Ontologies of Political Representation

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Political representation can be conceptualised in various ways. Underlying different conceptions of representation are more fundamental ontological commitments, which are rarely made explicit yet have direct consequences for how we think about and study representation. The purpose of this paper is to clarify what "ontologies political of representation" are currently available to us. This should help scholars of representation achieve greater epistemological and methodological consistency. Specifically, the paper reconstructs three broader ontological positions: (1) *radical-democratic constructivism*, (2) *interactive constructivism*, and (3) *materialist realism*. Each position is characterised by a different understanding of the nature of (democratic) politics that sets limits for what we can know about representation, and thus for how representation may be studied empirically.

I begin by laying out two general arguments for why scholars of representation should take ontology seriously. The subsequent sections discuss the three just-mentioned ontologies of political representation. The final section addresses the difficult question of how to choose between different sets of ontological assumptions. Are some ontologies of representation more plausible than others, and if so, why?

1. Why care about ontology?

In political science and theory, the term "ontology" refers to assumptions we make about the nature of the social and political reality that is the focus of our analytical attentions. The first question that might be asked is: Why should scholars of political representation care about ontology? Generations of political scientists have (seemingly) successfully studied representation without much reflection on "meta-issues" of this sort – why should we do so now? In this section, I offer two arguments for why it is indeed worth taking a step back and reflecting on the ontological assumptions that underpin our respective understandings of representation.

1.1 Ontology is antecedent to epistemology and methodology

The first and more general argument should already be familiar to most readers. This is that ontology is logically prior to our epistemological and methodological choices; so, if we want to (a) understand what the major theoretical disputes in our discipline are fundamentally about, and (b) achieve consistency in how we study political representation ourselves, we must be aware of the ontological assumptions our analytical enterprises are premised upon, and have a clear sense what these assumptions imply for our own as well as rival conceptual and empirical strategies.

To see this, consider first the necessary link between ontology and epistemology. The assumptions that one makes about the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated (ontology) have direct consequences for what one can acquire knowledge of (epistemology), and thus can study in a targeted and systematic fashion. With Hay (2006, 79), we might put the point more simply: "political ontology is intimately associated with adjudicating the categories to which legitimate appeal might be made in political analysis." Moreover, "even where we can agree upon

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common categories of actors, mechanisms, or processes to which legitimate appeal can be made, ontological choices affect substantively the content of our theories about such entities (and hence our expectations about how the political drama will unfold)."

The following example nicely illustrates this. If one assumes, as many scholars of representation do, that *constituencies* are entities that exist in some "objective" sense, say in virtue of its members belonging to a particular social class or residing in a pre-defined electoral district (see Rehfeld 2005, 35), then it makes good sense to try to acquire knowledge about the policy preferences of constituency members (and subsequently attempt to find out whether these preferences are shared by elected representatives). Using Hay's language, we may say that the category of "constituency preferences" can legitimately be appealed to as an independent object of analysis. In contrast, if one assumes that constituencies have no objective existence but are constructed by political actors who "solicit their objects" of representation by conjuring up images or symbols of what or whom is to be represented (Disch 2020, 5; Saward 2010), then any attempt to acquire knowledge about constituencies must start by looking at the speech acts or "discourses" through which political actors create constituencies. It might still be possible to appeal to the category of "constituency preferences," but it would be pointless to study that category independently of political actors' constitutive acts of shaping constituencies.

These different epistemological positions in turn call for different methodological choices. Scholars who believe that constituencies exist in some objective sense often use survey data about the policy preferences of, say, the members of a particular social group or the residents of a particular electoral district (and go on to investigate the degree to which government policies or parties' political positions are "congruent" with those constituency preferences, see Sabl 2015, 346-48). Those who think of constituencies as the product of political actors' efforts to shape citizens' preferences and political identities, on the other hand, typically draw on a range of different methodologies, ranging from Essex school discourse analysis (e.g., Howarth et al. 2000) to communication science-inspired methods that focus on how political actors' frame "representative claims" in the mass media (e.g., de Wilde 2013), to survey experiments on "framing effects" (e.g., Druckman et al. 2013). What these diverse methods have in common, despite some substantive differences, is that they are geared toward studying political actors' attempts to create and mobilise constituencies, not citizens' supposedly elite-independent preferences.

These examples equip us with a first sense of why ontological issues matter in research on representation. Before unpacking what different ontologies currently are available to us, I turn to the second, more specific argument for why scholars of political representation should engage with ontology.

1.2 Recent conceptual innovations come with alternative political ontologies

This argument holds that important recent conceptual innovations in political theory have introduced alternative political ontologies into the field of political representation. I am referring, in particular, to the "constructivist turn" in representation theory, which constitutes the single most important theoretical advance in the last several decades. Although some older approaches to conceptualising political representation – such as the seminal work of Hanna Pitkin (1967) – also contain constructivist elements (Disch 2021, 35-9), it was only through Saward's much-discussed notion of the "representative claim" (2010) and Disch's influential "mobilisation conception of political representation" (2011 and 2021) that constructivist approaches entered the political science mainstream (also see de Wilde 2013 and 2020; Mansbridge 2009 and

2018). This is not to say that quantitative scholars of representation, whose work dominates the field, have engaged much with constructivism; they haven't (Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021, 863-4). But there can be little doubt that constructivism is increasingly widely accepted as an innovative and powerful theoretical paradigm, even in empiricist circles (see de Wilde 2013; Wolkenstein, forthcoming).

