

Seeing Like a Representative: A conversation with Lisa Disch

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Editorial review: This article has been subject to an editorial review process



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Abstract

Lisa Disch is Professor of Political Science and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (US), where she teaches courses on contemporary political theory, political representation, Anglo-American and French Feminism, as well as courses on population and the environment among others. Professor Disch has published books on the political thought of Hannah Arendt, on the discursive production of two-party democracy in the US, and most recently on political representation. She is co-editor of The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory with Mary Hawkesworth, and co-editor with Nadia Urbinati and Mathijs van de Sande of The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation. Since 2020 she has been an elected member of the Ann Arbor City Council.

Keywords: democratic representation; Hannah Arendt; political theory; feminist theory; constructivist theory of representation

Introduction

Despite a longstanding interest in matters of politics, I had never given much thought to the meaning and value of political representation. That was until the problem of democratic representation ‘exploded’ in my hands, so to speak, when I was elected to the Municipal Council of the southern Italian town of Noci. Ever since, indeed, I have felt the need to try and understand what was it, truly, that I had engaged in as a representative: where had I failed, where, if anywhere, had I succeeded. It was in this search, still ongoing, that following the lead of a more down-to-heart view of representation than offered by classic accounts, I encountered the work of Lisa Disch.

While researching, teaching and writing on a number of issues within and beyond the field of political theory, Lisa Disch is a leading figure in debates on democratic representation, and among the first scholars to detect, defend and encourage a ‘constructivist’ turn in mainstream understandings of democratic representation. As somebody who was looking for a ‘theory’ who would explain and match a recent personal experience of a ‘practice’, I became all the more drawn to Disch’s work as I learnt of her exceptional situation as both a leading theorist of representation and herself a democratic representative. Much of my own work grew out of an imaginary dialogue I entertained with Professor Disch for years. For once, I had the honor to engage with her in a real conversation, from which what follows is extracted.

Discussions

Gentile Fusillo: Professor Disch, your work to date has addressed a broad range of issues that extend beyond a strict understanding of political science – encompassing themes in critical literary theory, continental philosophy, feminist political thought, political ecology, theories of democratic representation. What would you say is the core concern that moved your intellectual effort towards these issues?

Lisa Disch: That is a really great question... my first inclination was to say that there was no core concern and that I just leap from one thing to the next as the spirit moves me. But then I realized that was not quite true. I actually think that a major impetus for my work was reading Hannah Arendt and thinking about the shift she makes from human *nature* to what she called the human *condition*. That’s a shift from taking human nature as the basis or foundation of politics and political theory to a notion of human condition. We would emphasize today that there are plural human conditions and some of us have better ones, more fortunate ones that we were simply born into, but nonetheless, Arendt’s insight holds: that what we are, what we humanity, what we political agents are, is *conditioned* by

circumstances, we are conditioned beings, we are not beings who are defined by an essence or nature. And you can think of these conditions from the smallest to largest scale. When Arendt writes *The Human Condition* (2018) she begins with the largest scale: Sputnik and the picture that was taken of the earth and how this makes her think of the fragility of our condition. We are on this little ball, suspended in the vast universe, which means that we are conditioned by the Earth, we are Earth dwelling beings. But that's a very large scale, a very general thing to say, although still a pressing urgency because, as people say, there is no planet B!

We can also talk about the smallest scale, which is infrastructure. To really go from one extreme to the other, we are conditioned by living in cities and rural areas, there may be a density of population and richness of job opportunities, or sparseness of population and declining job opportunities, and infrastructure that degrades because there are too few people spread out too sparsely over too large an area. The urban/rural divide is a divide that you find all over the globe and it complicates politics all over the globe. All over the globe we are having debates over what cities ought to look like...these are pieces of our human conditions: we are worrying about cities built in deserts; we are worrying about American cities where we never did invest enough in the non-motorized transportation infrastructure that we need to live our lives as citizens of a globe whose resources are vastly diminishing. Now, this is a level where probably Hannah Arendt would have thought that administration happens. But I think this is where *politics* happens. This is where politics is happening now: these debates over what we need to build for ourselves in order that we can make this planet go further for us, because it's not going to go very far the way we are using it right now.

