Representation and the Crisis of Post-Modernism

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The subject of representation is familiar to political theorists and scientists as a purely political issue. Few now see any connection between representation in politics and representation in epistemology, science,

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language and art despite the historically well attested use of the same term, as in the representative theory of perception, the sign as representation and representational realism in painting, the novel, and even music. Those who have noted this multiple signification of the word have invariably dismissed it as an ambiguity of language. Yet it can be shown that in key texts of philosophy and political theory -especially those from the early seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries- the term representation is employed in diverse subject matters with a remarkable coherence of meaning, which precludes the possibility that the authors of these texts are simply equivocating. So related and consistent is the use of the term -not just in theory and philosophy but also in the practical discourses of the period- that it might be referred to as the age of representation. If one insisted on a Marxist explanation -which is far from the only way of looking at it- one might say that representation constitutes the central core of bourgeois ideology, unifying it in one coherent symbolic system ranging over politics, thought, science and art. Paradoxically, Marx himself emerges as a bourgeois thinker, for representation was crucial to his theory, as we shall show. Hence, it is not possible to identify representation with bourgeois ideology *tout court*, although there are close connections; it is better to treat it as a formal symbolic scheme serving numerous social ends.

The earliest of the so-called 'possessive individualists' were through and through representational thinkers, above all Hobbes and Locke. In Leviathan, Hobbes refers to the Sovereign as the 'Representer' or 'Representative' who mediates between men as natural beings in a state of nature and men as political beings in a commonwealth or state.

Men as natural objects become political subjects only through the intercession of the Representative. Thus the mediating role of the Representative is structurally isomorphic with the mediating role of the representation in epistemology, where the external object of nature is conveyed to the inner subject or mind through the agency of representations of sense or 'ideas', as Locke was later to call them. In both politics and epistemology the very same conceptual grid operates: that of a sharp separation between the objective and the subjective or the natural and political, mediated by means of representations. The very same schema is invoked for the expression of thought in language or the passions in art; once again between the inner state and its outward reception where stand mediating representatives: words are representations of thoughts, music is a representation of the passions. These linguistics and aesthetic doctrines of the seventeenth century predate the work of Hobbes, as do the representational theories of epistemology and the practices of political representation. However, perhaps for the first time, in the work of Hobbes all these separate developments of the age are brought together and unified into the one overarching symbolic paradigm. Locke took over and revised Hobbes' representational schema and made it the basis of subsequent enlightenment philosophy, science, art and politics.

This paradigm persisted well into the nineteenth century without serious challenge. Untill then most of the disputes that took place and the differences that arose were within it and amounted to diverse ways of articulating and developing it. Thus both in politics and epistemology, most of the arguments of the age were about the nature of representation

and took a similar turn. What is the character of the representative or representation? What is the object that is or can be represented? What is the relation between the representation and what it represents? How does the subject acquire its representations or become represented? These and many more questions were debated both in theory and practice. Systems of philosophy and political theory arose as well-articulated and integrated positions on these issues; constitutions were framed in accordance with such precisions; styles of art were transformed on the basis of new aesthetic elaborations of these ideas. Whether it is the philosophy of Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Mill or Schopenhauer, or the political theory of the Ideologues, Madison, Burke, Bentham, or Marx, representation (or its French and German synonyms) is the word in play. Marx is no exception, as is obvious from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* where representation figures in almost all possible senses: as stage representation or historical drama, as political representation of an illusory democratic kind or of realistic class interests, as ideological representation made up of sentiments and passions and as scientific representation of a supposedly true course of history. The paradigm of representation is firmly anchored in Marx despite the efforts of such late interpreters as Althusser to free his writings of bourgeois attachments.

It is hardly possible in a brief sketch to do more than hint at all the interconnections, parallels, structural analogies and isomorphisms of representation in the diverse fields to which it is applied in an ever changing kaleidoscopic pattern, for over three centuries of European history. However, a few comments on political representation might be appropriate in this context. It is a truism to say that we are ruled by

representative democratic governments. Unfortunately, in Western theory and propaganda the stress is placed on 'democratic' than on 'representative'. Whereas considered historically it should be the reverse. Democracy is a notion deriving from Greek theory and practice with which our form of state rule has little but a name and sentiments in common. The ancients neither practiced nor understood representation. Their thinkers did not have such a concept and with a few dubious exceptions -made too much of by historians- there were no representative institutions. Ancient politics might without impropriety be called mimetic in so far as it involved participation or sharing in ruling -the very same principles invoked in mimetic theories of art and philosophy. ['Mimesis' (or 'Imitatio') was also a general paradigm underlying symbolic systems prior to representation.] In fact, political representation was one of the earliest forms of representation to develop, giving a new meaning to the pre-existing Latin word which originally did not have any of the modern connotations. Representation, both as a practice and an idea, arose in the late-Roman church councils and continued in unbroken succession through to the lay assemblies of medieval estates known as diets or parliaments. This is the real origin of the modern political system and of its theorization.