I have already touched on one key difference between constructivist ontologies of representation and what one might call more conventional "realist" ontologies – that constructivist ontologies assume that "the identity, interests, or preferences of the represented are not given prior to representation but shaped through being represented" (Fossen 2019, 824), while realist ontologies treat the identity, interests and preferences of the represented as phenomena that exist independently of acts of representation – or that can be studied *as if* they existed independently of acts of representation. Constructivism's ontological shift has momentous consequences for how representation is conceptualised and empirically studied. For one thing, it redirects the focus of our analytical attentions to political actors' preference-, identity- and interest-shaping efforts. For another thing, constructivist ontologies decouple the practice of political representation from liberal democracy's representative institutions, notably parliament and parties. This is because claims to represent a particular constituency can in principle be advanced by anyone *within* and *without* those institutions (Saward 2018). All of this broadens our perspective of what political representation is about, and where we might find it.

Importantly, however, constructivism is not a unified paradigm that draws on a single set of ontological assumptions. It comes in different forms, and its proponents are not always explicit about the ontologies they operate with. In what follows, I distinguish two separate constructivist ontologies, which I call *radical-democratic constructivism* and *interactive constructivism*, respectively, and contrast these to the more familiar ontology of *materialist realism* that many, perhaps most, empirical representation scholars (implicitly or explicitly) subscribe to. What I want to do is offer a general, maximally jargon-free characterisation of these ontologies. The presentation will be deliberately stylistic, bracketing numerous differences internal to the different theoretical "schools" in order to highlight what is distinctive about them.

2. Ontology #1: Radical-democratic constructivism

Let us begin by examining the first ontological position found in research on political representation, which I call *radical-democratic constructivism*. I start with this position because its advocates tend to be more sensitive to ontological issues than most other scholars of representation. The reason for this is that they derive their understanding of representation from philosophical traditions that are exceptionally preoccupied with ontology, most notably certain strands of French post-structuralism.

Put simply, the central ontological assumption of radical-democratic constructivism is that the entire social and political world is a product of representation or, as some say, signification. To better grasp this, it is helpful to return to the seminal work of Claude Lefort, a radical-democratic constructivist *avant la lettre*. Lefort's point of departure is the observation that the emergence of modern democracy involved the "erection of a political stage on which competition can take place" – think, in particular, of parliaments and public spheres (Lefort 1988, 18). He then argues that the continuous "staging" of political competition in democratic societies shows all of their citizens that "division is, in a general way, constitutive of the very unity of society"

(Lefort 1988, 18). By this is meant that the conflict-enabling institutions and public spaces of modern democracy shape the *identity* of democratic societies by representing or signifying what a democratic society *is*, namely an essentially conflictual enterprise where divisions may be tamed but not overcome. This is precisely what marks democracy off from earlier forms of political rule, in which the monarch represented the *indivisible* unity of the whole society (on this, also see Kantorowicz 2016).[2]

Lefort repeatedly plays up the difference between modern democracies and pre-modern, monarchical regimes. Specifically, he suggests that

the disappearance of natural determination, which was once linked to the person of the prince or to the existence of a nobility, leads to the emergence of a *purely social society* in which the people, the nation and the state take on the status of universal entities, and in which any individual or group can be accorded the same status. But neither the state, the people nor the nation represent substantial entities. Their representation is itself, in its dependence upon a political discourse and upon a sociological and historical elaboration, always bound up with ideological debate (Lefort 1988, 18, emphasis added).

This means that the act of representing the state, the people or the nation (or some sub-set of a nation, for that matter) does not involve representing something that exists prior to the act of representation. Rather, it involves contributing, by engaging in what Lefort here calls "ideological debate," to the stabilisation, contestation or transformation of components of an existing symbolic order that has been instituted at an earlier point in time, with the introduction of modern democracy.

If we accept this, we must also acknowledge that representation and power are closely intertwined. Later radical democrats, most importantly Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), thus put questions of power front and centre. Like Lefort, Laclau and Mouffe suggest that the social and political world of modern democratic societies is constituted by acts of representation. Using a term from Louis Althusser, they conceptualise representation as *articulation*, which denotes "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105). Articulation so understood is performative: it constitutes what is being articulated, for example a class subject or indeed "the people" as a whole. This view of representation is carefully distinguished from materialist, in particular Marxist, theories that assume that collective identities are a reflection of objective material interests. In particular, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the "unity" of collective subjects is never merely

the expression of a common underlying essence but the result of political construction and struggle. If the working class, as a hegemonic agent, manages to articulate around itself a number of democratic demands and struggles, this is due not to any a priori structural privilege, but to a political initiative on the part of the class. Thus, the hegemonic subject is a class subject only in the sense that, on the basis of class positions, a certain hegemonic formation is *practically* articulated; but, in that case we are dealing with concrete workers and not with the entelechy constituted by their "historical interests" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 65).