There is also a whole set of things beyond infrastructure: there is law. Among the things that remains a question for us is 'what and who can or cannot count as property?' And much of the economic development of colonial powers, the US being a 'settler' colonial power, was conditioned on the ability to own people as property. Although that question is settled, at least with respect to outright slavery, there are continued debates over what counts as property that bear on the human condition. We debate questions about how to define intellectual property, for example, and the answers define the limits of technology sharing, which is something else we may need to do more generously in order to make this planet go further. All of those things are really part of what, I think, Arendt meant when she talked about the human condition, and for me these things are all the things of politics: they are contingent, they are human-made, they are alterable, but they are also a legacy that imposes constraints that we have to work within. They supply both the limits and the possibilities of our politics.

Arendt's shift from nature to condition was momentous for me, because in college I first encountered political theory through people who thought about the great canonical questions and took human nature as a central category. Reading Arendt and having her say 'even if there is a human nature we can never find it because we can never jump over our own shadows, we can't see ourselves from a vantage point that would enable us to talk about our nature'...that really blew my mind I think! This is a core concern that I have pursued: I have been drawn to kinds of thought that are interested in themes of contingency, of historicity, things that complicate the distinction between what's natural and what's social.

Gentile Fusillo: How then did the question of representation specifically come to your attention as such a theme, a theme of contingency?

Disch: So... feminism got me thinking about representation. There is that great quote in the opening pages of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, where she's riffing on Foucault to affirm that the 'feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation' (1990: 2). Butler was one of the first thinkers to make me see the stakes in questions of representation. More broadly put, it was the vibrant and intense debates in feminist theory, in the 1980s, over what it means to refer to women as the political subject of feminism and what it means to speak for and *as a woman*. In the preface to her wonderful book *Inessential Woman*, Elizabeth Spelman called the phrase 'as a woman' the 'Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism' (1990: X). It's the device that sneaks a singular, unified subject back into feminist theory and politics. When one prefaces a statement with it, that is a statement of representation: 'as a woman...I think this...I need this...' that's a *representative claim*, as Mike Saward (2010) would put it today.

Political theorists have a whole vocabulary now for understanding that these are *acts of representation*, that occur within movements as advocacy to rally support. Feminism did the most amazing job of blowing those up and complicating these claims that convene a unity. These were academic debates beginning in the 1980s that I think people who'd been in the feminist movement of the '60s found devastating when they first emerged: it felt like their actions and their legacy were being called in question. It is much easier to see now the incredible momentum it has leant the movement to take the critique of sex and gender way farther to the point where people are multiplying genders and questioning binarity not just in academic books but in their everyday lives. Feminism dramatized for us the power of a representative claim to both convene a political subject and also generate critiques of that political subject. Queer feminists, feminists of color made us think about the power that acts of representation have to define who's in that subject? Who's not in that

subject? How do the very claims that we make about what women's needs are – is it equal pay, is it reproductive rights, is it shelters for women who experience homelessness, abuse? – define the subject of feminism?

I learned a great lesson from feminism, also from Foucault, and from philosophy of language that very much got me thinking that the basic democratic intuitions about representation were not correct. All of these tell us that representative claims are speech acts, they do things, they don't merely reflect things, they do things, they enact states of being and they solicit subjects into being. That, I thought, was just an amazing way of thinking, a very political way of thinking about language and about claiming. It can also be an idealistic way of thinking about language and claiming but I think we, as political theorists or students of politics, are well equipped to think about the resistance that the world puts back against those claims, again, the feminist movement dramatized that. I think we are well equipped to not use that kind of language in a purely idealist way. The important insight for me to take away, before stepping into all those debates about idealism, you know the objection: 'oh, so you are making up the world in words!', is that there are basic democratic intuitions about what makes good representation, good *democratic* representation, that are not quite right because they want a constituency to be a *foundation* and *standard* for the representation. Those intuitions come from thinking about representation in terms of what Nancy Schwartz in her book *The Blue Guitar* (1988) called a 'transmission-belt theory.' We are thinking of a representative as standing for a constituency that is already well defined, and we imagine that we can measure how good the representative is by virtue of its faithfulness to that constituency. And so, this model of representation inspires citizens, meaning citizens not in the legal, passport-holding sense but in the sense of people who pay attention to politics and make demands, to imagine that the representative should act as a delegate. I think it's rare that you find that model uncomplicated in political theory. Hanna Pitkin's (1967) book complicated it. In her notion of responsiveness there is the idea that the representative and the represented constitute each other over time in an iterative process.