The democratic principle was only a late accretion to the modern representative system and only imperfectly integrated with it in an uneasy compromise. Any conflict between them tended to be resolved in favor of representation rather than democracy. Thus the framers of the U.S.Constitution were much more intent on achieving the representation of states than making democratic will prevail when

they wrote in the structural 'gerrymander' of the Senate, the upper and more important house. British parliamentary practice only became democratic along constituency lines by slow stages late in the nineteenth century. Proponents of 'real' democracy in the ancient style have invariably been hostile to representation, seeing it quite correctly as a drag on what they take to be popular political self-determination and freedom; this holds for Rousseau, Bakhunin and Hannah Arendt who are otherwise at odds. Nevertheless, nineteenth century style parliamentary constitutionalism, or liberalism for short, was a working adjustment of representation and democracy which functioned well for as long as the whole 'bourgeois' symbolic system of representation remained intact. The critics of political representation were themselves usually entangled in the symbolic representational system and so rendered ineffectual.

Only in the late nineteenth century when representation began to be questioned in epistemology, philosophy and art was it also threatened in politics. Nietzsche was undoubtedly the most powerful if not the very first of the questioners. He attacked parliamentary representation and democracy in his general critique of representation in all spheres, above all in epistemology. He not only opposed the need for representations but also the very terms 'subject' and 'object' between which representations were required to mediate. There are no subjects and there are no objects, declared Nietzsche, everything is a matter of varying degrees of will to power. Hence there is no need for representatives or representative institutions because all ruling is nothing but domination by the stronger and submission by the weaker, or will to power once again. Representative democracy is perverse

because it permits the many weaklings to combine and dominate the few strong and exceptional natures. But in a future politics of master races, the strong few will rule over the many who are by nature weak. It was not long before such ideas were given a distorted political expression through the doctrines of fascism and nazism directly influenced by Nietzsche. In Marxism, too, the conception of representation was in practice abandoned for it became purely formal Lenin interpreted it to mean that the communist party, as the vanguard of the proletariat, by its very nature objectively represented the proletariat, supposedly the majority of mankind, regardless of the subjective wills or interests of actual working people. Thus the stage was set for the twentieth century non-representative totalitarian forms of rule.

In other areas of early twentieth century thought and culture there were parallel movements against representation which were frequently linked to political causes. In the arts Modernism arose as a revolt against the earlier bourgeois modes of representational realism and it advocated various non-representational styles such as cubism, atonality and symbolism. The work of art was conceived in the new aesthetics as a purely formalistic or conventional or constructed entity and not as a representation of anything either objectively or subjectively real or true. Abstract art was the ultimate realization of this modernist program. During the same period in science, philosophy and other cultural realms there were analogous revolts against realism, materialism, objectivity or subjectivity and tendencies towards formalism, conventionalism and constructivism. Even such abstruse fields as logic and mathematics were affected. In general, there

occurred a breakdown of the solid and unified 'bourgeois' symbolic world based on the schema of representation. The new non-representational symbolic forms that arose were no longer related to each other by any inherent bond or coherent principle; each of them was an 'experimental' type valid in its own right, unique and specialized its own segregated universe of discourse. The fragmentation of culture of which many now complain was the unavoidable outcome of the breakdown of the representational paradigm.

In this period of modernist fragmentation all kinds of purely exiguous and temporary relations between science, philosophy, art and politics were built up only to collapse like houses of cards. Thus the new Leninist anti-representational regime in the Soviet Union was at first favorably disposed to anti-representational movements in the arts, such as Constructivism and Futurism. However, Lenin himself remained wedded to a representational theory of knowledge which he imposed on his interpretation of Marx, excoriating as 'idealists' all who opposed it. But soon enough, Stalin returned to the worst excrescences of realist representation characteristics of nineteenth century bourgeois art, in line with similar moves towards representational art undertaken by the other great dictators. In the meantime, however, the representative democracies became increasingly more given to non-representational styles of art and thought. In the period following the Second World War such avant-gardist cultural movements became the established trends in Western societies at least for the elites, for popular and commercial art remained naively representational. But this symbolic disjunction between art and politics in these societies was either not noticed or

seemed without immediate relevance.