As we see in this quote, Laclau and Mouffe also reappropriate the originally Gramscian term of *hegemony* for their theoretical purposes. For them, hegemony and

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[2] This is why political parties and factions were considered especially harmful in the *Ancien Régime* (Rosenblum 2008, chaps. 1 and 2).

counter-hegemony refer to the "dis-articulation" and "re-articulation" of identities in an on-going political struggle, with the aim of discursively creating some "relative fixation of the social" (Laclau 1990, 91). In Laclau's later work on "populism," many of these earlier ideas recur, though Laclau eventually shifts the main focus of attention to the quintessentially *political* task of constructing a "people." This, he argues, is the paradigmatic example of representation as a performative and constitutive practice:

Constructing a "people" is not simply the application to a particular case of a general theory of representation which could be formalized at a more abstract level; it is, on the contrary, a paradigmatic case, because it is the one which reveals representation for what it is: the primary terrain of constitution of social objectivity (Laclau 2005, 163).[3]

This act of construction is of course not meant to occur *ex nihilo*; rather, constructing a people centrally involves the re-articulation of already existing meanings, wherein "representation re-presents" (Thomassen 2019, 336) those already existing meanings (see Laclau 2005, 108). In fact, such re-articulations acquire much of their "force from citing representations of, for instance, the people that are already taken as authoritative" (Thomassen 2019, 336). So, although Laclau rejects the idea that representation is about making interests or collective subjects that exist independently of representation "present" in the political sphere, he is not suggesting that any kind of collective subject or "people" could be constructed at any given moment and in any given context. However, it is never some representation-independent material reality that places constraints on attempts to construct a "people." It is existing *representations* of what "the people" is or isn't that shape the horizon of articulatory possibilities.

Importantly, Laclau is quite open about the centrality of leadership to his populist theory of representation. It is indeed not difficult to interpret Laclau as conceptualising representation as a *one-way relationship*, in which populist leaders "initiate a downward claim on a 'new' popular subject that displaces settled hierarchies and creates a new hegemonic order" (Jäger and Borriello 2020, 743; see, e.g., Laclau 2005, 182-3, 99-100). Constructing a people, then, is not a process of mutual engagement between a leader and would-be constituents, let alone some sort of "deliberative" process of communication. Instead, it is a top-down process of identity-shaping that gives rise to non-cognitive attitudes that Laclau (2005, 53-6, 82-3) describes in terms of affective, libidinal ties, a "love" for the leader and for all those whom the leader supposedly loves.

This strongly leader-centred understanding of representation is also present in the work of contemporary radical-democratic constructivists like Disch (2021, 1), who starts her recent book by stating flat out that "responsiveness goes the other way." Contrary to popular belief, she suggests, it is not political leaders who are responsive to citizens' demands and preferences, but citizens who are responsive to political leaders' efforts to shape their demands and preferences in a top-down fashion. Disch thus not only rejects what she calls the "interest-first model" of representation "according to which constituencies form around things they want and elected representatives respond to their demands." She also seems to reject the possibility that representation could, at least sometimes, be *interactive* or a genuine two-way relationship in which people and leaders mutually influence one another. While Disch, unlike Laclau, does not speak of affective or libidinal ties to leaders, she too endorses a non-

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[3] Another term Laclau famously uses to describe the construction of the people is *the political*. For an excellent discussion of this term and its genealogy, see Marchart (2011).

cognitivist view of politics that appears to rule out representation through persuasion and argument where two-way communication could meaningfully contribute to the constitution of representative relationships (Disch 2021, chap. 5).

To sum up, radical-democratic constructivism comes with an ontology that sees the social and political world we inhabit as produced by representation. Social objectivity is generated through acts of "articulation" that shape how we see the social and political world, for instance whom we think "the people" is or what purpose we ascribe to political institutions. Articulation is never politically neutral, however. It is *intrinsically political.* That goes not only for political actors' attempts to create and mobilise new collective subjects, but also for our shared understandings of the meaning of democracy *per se.* After all, as Lefort (1988, 18) argues, modern democracy arose from the fundamentally political act of instituting "a political stage on which competition can take place," which at once denaturalised pre-modern forms of rule *and* established a new social reality that would henceforth define the horizon of our thinking about politics. It is for this reason that Marchart (2011, 213) describes radical-democratic constructivism as providing both a theory of *political signification* and a *political theory* of signification. For if there is nothing outside of representation, then neither can there be anything that is not political.

The ontology of radical-democratic constructivism has far-reaching epistemological and methodological consequences. Starting with epistemology, it seems clear that we can acquire knowledge about political leaders' *practices of articulation* as well as the *representations* (or, as Laclau and Mouffe sometimes put it, "hegemonic discourses") to which those practices give rise – but our knowledge will inevitably be shaped by whatever representations have acquired hegemonic status. For "insofar as all 'being' is discursively constructed, and the discursive forms the horizon of 'being,'" we can hardly avoid drawing on existing representations of the social and political world (Marchart 2011, 215). Methodologically, it follows that we must reject the kind of social-scientific "objectivism" that seeks to explain political representation by appealing to objective material entities, and acknowledge that our concepts and imaginative horizon are as much shaped by existing power relations as the political phenomena that we seek to study. This is why radical-democratic constructivists gravitate towards qualitative and interpretative methods that foreground the situatedness of the researcher (e.g., Howarth et al. 2000; also see De Leon et al. 2009).[4]

3. Ontology #2: Interactive constructivism

The second approach to representation whose ontology I seek to examine is also a constructivist approach, but one that differs in many respects from radical-democratic constructivism. First and foremost, what I call *interactive constructivism* does not regard representation as constitutive of the entire social and political world but as *one* (crucially important) political practice that can be studied within a wider array of political practices. Second, interactive constructivism conceives representation in more procedural and relational terms than radical-democratic theories of "articulation" do; hence *interactive* constructivism. Well-known advocates of this view are Michael

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[4] Disch (2011, 2020, 2021) repeatedly cites experimental studies on "framing effects" (e.g., Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Broockman and Butler 2017; Druckman et al. 2013) as confirming the empirical correctness of the radical-democratic approach to representation – however contested the real impact of framing effects on citizens' political judgments is (Amsalem and Zoizner 2022). Being a product of "objectivist" empirical social science, however, these sorts of studies are barely compatible with a radical-democratic constructivist ontology.