I started thinking about democratic representation from these various critical vantage points that alerted me to the problem with an oversimplified use of these 'transmission belt' standards of legitimacy. It also seemed to me that the great canonical works that Western political theorists cite as standards of representation haven't been understood in all of their subtlety, I would say that is true for Pitkin. In addition, it seemed to me that some empirical research took an oversimplified notion of congruence that reduced democratic representation to matching public opinion with policy that legislatures or legislators produced. Yet there is also another body of empirical literature written by scholars who

understand that political representation is dynamic and constitutive. I'm thinking, of course, of empirical work in political psychology and in the policy feedback literature in the US, that posed the problem with great clarity: if we find that representatives and constituencies are co-constitutive, what does that mean for legitimacy? If the definitions of legitimacy that come most readily to hand impugn our findings about how democratic representation works in the world, what are we supposed to do about that? The critical theory that I brought to this work made me want to say 'ok, these findings don't need to put us at loggerheads with the notion of democratic legitimacy, but it does need to change very much the way we think about it!'

Gentile Fusillo: You have recently co-edited a collection of essays (**Disch et al; 2019**) by a number of prominent scholars on the 'the constructivist turn' in theories of political representation – a development that has been the focus of your analysis for more than a decade. What is 'constructivist' about this development?

Disch: I would express it this way: acts of representation bring political agents into being and, as Mike Saward has expressed it, those acts of representations can very often be conceptualized as claims. That doesn't mean they are just words, but that representation – an act of claim-making – is a call, it's a solicitation of a response. So, the constructivist part of that is not that politicians make up constituencies, but that in order to speak of a political agent you need to speak of a force that is unified in some way. It does not have to be uniform, but it needs to be a collective of some kind. Representation takes what would otherwise be perhaps an aggregate and gives it a name, gives it a struggle, either of those two things, embodies it in a formal policy and gives it a benefit or gives it a burden. A good example is 'we are the 99%', a phrase that represents a conflict and positions agents in that conflict. A deliberate way of dividing the social field and articulating a political conflict, it exemplifies a representative claim. I know that it is controversial to argue that political agents are constituted through representation: I know that there are many people, some of them in the Occupy movement itself, who would say that they were not engaged in representation and did not want to be. They believe that political forces don't need representation, that they are imminent, and that they are most powerful as imminent. As they begin to cooperate with institutions, they begin to lose their force. I think these are two different ways of thinking about democratic politics; I don't think they can ever be reconciled. They are both concerned with the mobilization of agency, so they are in the broadest sense on each other's side, but they have very different beliefs about the constitution of the political world. I recognize that difference, and I am engaged by the work of both sides, but I just intuitively committed to the one!

Gentile Fusillo: ...and how do you think this should change our approach to the question that, both as scholars and as citizens, we so often ask ourselves: 'who is the good representative'?

