

URBINATI, Nadia. *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006

Resenha

Alessandro Pinzani

(Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina - UFSC)

Virtually every contemporary democracy (with minor examples such as some Swiss cantons) is a representative, not a direct democracy. Nevertheless, while the concept of democracy has been the object of numerous theories and debates, very few attempts have been made to define the concept of representation (at least to define it theoretically, without merely describing how it works in the different democratic systems). The best known of these are Hannah Pitkin's path breaking *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), Bernard Manin's *Principes du gouvernement representative* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), and Frank Ankersmit's *Political Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). With *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006) Nadia Urbinati, professor of political theory at Columbia University, offers a major contribution to the theory of representation. The book differentiates itself from the others mentioned first and foremost by trying to offer "a systematic and comprehensive defense of the normative core that makes [representation] democratic" (5);¹ second, by its historical character, since the author critically analyses the positions of modern thinkers who played a key role in the definition of representation and its relation to democracy: Rousseau, Kant, Sieyes, Paine and Condorcet. This fact, however,

should not lead us to conclude that the author's goal is just to reconstruct the history of the concept of representation. Urbinati tries rather to extract from these authors the elements to build a theory of representation of her own. Her intention is "to understand those form of indirect political presence that make contemporary government democratic" (3). Her basic idea is that participation and representation are not "alternative forms of democracy, but related forms" (ibid.). Against the widely sustained opinion that representation is supposed to neutralize or minimize political participation, Urbinati claims that "democracy and representation are complementary rather than antithetical" and that "representation is essential to democracy" – at least under certain conditions (4). She justifies this claim on the basis of three arguments: First, the idea that democratic politics (both direct and representative) is characterized by a vigorous public discourse. The insistence on "presence through voice" (5) puts Urbinati in the proximity of contemporary theories of deliberative democracy; what characterizes her own theory in comparison with these is her insisting on the centrality of political judgment. The second argument is that indirectness "plays a key role in forging the democratic character of politics" (ibid.). The third argument is that "representation highlights the idealizing and judgmental nature of politics", which Urbinati refers to as "an art by which

individuals transcend the immediacy of their biographical experience and social and cultural belongings and interests, and educate and enlarge their political judgment on their own and other's opinions" (ibid.). Following Arendt, but taking a somehow different path than her, Urbinati discusses the importance of political judgment and its connection to aesthetic judgment in an ingenious chapter on Kant's theory of representation.

Representation is thought by Urbinati to possess a connecting role that unifies the citizens (the "atomic units" of civil society) and projects them into a future-oriented perspective. In my opinion, representation as defined by Urbinati gives way to a new concept of "we, the people". Usually, theories of democracy describe the people alternatively as the sum of the citizens living in a country at a certain moment (this is notably the perspective of economic or formal theories of democracy) or as the sum of past, present and future generations of citizens, as "the People" with capital P. In both cases one incurs theoretical difficulties, since one has to take into account the egoistic, self-centered perspective one has to attribute to the citizens as "atomic units" and explain how such individuals could cooperate with each other; or one has to face the problem of assuming a point of view which does not coincide with that of the people actually forming the body of the citizens (a well-known difficulty for all those who try to understand Rousseau's General Will as opposed to the *volonté de tous*). According to Urbinati's concept of representation, it is now possible to merge these two different perspectives: citizens learn to think of their own opinion and interests as something connected to the life of a political body that pre-existed them and that will

survive them. The general will is neither the result of compromises achieved by calculations (as the economic theory of democracy or any other theory based on rational choice thinks), nor the expression of an almost mystical body of the Nation or of the Country, but something that forms and expresses itself through a complex process in which citizens confront themselves and the others with different opinions and points of view. Representation is essential to this process; actually *it is* this process, as Urbinati points out: it is "a comprehensive filtering, refining and mediating process of political will formation and expression. [...] It helps to depersonalize claims and opinion, which in turn allows citizens to mingle and associate without erasing the partisan spirit essential to free political competition or obscuring the majority/minority divide" (6).