Saward, Nadia Urbinati, and Jane Mansbridge. These scholars certainly locate themselves within very different traditions of political thought, but they share in common a roughly similar understanding of how political representation works that transcends those differences. And although they say rather little about ontology in their writings, it seems they must make somewhat similar ontological assumptions in order for their theories to make sense.

This section is devoted to clarifying these thoughts. I first summarise the main ideas about representation that interactive constructivists entertain, and then go on to explore what ontological assumptions interactive constructivism might turn upon. Starting with the first of the two tasks, it might be useful to underline that those who defend interactive constructivism sometimes draw a clear distinction between the constructivism of radical democrats and theirs. Urbinati (2020, 199), for example, explicitly distinguishes "*two kinds of constructivism* – one aiming at creating the people as an institutional reality and one remaining on the terrain of opinion." The first, where the focus is on constructing a "people," is the already-familiar radical-democratic brand of constructivism. The second, in contrast, is about constructing "an *interpretative* or *artificially created similarity* between the representative and her electors (not pictorial or mirror-like similarity)," a "similarity of ideas, not essential or substantive similarity" (Urbinati 2011, 44). Constructing this sort of similarity requires, says Urbinati, – and notice the difference between Urbinati's semantics and Laclau's talk of top-down articulation and libidinal ties to a leader – that representatives *cooperate* (Urbinati 2020, 199) and *communicate* (Urbinati 2011, 44) with those they wish to represent. Representation as an interactive two-way relationship, not a one-way relationship created by a leader.

These ideas are presented in more systematic fashion in the work of Saward and Mansbridge. Saward's (2010) theory of representation as claim-making constitutes the perhaps most widely-discussed interactive constructivist account of representation. In short, Saward frames representation in terms of a "claim" to be someone who stands for something that is presented by a claim-maker to an audience. As Saward (2010, 36) puts it, "A *maker* of representation ('M') puts forward a *subject* ('S') which stands for an *object* ('O') that is related to a referent ('R') and is offered to an *audience* ('A')." Here is a helpful example that Saward provides to illustrate the idea:

The MP (maker) offers himself or herself (subject) as the embodiment of constituency interests (object) to that constituency (audience). The referent is the actual, flesh-and-blood people of the constituency. The object involves a selective portrayal of constituency interests (Saward 2010, 37).

Saward's account also has a strong *interactive* element built into it, to do with the capacity of audiences to question, contest and reject representative claims. "Political makers of representations tend to want to foreclose or fix the meanings of themselves and their actions," argues Saward (2010, 54) – but "there is no representative claim that cannot be 'read back' or contested or disputed by its targets, recipients, or observers. The maker of a representative claim may intend that the constituents invoked by the claim see it as he or she wishes, but they are always to some extent free to reinterpret the claim, to turn it back against the maker: 'who are you to tell me who I am and what I need?'" Note that this is compatible with the notion that representative claims invariably are *constitutive* claims that construct "in some measure the groups that they purport to address (audience), along with the groups that they purport to speak for or about (constituency)" (Saward 2010, 54). For those who are supposed to be

constituted as addressees or constituents are not conceived as passive recipients of claims, but as capable of understanding that claims do not necessarily refer to a natural or pre-existing entities that are "out there" prior to the claim being advanced. So, just as Urbinati argues, it seems that representatives need to cooperate and communicate with those they claim to represent if their claims are to be accepted.

As far as Mansbridge is concerned, constructivist elements were already present in her early writings on representation, notably in her concepts of "anticipatory representation" (where representatives are required to represent interests that have not yet been formed, see the discussion in Disch 2021, 40-3) and "surrogate representation" (where representation is decoupled from any electoral mechanism that could establish a formal electoral relationship and thus has to be constructed, see Mansbridge 2003, 522-5). Yet it was only more recently that she began incorporating newer constructivist ideas (like Saward's) into her understanding of representation. With her background in Habermasian deliberative democratic theory, however, Mansbridge's focus is not so much on the very act of constructing constituencies as on the ways in which (constructed) representative relationships are maintained, transformed, and imbued with democratic legitimacy. Chief amongst the things Mansbridge mentions in this connection are again cooperation and, indeed, "two-way communication" (Mansbridge 2009, 370) between representatives and constituents. As she recently put it, representation requires "iterative communication between elected representatives and their constituents, between administrators and those to whom they apply the law, between societal representatives and their constituents, between legislatures, administrators, and the societal realm, and between societal representatives and their constituents" (Mansbridge 2018, 304).