Disch: In some work in democratic theory, and in empirical work on competence, there is a focus on asking what the 'citizens', again in the broad republican sense not the passport-carrying police sense, bring to politics, what knowledge do they bring, how well informed are they about their interests? This preoccupation makes improving people's judgment, educating them, a focus of democratic aspiration. I think, and I am informed here by E. E. Schattschneider's *Semisovereign People* (1960), that conflict brings things out in citizens. We do democracy a disservice when we approach it through a pedagogical model that expects people to be students of politics before they are actors in it. We are looking for democratic institutions to engage people in action. Mike Saward has wonderfully theorized that this is one thing acts of representation do: they engage people. As critics and analysts of democracy, we can look at those acts of representation and we can ask 'What do those acts bring out in the represented, what constituencies are mobilized, what constituencies are marginalized, are there systematic patterns? In the US most certainly yes.' One insight driving the unbelievable and unconscionable move towards voter suppression in the US is precisely this: that representative institutions, processes, and claims can mobilize constituencies and deactivate them. It is possible to do this strategically. If I believe in a broadly inclusive democracy, that's a commitment, that's not a theory, that's a value commitment that I make as a person and a political actor, then I can judge how democratic and how representative the system is. Rather than start out asking what citizens know, I start out asking what the system of representation, i.e., set of institutions, and the people working in those institutions, and the processes that it uses, is bringing out. What constituencies is it making? What interests and affects does it solicit? That is different from the question we have traditionally asked about the congruence between policy opinion and policy legislation. It's different from asking, 'do people have an opinion about x or y and therefore is there anything out there to represent?'

As someone who is currently a city councilor in Ann Arbor, what I have become aware of, a problem for cities everywhere, is to represent people who are not residents because of the inequities built in our structures, or because of the generational nature of politics. The pressing concerns facing cities in the US are concerns about equity. For example, addressing how the financing and construction of housing has excluded people. Those people need representation... They are constituencies *by virtue of their absence*, and there is a struggle to actually represent them and their interests...

Gentile Fusillo: ...to make them present...

Disch: Exactly, to make them present very literally: to give them access to this city that is spinning into inaccessibility. There are the future constituencies as well. The things that we do for climate action may feel to current residents as a non-representation, a violation of their interests. But cities must fund climate action because we are obligated to leave something for the future! Right? The generations who could have acted, who were beginning to see this in the mid 60's, didn't act and we are making up for their inaction. I wish that I didn't have this burden of the inaction of the past, but I do. It means that I have to often just – patiently but aggressively – work against my constituents and their interests.

Gentile Fusillo: This leads us straight to the last question I wanted to ask you, precisely about your experience... two years ago you ran for the municipal elections in the city of Ann Arbor and were elected municipal councilor, and my question was going to be: as a representative, do you feel empowered?

Disch: Yes! But not in the way you might think! I do not feel empowered to lead...it's very complicated to lead. I feel empowered because I get to work with a talented and knowledgeable city staff.

Gentile Fusillo: ...many municipal councilors around the world could say you are very lucky in that respect!

Disch: Yeah! And we are well financed. This is a plum place to be a representative! And this talented and knowledgeable city staff enables me to do work, in the sense that Hannah Arendt meant that word: to build things for the common world that will last. And work, oh, it moves slowly! And it's not splashy. In much of the work that I do with city staff I often feel that they are leading because they have been laboring to accumulate small transformations for a long time. Sometimes my job as a representative is to not get in the way of their work by creating expectations that are beyond what can be accomplished, so that people are not angry that 'all you have done is x.' So the thing is to put your head down and do the work. Much of what you do as a representative in local government, which is one of the most powerful places to be a representative if you live in a well-resourced and competently staffed city, is not 'exciting.' When I hear some of my colleagues on Council wanting to say exciting things I often find myself shaking my head, because I either know it can't be done or I know that they are sounding off against something that must be assented to, now at least. Changing, say, an affordable housing crisis, will involve a long process of *work*! So one of the things that I am really learning is something that I already knew: it's that

representatives don't make things up in words. We are not empowered to speak and make it so. What we are empowered to do is work...

Gentile Fusillo: That's beautiful...

Disch: Thank you!

Clementina Gentile Fusillo completed a PhD in Political Theory at the University of Warwick, with a thesis titled "On the virtues of truth: generativity and the demands of democracy". She is currently an Early Career Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies at the same University.



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To cite this article:

Gentile Fusillo, C., 2020. Seeing Like a Representative: A conversation with Lisa Disch. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 9(2), 111-120. Available at: <http://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v9i2.1130>.