Chapter one is the most theoretical one. Urbinati first reconstructs the role of representation in democratic theory and in history. She gives particular attention to three theories of representation that interpreted the latter from different perspectives: juridical, institutional and political. The juridical is the oldest one and sees representation as "a private contract of commission". It follows "an individualistic and nonpolitical logic insofar as it presumes that electors pass judgment on candidates' personal qualities rather than their political ideas and projects". This theory offered the basis for liberal representative government and for electoral democracy. It is "based on a clear-cut dualism between state and society" and "restricts popular participation to a procedural minimum". Its conception of sovereignty is essentially voluntaristic (21 ff.). The institutional theory follows the juridical

in this vision of sovereignty and in the ideas that state “must transcend society” and that “the people must hide their concrete and social identities to make public officials impartial agents of decision”. The representative system will create a class of professional politicians who will decide for their electors (23). The paradox of such a competence-driven approach is that it presumes “that the representative must be deaf to public opinion in order to make good decisions” (26). The only “function” it assigns to the citizens is “to ‘accept’ of ‘refuse’ their leaders and never interfere with them” (27). The problem with this approach is that leaders are not detached from social influences, making therefore partiality and corruption quite common.

The political theory of representation creates a new category, since “it considers representation dynamically rather than statically: representation is not meant to make a preexisting entity – i.e., the unity of the state or the people or the nation – visible; rather, it is a form of political existence created by the actors themselves” (24). According to this theory, representation designates a form of political process that stimulates circularity between institutions and society and “is not confined to deliberation and decision in the assembly”. From this perspective, “the activation of a communicative current between civil and political society is essential and constitutive, not just unavoidable” (ibid.). Instead of opposing state and society, the social is made political. Sovereignty is no longer conceived of in terms of mere decision but also of discussion and judgment. Political representation “marks the end of a yes/no politics and the beginning of politics as an open and common arena of contestable opinions and

revisable decisions” (25). According to this vision, the people “retain a negative power that allow them to investigate, judge, influence, and censure their lawmakers” (28).

Against direct democracy, in which one votes on single issues, Urbinati claims that a vote for a candidate, as in representative democracy, “reflects the *longue durée* and effectiveness of a political opinion or a constellation of political opinions; it reflects citizens’ judgment of a political platform, or a set of demands and ideas, over time” (31). Urbinati insists on the fact that “opinions never have equal weight” (ibid.); however, it is not clear how we can translate quality (of opinions) into quantity (i.e. into votes). Speech seems to play a key role in this question,² but I am not sure whether Urbinati manages to harmonize the concept of *isegoria* with the idea of the different weight of opinions. The “querulous nature of democracy” she stretches out (33) can be understood also in the sense that there will always be a quarrel among different groups of citizens – say, between a minority that will always remain such (e.g. homosexuals) and a majority that tends to exclude the minority. Urbinati acknowledges that “democratic society is build around conflict” and not around “organic unity or harmony”, but maybe she overestimates the positive role of “speech and opinions as the means by which a multitude of concrete individuals overcome their irreducible singularity and converge into common political platforms and intents” (35). Rancière in his *La mésentente* gives a quite different picture of the “querulous nature of democracy” and connects it to exclusion and to the never ending fight for inclusion by those who are excluded (whether workes, women, homosexuals, immigrants etc.).

Urbinati tends also to underestimate the role of parties in the political life of contemporary democracies. She writes that “no party claims to represent only the interests of those who belong to or side with it” (37). This may be true of the U.S., for instance, but it is not true of many other countries in which smaller parties (as opposed to *Volksparteien* or mass parties) often claim precisely to represent the specific interests of certain social groups, from farmers (e.g. the Farmers Party in Poland) to affluent people (the German FDP, for many years the minor partner in several two-parties governments, claimed once to be the party of the *besser Verdienenden*, i.e. of those with higher income). Furthermore, in many countries parties tend to minimize precisely the participation and the negative power of control of the citizens. In Italy, for instance, parties decide who the candidates are and citizens have no chance to prefer a candidate of party A to another candidate of the same party: they have to ‘swallow’ the candidate the party imposes on them. The result, in the Italian case, has been a parliament filled with partners or relatives of prominent politicians (i.e. ‘old style’ nepotism) and, more seriously, a strong sense of disaffection and lack of trust in the democratic institutions among the voters. Finally, parties often introduce further (and ongoing) difficulties into the representative mechanism. I’m not sure whether the function of parties is only that of “integrating the multitude by unifying people’s ideas and interests” as Urbinati claims (38). She writes that to analyze the role of the party in modern democracy “goes beyond the scope” of her book; but maybe a theory of representative democracy cannot avoid making such an analysis.

