-110). Second, in terms of normative democratic criteria, it is the overall systemic quality of representation (however that quality itself is assessed) which counts, however much dyadic instances of representation still matter, normatively. To clarify this distinction further, consider Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Dimensions of systemic representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REPRESENTATION’S DOMAIN</th>
<th>DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMATION</th>
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<td>Dyadic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Systemic-governmental</td>
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The systemic-governmental view holds that representation happens across the executive and legislative domains of a state, and more widely in governmental and quasi-governmental international bodies. The systemic-societal view holds that representation occurs across society, including in governmental bodies but also for example in interest groups, social movements, and businesses. In terms of democratic legitimation, one can look to specified qualities of representative dyads within (Box A) or within and beyond (Box B) the governmental system. Without entering into a full defence here, I hold that boxes C and D in Figure 3 are the relevant ones to consider political

¹ See Pitkin (1967) and more recently by Urbinati (2006), Mansbridge (2003), Disch (2011) and Saward (2011).
representation’s presence and qualities.² So-called ‘informal’ representation – often located outside the state, often nonelective or informally or partially elective though still based on claim-making and reception – is political representation and is potentially democratic representation.³

Representation is ‘done’ (or at least, ‘claimed’) by a wide array of local, national and international groups and individuals, elected or chosen or not-elected and rejected. Even democratic representation need not to be understood as confined to a set of statal institutions, but rather understood more broadly (and indeed more complexly) as a quality of practice which may be more or less present in a wider set of diffuse locations, including across transnational contexts. Representative democracy in formal national or other governance structures is part of but does not exhaust the ideals, let alone the spaces, of democratic representation.⁴ Normative questions of democratic legitimation of representative claims need to track this fact of domain.

In short, both subject and object effects – the key products, however immaterial or ephemeral, of the dynamics of representative claims and their reception – occur across society, in and outside the state. Indeed, the dynamics of representation shape and mould our very conceptions of what counts as ‘public’ or ‘private’, what is of the state or of a wider society or societies.

Into the fray

The relation maker-subject-object-audience, expressed as the general form of the representative claim, is a neat theoretical construct which expresses the necessary components of a representative claim. The abstraction of the construct fosters its application to a wide array of contexts; it is central to the

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² Writers who advocate a ‘systemic’ view of representation, notably Pitkin, Urbinati and Mansbridge, especially as far as normative judgements are concerned, tend to assume that systemic = systemic-governmental.

³ It might be objected that states/governments still decide issues exclusively – they authoritatively allocate values not in the sense that they monopolise the authority to do so, but rather that their version of authority is the one that matters (the decisive one). In response, however, one can note the proliferation of more or less effective decision points and practices beyond and across states: devolved decision-making (for example through privatisation of industries) gives powers to non-elective regulators as representatives of the public interest (see Keane 2011); formal ‘stakeholder’ participation, as at the World Summit on Sustainable Development; the representative roles of varied UN agencies; modes and practices of professional self-regulation in the public interest; the second set of rulers in a polyarchy, i.e. corporate leaders in the terms of Dahl (1985); think tanks and interest groups and lobbies who draft legislation and regulations; and assorted modes of network governance (as in the European Union – Schmitter 2011).

⁴ A fuller account of this point with a visual representation is available in Saward (2011).
versatility it displays as an analytical tool. Further, key specific dimensions of representative can be read off the construct in itself, for example that: they can be singular or multiple (different subjects and different objects may be invoked, or perceived, within a single claim); implicit or explicit, or obvious or non-obvious, to the maker and in particular to varied observers; internal or external (meaning that the maker and the subject may be the same or different person, group or thing); unidirectional or multidirectional (made by state actors about state-society relations, or the other way around, or some more complex multidirectional variant) (Saward 2010, 57-81). It is not, however, simply a matter of applying the analytical tool to actual political circumstances. It is rare to be able to map the tools key elements straightforwardly to such circumstances. When we move – even partially and tentatively - into the political fray, we stand to learn substantive things about the relations between maker, subject, object and audience: their identification, appearance, relations and importance. As elements of practical and reflexive learning, these lessons can then become part of a deepened understanding of the tool itself and the extent, nature and productivity of its potential applications.⁵

The exploration below offers some examples of this learning.

**The elusive object of representation**

The object of representation is the thing represented, the ‘signified’, an idea or image of for example people or places for which a subject is said to stand or speak. Perhaps the key point about this examination of examples is that it reveals the critical elusiveness of the object effect in representative claims. This elusiveness becomes evident in varied ways, as I shall now illustrate.