With this necessarily brief overview of interactive constructivism in place, we are now in a position to address the rather difficult second issue of which ontological assumptions this second constructivist view rests on. This is a difficult issue because, as I have already noted, advocates of interactive constructivism largely remain silent about ontology. How can we know what they would commit to in terms of assumptions about the nature of social and political reality? Since interactive constructivists are mostly what may be called "mid-range" theorists, it makes good sense to begin searching for their ontological commitments at a lower level of abstraction, by looking at what they have to say about *epistemology* (i.e., what we can acquire knowledge of), for example. Of course, ontology is logically prior to epistemology, so we cannot simply "reverse engineer" interactive constructivists' ontological views. However, through a brief analysis of their epistemologies we can get a better sense of the sort of ontological assumptions they might endorse.

Consider, to start with, Saward's (2010, 43) general proposition that "the world of political representation is a world of claim-making rather than the operation of formal institutions." While this may be read as an ontological proposition, I interpret it to be an *epistemological* one, since it does not refer to the social and political world as such but to a much narrower domain of analytical interest. What Saward is saying is that particular kinds of speech acts – namely, "representative claims" – are the primary entities we can and should be interested in *acquiring knowledge of* when studying representation. Meanwhile, he refrains from making more ambitious statements about what the social or political world is. Indeed, Saward makes clear that "there are more things in the political world than claims – there are demands, for example. And not all claims are representative claims, though many will be, even if not explicitly" (Saward 2010, 43). These epistemological propositions appear to be accepted by most

interactive constructivists, even if they do not use Saward's language of "claims" or, like Mansbridge, deal with already-established representative relationships.[5]

Arguably, a view of politics that assigns central importance to *communication* must be presupposed here. After all, it is various sorts of *speech acts* – claims, demands, interventions aimed at contesting claims, and so forth – that are treated as the central elements of the political world. This also explains why leading interactive constructivists affirm the fundamental compatibility of their approach with deliberative democratic theory (Saward 2010, 3, 21, 31, 93,108-9, 113, 134-5, 164-5) – or even avowedly start from deliberative-democratic premises, as Mansbridge does. The question then arises whether deliberative democratic theory can furnish an ontological grounding for interactive constructivism? The difficulty with this is that deliberative theory, even in its most sophisticated Habermasian variant, is not explicitly concerned with ontology either. That said, it is possible to read Habermas as committing to particular assumptions about the nature of the social and political world we inhabit, thus offering some relevant reflections about ontology that we can use for our present purposes (on this, see Stahl 2013, 538-9).

While Lefort, Laclau and Mouffe stress that the emergence of modern democratic societies opened social relations to political construction in ways that were impossible in societies where "power was incorporated in the person of the prince" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 186), Habermas (1998, 464-72) concentrates on a different aspect of modern democratic societies, namely that they arose from the same modern political-intellectual heritage that brought about capitalism and the bureaucratic administrative state. A major concern in his later political theory is the potential *threat* that these latter two forces pose to democracy; he famously frames this as the "colonisation of the lifeworld" by "systems." The notion of "lifeworld" here denotes a society's social fabric that, in modern societies, is thought to be created and reproduced by everyday communication aimed at reaching common understanding (Habermas 2006, 411). In the lifeworld thus understood, social relations are integrated through communicative coordination among its inhabitants. The "systems" of capitalist markets and state bureaucracy, in contrast, aim at functional integration through flows of money and state power. If the operating logics of markets or bureaucratic apparatuses gradually spread throughout the lifeworld, argues Habermas, they will undermine the deeper social fabric of societies, replacing understanding-oriented communication with functional imperatives. This puts democracy at risk, since communication oriented at reaching understanding – which requires mutual listening, explanation and justification – is the backbone of any functioning democratic society (Habermas 1998, 184, 461; Habermas 2006, 422).

It seems that one rather central ontological commitment we can derive from Habermas' theory is that the preconditions for the kinds of understanding-oriented communication that democratic societies are nourished by are provided by the lifeworld. As Habermas (1998, 302) puts it, in democratic societies both "the politics governed by the formal procedures of an institutionalized opinion- and will-formation and … the politics that occurs only informally in the networks of the public sphere … depend on lifeworld resources." These "lifeworld resources" are "a liberal political culture and an enlightened political socialization, above all on the initiatives of opinion-building associations. To a large extent, these resources form and regenerate spontaneously, and in any case they are not readily accessible to direct interventions of

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[5] Some would arguably add the qualifier that there are *normative* reasons to focus more on the question of how claims can be channelled through formal institutions than Saward does, but this need not concern us now (Urbinati 2020).

the political apparatus." These are no doubt claims about the nature of the social and political world in democratic societies. (And note how much they resonate with interactive constructivists' emphasis on cooperation and communication between representatives and represented.)

A further important ontological commitment in Habermas' work concerns the concept of popular sovereignty, which he positions as antidote to the colonisation of the lifeworld by systems. Now, because practices of communication are at the heart of his understanding of modern democratic societies, he reconceptualises popular sovereignty in strictly communicative terms. This involves a substantial revision of the social ontology underlying popular sovereignty: rather than thinking of the popular sovereign as an embodied collective, Habermas describes popular sovereignty as generated out of "subjectless" forms of communication that circulate freely throughout society. In his own words, "popular sovereignty no longer concentrates in a collectivity, or in the physically tangible presence of the united citizens or their assembled representatives, but only takes effect in the circulation of reasonably structured deliberations and decisions" (Habermas 1998, 136; also see Habermas 2006; Habermas 2022, 78-9).[6] He explains this idea by reference to Hannah Arendt's notion of "communicative power," a power that arises when people make public use of their communicative freedom to form opinions and wills, as well as to contest the ways in which power is exercised – or how "representative claims" are framed ("Who are you to tell me who I am and what I need?") (Habermas 1998, 147-51).