However, some political scientists during this post-war period began to observe a slow and creeping erosion of representation in actual political practice even while the officially sanctioned theorists were launching renewed defenses of the representative democracy of the free world. Bureaucratic administration and the managerial style rather than political legislation, policymaking rather than political decision, committee deliberation rather than open debate-all these features of the vastly expanded post-war state were seen as militating against democratic representation. The political apathy of the masses, who no longer felt themselves to be represented, was also noted but differing conclusions were drawn from this fact. Some saw it as symptomatic of an end to liberalism whilst others saw liberalism transforming itself in a corporatist direction. The latter interpretation is somewhat paradoxical as corporatism is basically an anti-liberal and anti-democratic principle of representation. It was the original form of estate representation prior to liberal parliamentarianism. During the nineteenth century right-wing anti-democrats were always toying with ideas of corporatist orders. The Italian fascists pretended to be in favor of such institutions, though straight out dictatorship was more to their liking. Hence, it is more likely that moves towards corporatist representation signify a weakening of the liberal-democratic representative institutions of our present state. It is not clear, however, whether these developments will inevitably tilt over into some non-representative form of administrative-managerial politics or whether they can give rise to viable and stable forms of representation different from representative democracy. The confusion in the post-war arts

and philosophies does not inspire confidence that a new non-representational cultural system is in the offing. That arts-having reached the utmost in non-representational abstraction as abstract expressionism, minimalism, electronic music, concrete poetry, etc.-suddenly collapse back into the crudest and most mechanical forms of representation, such as photo realism, pop art and psycho drama. The new technological media of film, television and sound recording encourage art styles that rely on a sheer mechanical mimesis that is not even representational. The representative character of politicians is influenced by media performances and the art of advertising and self-presentation they promote. When people cease to vote for a representative on issues and interests and choose a media image, the representative principle is forfeited by default. Political campaigns and elections become a kind of popular theatre, and they are stage managed for crowd participation. Thus media politics, too, takes on the character of sheer mechanical mimesis.

At the same time intellectuals are continuing the theoretical onslaught against representation begun by Nietzsche. His so-called post-modernist followers, first in France and now in the U.S., going mainly under the banner of deconstructivism, are once again deconstructing the representational paradigm of subject, object and mediating representation-declaring instead that all is text and interpretation or power and discipline. They unite in singling out representation as the common focus for their critiques although they differ in every other aspect. Few seem to be fully aware that such a deconstructive effort is likely to have political consequences that are far from palatable in a democracy, with the exception of Foucault who

openly embraced the counter-cultural politics of revolution and advocated some kind of anarchism of anti-institutional struggle. The attack on representation in politics in favor of participation launched by the student 'revolutionaries' since 1968 is indirectly linked, at least in the French context, to the attack on realism and the old epistemology of truth as correspondence simultaneously carried on in post-modernist thought. But it is also more directly related to the decay of meaningful representation in the real politics of the state.

Other political theorists, above all Habermas, have interpreted such phenomena both in politics and culture as exemplifying a crisis of legitimation in the late-capitalist state. It is undoubtedly true that a crisis of representation has been with us for some time: our representative democratic institutions, though still functioning, are not fulfilling the kind of role envisaged in liberal democratic theory and practice. Following the dictum 'no legitimation without representaion', it might have been expected that a weakening of representation should have brought about an equivalent loss of legitimacy. But on one level this has not happened: people do not appear to be any less obedient or law-abiding in relation to their political masters. Such apparent inconsistencies call for a theoretical revision of what is meant by legitimation and how it relates to representation in our system. Indeed, it might demand a revision of our conception of the nature of the contemporary state and its symbolic cultural underpinnings.

Analogous anomalies of representation in epistemology, the sciences and the arts also demand theoretical work simply to come to

terms with the problems that have arisen in these fields. Solutions to such deep difficulties in cultural development require much more than theoretical effort; nevertheless theory is not without consequence. It would be an idle quest to seek to recover the old representational paradigm and expect thereby to recreate the cultural unity of politics, science and art that existed for the last few centuries. Even such a basic feature of the old schema as the relation of subject, object and mediating representation can now only be maintained if totally reconceived: subjectivity and objectivity can no longer be taken as the simple opposition of an inner and outer reality and the representation no longer as a discrete idea. But even if representation can be given a new meaning in epistemology, it does not follow that this will be of any use for a reconception of representation in politics. It is possible that the relation between them that once existed in 'bourgeois' thought has now been irremediably lost. If so, we need to ask on what alternative symbolic basis politics is to be conducted in the future. This is a task for present political theory.