*The object can take a variety of forms*

The object can be, for example, an attitude, a role, or an emotional state. Consider former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown: ‘We beat the Tories. We squeezed Labour……Because for the first time in a generation we could

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⁵ See Scott (2012), for whom immersion in actual contexts can add quite different and substantively new knowledge that is not suggested, or suggestible, from within the framework of a general theory or perspective.
campaign on our record of local delivery and our record of national delivery too. Every leaflet dropped in the Eastleigh campaign combined both. And, when people took a long, hard look they liked what they saw. We didn’t win in Eastleigh in spite of being in power. We won in Eastleigh because we’re in power – locally and nationally’. Here, the object is ‘people’ who do or can take a certain attitude, in the electoral constituency of Eastleigh (where the Liberal Democrats had just won a by-election) but implicitly further afield as well. In another example, a senior judge, Lord Neuberger, said (referring to coalition government plans to use secret court hearings on issues of national security): ‘…anyone interested in justice and democracy” would be “very troubled” by the prospect of cases being heard behind closed doors’. Here, a summoned image of people in emotional state – the ‘very troubled’ – is the object of the claim. Or, for example, the claim may be a role – consider Ashdown again: ‘...at the end of the day we are representatives not delegates’.

The variety manifested by representative claims and therefore by invoked object effects raises the question of where the boundary lies between statements which are representative claims and those which are not. The dilemma is reminiscent of that faced by J.L. Austin in his famous account of the contrast between constative and performative utterances in How To Do Things With Words (1962). After detailed and extended analysis, Austin reached the view that many apparent constative utterances were or could have performative effects. Similarly, many apparently straightforward factual statements may constitute representative claims. The crucial point here is that context can render an identical statement as a representative claim in one time or place, where it is not in another. Italian political activist and leader of an insurgent and successful party in the national Italian elections of 2013, Beppe Grillo, stated that ‘I’m an actor; I’m not a political leader’. While on the face of it, this statement might be read as ‘I’m not a politician therefore I can’t do anything for you’, it is better interpreted in its contemporary Italian context as something akin to ‘I am not one of those who has failed you so badly’. Further, a (rhetorical) question for example can frame or contain a representative claim: ‘We have allowed human beings in the UK to be bought and sold as mere commodities for profit, gain or gratification. How on earth have we arrived at a place where there is no ambition or leadership to stamp out this appalling crime?’ (Andrew Wallis, chief executive of the anti-trafficking
charity Unseen). The object here is a UK with ‘no ambition or leadership’. In short, representative claims and their object effects can be framed within statements, questions and other grammatical forms, and context is critical to their status and potential force as claims.

*The object of a claim may be implied, unclear, or otherwise difficult to pinpoint*

The object can, in different ways, be deeply implicit rather than clearly suggested or posited. It has no standard mode of presence in the grammatical structure of a representative claim

The elusiveness of the claim’s object may similarly take varied forms. Consider the vagueness of ‘change’ in Liberal Democrat leader and deputy prime minister Nick Clegg’s claim that ‘We are not a party of protest. We are a party of change’. A claim may also have an implied object, and effect that may be no less forceful for its implicit nature. Consider the words of Beppe Grillo: ‘And we ran an election campaign with principles and promises that we intend to keep. So if I made an alliance with anyone, the movement would dissolve itself immediately because it would go against one of our pillars – that is, no to an alliance with anyone’. Arguably a key object in this claim is ‘betrayal’ – certain actions, making alliances, would constitute such a betrayal. Crucially, elusiveness in this case may, for interpretive purposes, require active intervention or creative reading by an observer, imputing meaning to the claim that is not on the latter’s grammatical surface. Note here too the complex double-object effect – in Grillo’s claim, both ‘integrity’ and ‘betrayal’ are reasonably imputable as objects.

*Representative claims produce object effects which trade in impressions, characterisations and contestable descriptions.*

The use of the notion of the referent of representative claims has come under recent critical scrutiny (see the comments of Disch and Thompson in Schaap et al. 2011). While it may still have currency in the form of a ‘referent effect’, and also as an acknowledgement of the ‘sheer materiality’ of key elements out of which claims may constitute or assemble object effects (Saward in Schaap et al. 2011), it is clear that the object effect is a much more significant component, theoretically and politically. This is the case primarily because the object effect is a portrayal or depiction – selective and particular. Nick Clegg,
suggesting that the UK Independence Party (UKIP) favoured by ‘grumpy Tories’: ‘If you don’t believe in gay marriage, you don’t like coalition, you don’t like compromise, I am going to vote for the real McCoy. I can see how people might do that’. He paints a rich picture of UKIP and its potential voters (while arguably retaining some sympathy for the latter group), suggesting that the portrait is both accurate and that it parodies itself. And consider Lord Neuberger’s ‘very troubled’ people in the claim cited above. Similarly, consider a claim by shadow education secretary Stephen Twigg, commenting on a rule change regarding teacher recruitment for state schools: ‘Parents will be shocked to learn that this government changed the rules and we now have unqualified teachers in state schools. This wouldn’t happen under Labour’. Or the spokesperson for Peta, the anti-fur action group: ‘In a recent survey, 95% of British women said they wouldn’t be caught dead in fur’. People of a certain kind or in a certain category ‘would be very troubled’, ‘wouldn’t be caught’, or ‘will be shocked’. The object effect here is not only an impression, but variously a conditional or a future-oriented depiction or characterisation.