The two ontological commitments are closely linked to one another: in Habermas' discursive translation of popular sovereignty, the exercise of "communicative power" "is internally connected with contexts of a rationalized lifeworld that meets it halfway," that is, it must be "anchored in the voluntary associations of civil society and embedded in liberal patterns of political culture and socialization" (Habermas 1998, 302, 358). This means that people must expect their exchanges – especially those about important issues of shared interest – to require reciprocal reason-giving, some level of mutual respect, and so forth. These sorts of "lifeworld resources" are thought to be both the precondition for popular sovereignty to make itself felt *and* fostered and sustained by the circulation of "subjectless" forms of communication aimed at shaping laws and policies. Without claiming that all interactive constructivists would accept embedding their theories in this broader Habermasian framework, arguably the latter provides a fitting ontological underpinning to interactive constructivists' communication-centred conceptualisation of political representation.

Summarily, it seems that an ontology that conceives popular sovereignty as a form of communicative power that both presupposes and sustains a wider lifeworld where citizens regularly engage in understanding-oriented communication is a natural

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[6] The proposed Habermasian framework also supports the "systemic" view of representation that many interactive constructivists favour, which holds that "representation occurs across society, including in governmental bodies but also for example in interest groups, social movements, and businesses" (Saward 2014, 732; also see Mansbridge 2003, 525-6; Mansbridge 2011, 627-28; Saward 2018; Urbinati 2011, 46). After all, Habermas approaches democratic societies in systemic terms, famously arguing for a "two-track" model of democratic law-making, where formally institutionalised deliberation and informal public spheres combine to form a larger, interconnected whole (Habermas 1998 and 2006). What remains ambiguous is the relationship between the "dyadic" dimension of representative-constituent interactions and the systemic dimension of outputs that result from the actions of innumerable representative actors. The recent uptake of Habermas' systemic account of democracy in democratic theory has done little to clarify this, although several scholars have drawn attention to this issue (see Owen and Smith 2015; Ebeling and Wolkenstein 2018; Bevir and Chan 2022).

match for interactive constructivism. This is notably because interactive constructivists are epistemologically committed to analysing speech acts (representative claims, "reading back" or contesting claims, iterative communication, etc.) as the central units of political representation in democratic societies. Note that it is less straightforward what follows in terms of methodology. Although scholars of deliberative democracy (e.g., Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019) and constructivist representation (e.g., de Wilde 2013 and 2020) increasingly make use of quantitative methods aimed at predicting behaviour and outcomes, and thus at least implicitly endorse the sort of social-scientific "objectivism" that most radical-democratic constructivists categorically reject, it has rightly been argued that these methodological choices sit uneasily with the unpredictability of communicative processes that any genuinely deliberative-democratic approach must presuppose (Ansari et al. 2022). Whether this tilts the balance in favour of interpretivism, as some suggest (Ansari et al. 2022), remains an open question (compare the preliminary suggestions for quantifying constructivism in Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021). What is certain is that a better understanding of interactive constructivism's ontological core is crucial for making progress on these methodological issues in the future.

4. Ontology #3: Materialist realism

The third and final ontology of representation – *materialist realism* – is perhaps the most familiar one, for it forms the basis of the dominant approaches to studying representation in empirical political science. While these approaches differ in terms of concepts, data and measurement, they all turn upon a similar understanding of political representation, according to which "representation means that the actions of … policy makers are supposed to be responsive to the wishes of the people" (Powell Jr. 2004, 273; classic accounts are Miller and Stokes 1963; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Stimson et al. 1995; for a recent overview, see Sabl 2015, esp. 346-48). Of course, "simple correspondence between what citizens want and what policy makers do is not enough"; there must also exist "institutionalized arrangements that reliably create such connections. The most essential and irreplaceable of these institutions is the free and competitive national election in which all citizens can participate equally" (Powell Jr. 2004, 273-4). National elections are typically conceptualised as generating a principal-agent relationship between citizens (the principals) and the parties in parliament or individual legislators (the agents), depending on the electoral system of the countries that are analysed (e.g., Mansbridge 2003, 516; Müller 2000; Strøm et al. 2003). The threat of being unelected in the next election is supposed to keep the agents attuned to the principals' preferences and demands.

This way of thinking about political representation differs considerably from the two constructivist approaches discussed thus far. It is, indeed, the *antithesis* to constructivism. The single biggest difference between materialist realism and constructivism is directly related to ontology: this is that the former assumes, in contradistinction to constructivism, that constituencies and their wishes exist prior to acts of representation. In other words, neither constituencies nor their wishes are constructed via in-principle contestable "representative claims" or attempts to articulate "the people." Rather, they are entities that can be identified by proxies such as citizenship and age (all eligible voters of a country), residence (constituencies in pre-defined electoral districts), and so forth. These proxies pick out a constituency whose preferences and demands can be studied in surveys with representative samples, thus unveiling what its members want from elected representatives.