Particularly interesting is Urbinati’s defense of representation as advocacy. She identifies two main political functions of representation: to express individual opinions and choices and to resist exclusion (45). Representation as advocacy encompasses two components: “the representative’s passionate link to the electors’ cause and the representative’s autonomy of judgment” (ibid.). As an advocate, the representative is not asked “to be impartial as a judge, or to reason in solitude like a philosopher” (47); however, while advocates believe in their causes, they also understand the reasoning and the opinions of others. Again, this presupposes that democracy is conflict, but also that there is always the possibility to reach an outcome that is satisfactory for all parties.

The ‘historical’ chapters are a compelling read both for their content, i.e. for the interpretation they offer of such classic authors as Rousseau, Kant, etc., and for their methodology. Far from adopting a merely historical perspective, Urbinati succeeds in revitalizing the arguments used by past thinkers and in making them important tools for constructing a new theory of representation. She is not doing ‘mere’ history of ideas; she is dialoguing with these authors and making them alive. This becomes particularly clear in the last chapter, which is maybe the most surprising and exciting one. It is dedicated to Condorcet’s theory of indirect democracy. While the thinkers analyzed in the former chapters are among the names one could expect in such a book (they are ‘the usual suspects’ so to speak), Condorcet is actually a rather underestimate political thinker (Urbinati explains the many reasons for this). Urbinati proposes studying his political ideas “as a

contribution to modern democratic constitutionalism and emphasizing its uniqueness and heterodoxy in relation to the doctrinal tenets of republicanism, liberalism and democracy” (180). As Urbinati convincingly demonstrates with her analyses of Condorcet’s project for the French constitution of 1793 and other writings of him, this thinker “translated sovereignty into the language of ‘rights’ and conceived the constitution as the founding process of a legal, political, and ethical order” (180). Condorcet put society and the government “in a permanent and dynamic dialogue” (181). He achieved this by creating a mechanism of double constitutional amendment: every citizen may propose at any time the revision of an article of the chart, and every twenty years a general revision should take place. He put disagreement at the center of his vision of democracy, but he wanted to prevent extemporaneous decisions. The constitution proposed by Condorcet should make possible a process of public interaction “within which the citizens developed, changed, or corroborated their judgment without coercion or manipulation” (184). This comes very close to Urbinati’s own goal of offering a normative theory of representative democracy, and it is for this reason that she analyses Condorcet’s proposal at length.

In her conclusion, Urbinati comes back to the idea that politics is a matter of governing temporality and that representative democracy represents precisely a way of doing this in a more democratic way than direct, delegated, and plebiscitarian democracy. She tries to revitalize a conception of the political which most

contemporary theories (with their “deep rooted rationalist approach to deliberation” [227]) fail to appreciate: the importance of partisanship. Far from seeing in it an obstacle to democracy, Urbinati stretches out the reinvigorating role that partisanship may play: “in a society in which citizens are free to express their ideas (and actually are required to express them about lawmakers and sometimes laws), political representation becomes the special terrain in which individuals’ social and cultural specificity surfaces rather than congeals under the legal status of citizenship” (227). It allows keeping the sovereign “in perpetual motion” (228).

Among the many books on democracy (particularly on deliberative democracy) that have come out in the last years (e.g. Richardson’s *Democratic Autonomy*, Goodin’s *Reflective Democracy*, Gutmann and Thompson’s *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, Ackerman and Fishkin’s *Deliberation Day*), this one is maybe the most compelling because of its strong appeal to consider representation as an essential element of democracy and not just as a possible way of organizing a democratic system or even as an obstacle to democracy itself. Urbinati sets herself an ambitious goal and manages to reach it with ‘sovereign’ security, even if the lack of a more in-depth analysis of the key role of parties in our contemporary democracies leaves the reader with some doubts about the real chances that public debate, speech, and free expression of one’s own ideas and opinions have to make our societies more democratic.

¹ The numbers in parenthesis refers to the pages of the book.

² Interestingly, while exalting speech “as a form of political action” (34), Urbinati does not mention Arendt’s conception of action as *praxis* and *lexis*.

Notes