The object effect is central to an interpellative call at the heart of representative claims – a call whose potential power can variously reside in directness or indirectness, subtlety or bluntness.

Consider a claim where the object appears to be simply an emergent, alleged attribute of a country. Commenting on a report on trafficking and modern slavery in today’s Britain, Christian Guy, managing director for the Centre for Social Justice’ suggested that: ‘Our once great nation of abolitionists is a shameful shadow of its former self.’ The object is the nation which is now, it is claimed, a ‘shameful shadow’. The British segment of the audience is here implicated as both subject and object. The call is indirect, because the description of both subject and object is impersonal, citing ‘the nation’ rather than ‘the British people’, for example. But the nation-encompassing generality of the claim invites (British) members of its audience to identify with both subject and object, i.e. both to share in ‘shame’ and recognise their collective (and perhaps individual?) dormant resources to be ‘great’ rather than shameful”. And again consider Neuberger: “…anyone interested in justice and democracy” would be “very troubled” by the prospect of cases being heard behind closed doors’. The call is powerful – the subject is left open for active
interpretation and potential identification by members of an attentive audience, many of whose members presumably would find it difficult to resist feeling or declaring an ‘interest in justice and democracy’.

To understand or to know the object, the intentions, position and agendas of the maker are crucial.

Representative claims do not simply have contexts that matter. They have makers, and makers have agendas that drive the very making of the claim as well as its potential content. There are no makers without specific agendas arising from their specific standpoints (worldviews, wishes, struggles, fears and hopes). Sometimes this point will be clear and obvious. Penny Gaines, chair of the group campaigning to stop the building of the proposed new high-speed rail route (‘HS2’, or High Speed 2) from the south-east to the north of England, says: ‘There is mounting evidence that costs will escalate beyond the £33bn budget. They’ve cancelled the next round of community forums, much to the disgust of communities who are being blighted’. The object here is ‘disgusted communities’ who are being ‘blighted’, and the forging of this object owes everything to the position and concerns of the maker. In another example, the Home Secretary, Theresa May, referring to the Conservative Party, says that the latter is ‘The party not just of those who have already made it, but the home of those who want to work hard and get on in life’. The object is ‘those who want to work hard and get on in life’. This could comfortably be a statement made by virtually any spokesperson for any political party, left, right or otherwise. To have an insight into why this claim is made when it is, why the seemingly anodyne wording and object construction may have more specific (coded or symbolic) meaning for potential audiences, one needs to know that this is a senior minister with apparent leadership ambitions in a party that is intense coalition government, down in the polls, with a leader facing mounting criticism from within and outside his own ranks.

Audience, object and legitimation

In their variety, their interpellations, their depictions and characterisations, object effects in single representative claims constitute rich and open-ended political factors for interpretation, response, acceptance, modification or rejection by other actors. Taken together – for example the set of twenty
claims on one day in a selective sample of the national press in the UK – they form a cacophony of calls to mediate and juggle. The portray leaders, peoples, parties, citizens, parents, residents, taxpayers and others. In this final section I reflect very briefly on claims’ audiences and the question of legitimation with regard to object effects.

1. Claims and their posited objects are neither self-validating nor self-denying. Each of the claims cited here would require research detective work over time to see how they are received by appropriate constituencies and indeed audiences. The fact that in many cases such detective work is only carried out by very few people with professional stakes in the issue at hand could be troubling for democrats. Indeed it may be. But from another angle, politics in a tolerably open society moves on quickly. Claims are accepted or rejected or ignored, and in each response the effects may be ephemeral and shifting. If legitimacy means legitimation over time, it is important to retain but recognise the great complexity in coming to judgements of legitimation, certainly hasty ones. To overly moralise the subject of representation is, potentially, to miss its key characteristics. It is an open question as to how much investigation we need to do into a given claim to render it intelligible. Context matters profoundly.

2. In The Representative Claim the point is made that audiences can ‘read back’ or dispute claims, often by disputing their attempts to bring into focus particular object effects. This brief investigation shows that different audiences may also have strong ‘reading in’ roles. The meaning or meanings of claims is rarely transparent – and seemingly transparent language can be misleading in that regard. Audiences do active work in constructing as well as disputing representative claims.