While it is not always made explicit where the wishes of constituencies (however defined) are supposed to flow from (if, *contra* constructivism, they are not even partially shaped by political representatives), it is highly common to treat those wishes as corresponding to constituents' economic self-interest. Katz (2014, 184-5) schematically distinguishes two prominent models of representative government that are based on such "materialist" assumptions. The first – call it the Duverger (1963) or "mass party" model – assumes a segmented class society, where each class forms a "natural" constituency with objective, historically evolved economic interests, and "each party is the 'political committee'" of a social class (Katz 2014, 184; also see Dalton et al. 2011, 5-9). The second model – call it the Downsian (1957) model – conceives of parties not as the political arm of different social groupings but as "teams of politicians" that compete to be "hired" as the agents of the whole citizenry. The members of the citizenry are here assumed to "hire" their agents based on rational calculations about their own "utility income," whereby each voter compares "the stream of utility income from government activity he has received under the present government … with those streams he believes he would have received if the various opposition parties had been in office" (Downs 1957, 49). This latter model continues to be a mainstay of research on representation and party government (e.g., Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).

What we have here, then, is an ontology that is *materialist* and *realist*, in that it assumes that there exists some sort of objective economic base for the constituency wishes that representatives should be responsive to. Constituency wishes can accordingly be treated as existing independent from acts of representation, which implies that one can plausibly try to acquire knowledge about those wishes without considering the manifold ways in which those wishes may be shaped by representatives. This epistemological position neatly fits with the preferred methodological choices of empirical political science. Starting with the canonical study by Miller and Stokes (1963), which used a public opinion survey to ascertain the issue positions of citizens in different U.S. congressional districts and linked these to the preferences and behaviour of the representatives of those districts, survey methodology has been the preferred strategy of empiricists interested in political representation (Powell Jr. 2004, 285-289).

It should be noted that this way of studying political representation has been increasingly criticised in recent times, notably by scholars who argue that voters lack the competence to know their own economic interests and vote out of irrational and "affective tribal loyalties" instead (Achen and Bartels 2016, 325; much of this work takes inspiration from moral and evolutionary psychology, e.g., Greene 2013; Haidt 2013). But while this research rejects many traditional assumptions about objective material circumstances, it tends to replace one realist ontology with another one that depicts group formation "in primordialist terms," "as if it makes no difference to democratic politics whether a group affiliation is self-chosen or ascribed, based in religion or demography, racialized or treated as normal" (Disch 2021, 56). So, even if the classic materialist understanding that sees political representation as driven by economic self-interest (and citizens' awareness of their interests) has come under fire within empirical political science, it has not given way to constructivist ontologies, but encouraged the adoption of alternative realist ontologies.

5. Choosing between ontologies?

Table 1 summarises some of the characteristics of the discussed ontologies of political representation. What we are faced with are three internally consistent ontological alternatives that political scientists interested in the study of representation should at least be aware of. For if one commits to one of those ontologies, one must also accept specific judgments about the categories to which legitimate appeal can be made in the study of representation, as well as certain assumptions about which methodologies are most appropriate (though there may remain some ambiguities here, see the discussion interactive constructivism's methodological implications).

Readers who accept this reasoning might wonder on what grounds the plausibility of ontologies may be adjudicated? In what way can we distinguish between more and less sound ontologies? Or are we condemned to treating such fundamental philosophical issues as essentially undecidable and a matter of *faith* – or a matter of pragmatism, in the sense that we have reason to stick to ontological assumptions that have served us well in the past?

Table 1. Ontologies of representation

	RADICAL-DEMOCRATIC CONSTRUCTIVISM	**INTERACTIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM**	**MATERIALIST REALISM**
FOCUS	Acts of articulation (Laclau & Mouffe)/mobilisation (Disch)	Representative claims and their uptake by audiences	Elected representatives' responsiveness to constituents' wishes
MAIN ONTOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS	Constituencies and their wishes are constructed by political elites, mostly as a one-way relationship	Constituencies and their wishes are constructed by political elites, but the relationship is interactive and discursive	Constituencies and their wishes exist independently of acts of representation and have a material base
MAIN UNITS OF ANALYSIS	(Hegemonic) discourses, "frames"	Claim-making, public deliberation around representative relationships	Citizens' and elected representatives' preferences
DIRECTIONALITY	Top-down	Top-down and bottom-up	Bottom-up
COMMONLY USED METHODS	Essex school discourse analysis, experimental methods for studying "framing effects"	Various different methodological approaches (on-going debate)	Survey methodology

While I (obviously) cannot resolve this issue in the present paper, I want to suggest three questions that scholars of representation might want to ponder when trying to navigate the available options and identify an appropriate ontological underpinning to their research. I will remain agnostic about which of the questions matters most, nor can I take a position on how one's responses to the questions should be balanced against each other. The questions merely serve a guiding function.

What does philosophy of science have to say? Philosophy of science is the field that is primarily concerned with working out what is plausible in terms of ontology, epistemology and explanation. It is, in other words, concerned with the preconditions of all scientific enquiry. Consulting the state of the debate in this field is useful because it promises to equip us with good sense of which of the three discussed ontologies aligns best with how philosophy of science has evolved in more recent times. This in turn could be a good basis for choosing one or several ontologies over others. After all, it would appear odd to choose a set of ontological positions that is out of sync with the discussion in philosophy of science.

If one follows this suggestion, and considers how philosophers of science generally think about ontology and epistemology, it seems fair to say that both constructivisms are a better bet than standard materialist realism. In a wide-ranging review article aimed at a political science audience, Bevir (2008, 55) notes that the realist ontology (and empiricist epistemology) of much of empirical political science is "so out of date that it barely appears in undergraduate textbooks." He also rightly notes that there has occurred a broader shift toward constructivism in social ontology that dates back to the various linguistic turns that profoundly transformed both philosophy of science and political theory since the 1970s or so. From the point of view of philosophy of science, political scientists are therefore "generally mistaken if they conceive of institutions or structures as fixed or natural kinds" (Bevir 2008, 63). The constructivism Bevir talks about

challenges the widespread tendency to reify social things, and to ascribe to them an essence that then determines either their other properties or their consequences. Legislatures, democracies, wars, and other social things are meaningful and contingent. We cannot properly identify them – let alone count, correlate, or model them – unless we pay attention to the possibly diverse and changing beliefs of the relevant actors (Bevir 2008, 63).

If this is correct, then we have plenty of reason to endorse constructivism, either in its radical-democratic or interactive variant. But let us move on to the other questions, which might not produce such a clear-cut answer.

What is the evidence supporting core ontological assumptions? This question seems at least equally important, though it might be difficult to answer it without first getting the logically prior philosophy of science-question out of the way. At any rate, the thought is that trying to ascertain the empirical plausibility of the available ontological alternatives could be helpful for choosing between them. For if a set of ontological assumptions has no empirical support, it seems justified to regard it as a non-starter, even if it is not always obvious what sort of evidence might count as corroborating ontological propositions in the first place.

Appealing to empirical evidence that underlines the "correctness" of certain ontological commitments is not an unfamiliar strategy in theoretical and conceptual scholarship in representation. Lisa Disch (2021, 4), a leading radical-democratic constructivist, chooses exactly that strategy, arguing that "[e]mpirical political science research on political knowledge and public opinion formation vindicates" her conception of representation as top-down constituency making (also see Disch 2011 and 2020). What she is referring to, in particular, is the vast literature on "framing effects" in empirical political science (e.g., Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Broockman and Butler 2017; Druckman et al. 2013). For Disch, this research unambiguously shows that "[p]eople determine the stakes of a political conflict and choose their side by taking cues from a variety of (typically) elite sources. They listen to their favorite talk jockey, or follow the lead of a party spokesperson, or take direction from their church or union." This decides the issue of which ontology of representation is correct.

One must of course be careful not to seek evidence that simply confirms one's pre-conceived view of what is ontologically correct. Without suggesting that Disch falls prey to this all-too-comfortable way of approaching the matter, it should at least be mentioned that the evidence for citizens' susceptibility to elite framing is much more mixed than Disch claims (e.g., Hopkins 2018). The most comprehensive recent meta-review of the field, based on 138 experiments conducted among 64.083 citizens, in fact finds that "framing effects are much more limited in two important contexts:

frames have a weak (even negligible) average impact on citizens' behaviour, and their effect weakens substantially when a competing frame is introduced" (Amsalem and Zoizner 2022, 222). This does not "disprove" radical-democratic constructivism, to be sure. But neither can "framing effects" research be cited as a ringing vindication of radical-democratic constructivism, at least if we interpret the latter in line with Disch.

What am I committed to, normatively, when it comes to political representation? Admittedly, this question reads like an encouragement to commit a category mistake. But I am not suggesting that there is some sort of direct link leading from normative commitments to ontological assumptions. The point is rather that reflecting on one's normative commitments can be a useful starting point when trying to identify an appropriate ontological grounding. If one thinks, for example, that political representation is normatively legitimate if and only if it is instituted by a formal act of authorisation like an election, then one will find any constructivist ontology troublesome (on this, see Schweber 2016). Even interactive constructivism cannot prove satisfactory, since the acceptance of representative claims – which interactive constructivists regard as primary legitimating mechanism (e.g., Montanaro 2018, 194; Saward 2018, 288) – is hardly a *formal* act of authorisation. A material realist ontology might then be the most promising way forward, however difficult it may be to defend such an ontology on philosophical grounds. This is because materialist realism not only assumes that constituencies exist in some objective sense; it also posits that representative relationships are instituted by citizens' act of voting in national elections.

If, in contrast, one thinks that political representation is invariably bound up with power struggles in relation to which one cannot remain an outside observer, then it seems that neither materialist realism nor interactive constructivism would have much appeal. They would not have much appeal because they are not sufficiently power-sensitive, assuming, for example, that liberal democracy's political institutions and practices (elections, parliamentarism, public deliberation, etc.) provide a more or less neutral "stage" for political conflict – instead of treating these institutions and practices as an expression of sedimented power relations. In this light, one would probably have to opt for a radical-democratic constructivist ontology. This puts the issue of power front and centre, treating representation as intimately connected to efforts at establishing or challenging "hegemonic formations" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 71). With all that said, I reiterate that exploring one's normative commitments is only one, and certainly not the most reliable, strategy for "choosing" an ontology. To pick one of the three ontological alternatives *solely* on the basis of what one finds normatively appealing runs the risk of deriving an "is" from an "ought." This is to be avoided for logical reasons, and also because wishful thinking rarely leads to good scholarship.

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