3. There are particular sorts of makers of claims here. Whose voice, whose claims, are present or perceptible, and whose are not? This unscientific sample has indicated that the broadsheet press in the UK tends to report or repeat the claims of government figures and party leaders along with societal notables and the spokespersons for lobby or interest groups of varied types. Voices making different or further claims, and voices disputing or otherwise engaging with these claims, are absent. There is, perhaps, a kind of media master claim at work – a claim about whose
voices are representative, or should be regarded as such. If there is a visibility gap, it lays not so much between the elected and the unelected as the politically organised and the politically unorganised. The economy of representation has producers and consumers. Are the consumer voices in effect silenced by and through a cacophony of claims to depict them and to speak on their behalf?

References


Celis, K. et.al. (2008), ‘Rethinking women’s substantive representation’ in *Representation* 44, 2, 99-110


Appendix

Representative claims of 10 March 2013 and their sources

The Independent on Sunday

‘There is mounting evidence that costs will escalate beyond the £33bn budget. They’ve cancelled the next round of community forums, much to the disgust of communities who are being blighted’ (Penny Gaines, chair of the Stop HS2 campaign group, 4)

‘We’re at our strongest when anyone and everyone can feel that the conservative party is for them – when we’re the party for all. We win when we stand for the values of the British people – respect, fair play, generosity, enterprise, aspiration’ (Theresa May, Home Secretary, 6)

‘The party not just of those who have already made it, but the home of those who want to work hard and get on in life’ (6)

‘We are not a party of protest. We are a party of change’ (Clegg, 9)

‘In a recent survey, 95% of British women said they wouldn’t be caught dead in fur’ (spokesman for Peta, 15)

The Observer

‘There is going to be a lot of pressure on public spending and I think what we have to make absolutely clear as a party is that there is a difference between managing public spending in that context, we have to have financial wisdom, and the kind of thing that a lot of right-wing Conservatives are pushing for which is Tea party, some kind of ideological jihad against public spending and public services’ (Vince Cable, Business Secretary)

‘...at the end of the day we are representatives not delegates’ (Paddy Ashdown)

‘We beat the Tories. We squeezed Labour......Because for the first time in a generation we could campaign on our record of local delivery and our record of national delivery too. Every leaflet dropped in the Eastleigh campaign combined both. And, when people took a long, hard look they liked what they
saw. We didn’t win in Eastleigh in spite of being in power. We won in Eastleigh because we’re in power – locally and nationally’ (Paddy Ashdown)

‘…anyone interested in justice and democracy’ would be “very troubled” by the prospect of cases being heard behind closed doors’ (Lord Neuberger, 11)

‘We have allowed human beings in the UK to be bought and sold as mere commodities for profit, gain or gratification. How on earth have we arrived at a place where there is no ambition or leadership to stamp out this appalling crime?’ (Andrew Wallis, chief executive of the anti-trafficking charity Unseen, 21)

‘I am speaking out because I’m happy to stand up in court and try to highlight how absurd this situation is’ (Suzanne Lee, 23)

‘Parents will be shocked to learn that this government changed the rules and we now have unqualified teachers in state schools. This wouldn’t happen under Labour’ (Stephen Twigg, shadow education secretary)

‘Headteachers and governors at places like Pimlico know their schools best and we trust them to recruit the right staff’ (Dept. for Education spokesman, 26).

‘Whatever else happens with the bill, it is vital no protection is lost in this area for the sake of our children’ (Andy Leary-May, director of a charity supporting gay adoptive and foster families, New Family Social, 30).

‘Today Chavez is being deified by his supporters at home and abroad as a liberator of the Americas. In reality, there is a far grimmer side to his figure… (Hector Abad, Columbian novelist and journalist, 37)

_The Sunday Times_

‘Our once great nation of abolitionists is a shameful shadow of its former self’ (Christian Guy, managing director of Centre for Social Justice, 9).

‘When Strasbourg constantly moves the goalposts and prevents the deportation of dangerous mean like Abu Qatada, we have to ask ourselves to what end we are signatories to the convention’ (T. May, 11)
UKIP favoured by ‘grumpy Tories’ – ‘If you don’t believe in gay marriage, you
don’t like coalition, you don’t like compromise, I am going to vote for the real
McCoy. I can see how people might do that’ (Nick Clegg, 11, on UKIP).

‘And we ran an election campaign with principles and promises that we intend
to keep. So if I made an alliance with anyone, the movement would dissolve
itself immediately because it would go against one of our pillars – that is, no to
an alliance with anyone’. (Beppe Grillo, 29).

‘I’m an actor; I’m not a political leader’ (Beppe Grillo, 29)