
WHAT MAKES REPRESENTATIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM DEMOCRATIC?

O QUE TORNA O CONSTRUTIVISMO REPRESENTATIVO DEMOCRÁTICO?

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Abstract:

This article connects J. S. Mill's democratic theory and practice with the contemporary debate surrounding representative constructivism and argues that Mill's advocacy of female suffrage affords an empirical example of the mobilization power of representative constructivism. Studying this concrete example of constructivism alongside Mill's theory of political representation clarifies that constructivism is democratic to the extent it seeks to make citizens themselves appropriate and contest the claims that their representatives construct on their behalf.

Keywords: representative constructivism; descriptive representation; John Stuart Mill; female suffrage.

Resumo:

Este artigo associa a teoria e a prática democráticas de J. S. Mill com o debate contemporâneo sobre o construtivismo representativo e sustenta que a defesa de Mill do sufrágio feminino oferece um exemplo empírico do poder mobilizador do construtivismo representativo. O estudo em conjunto deste exemplo concreto do construtivismo com a teoria da representação política de Mill mostra que o construtivismo é democrático na medida em que procura fazer os próprios cidadãos e cidadãs contestarem e se apropriarem das demandas que os representantes constroem em seu nome.

Palavras-chave: *construtivismo representativo; representação descritiva; John Stuart Mill; sufrágio feminino.*

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1. Introduction

According to some interpreters of *Considerations on Representative Government*, the intention of John Stuart Mill in that book is to endorse what Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (1967, ch. 4) has called *descriptive representation*, the theory according to which the role of the representative is first and foremost to mirror constituents' identities and demands. In "O paradoxo da representação política," for instance, Antonio Carlos Alkmim (2013, p. 69) maintains that Mill was one of the "main advocates" of "descriptive representation."¹ He avers that for Mill, representatives in the assembly should "mirror . . . social and demographic attributes" of the population and describe its different "segments of opinion" in such a way as to afford a faithful "portrait" of the nation (ALKMIM, 2013, p. 69). In a similar vein, William Selinger (2015, p. 20) recently asserted that, like most liberal thinkers in modern Britain, Mill espoused a mirroring conception of representation:

In Britain, well into the nineteenth century, liberals continued to draw on the medieval theory that parliament was representative only insofar as it served as a *mirror* of the people . . . Parliament was only representative when its composition was an "express image" of the nation in its manifoldness. . . . All of the British figures [of modern political theory] – from Burke through Mill – subscribed . . . to this view of parliamentary representation.

Alkmim and Selinger are certainly not isolated instances of this interpretation; Mill's defense of proportional representation in *Representative Government* can indeed

¹Unless otherwise noticed, all translations are mine. I use the expressions "descriptive representation" and "descriptivism" interchangeably. My account of descriptive representation descends mainly from Pitkin (1967) and does not encompass contemporary defenses of descriptivism. For some contemporary proponents of descriptivism – such as Jane Mansbridge (1999) and Iris Marion Young (2000) – a descriptive representative is first and foremost someone whose personal history and background ensure that her life experiences are similar to her constituents'. Thus conceived, descriptivism becomes less opposed to constructivism, for then one need not argue that descriptive representatives should only mirror citizens' pre-given interests and identities. One could, instead, defend descriptivism by arguing that descriptive representatives are more likely to construct original demands that resonate successfully among their constituents. Nevertheless, even when thus conceived, the emphasis on the identity between the representative and the represented makes descriptivism differ from constructivism. Though I recognize that the difference between constructivism and descriptivism tends to be less pronounced in the works of contemporary descriptivists, I still maintain that descriptivism and constructivism represent contrasting conceptions of representation and that each of them is not fully encompassed by the other.

give the impression that his conception of representation was entirely descriptive.² Closer inspection, however, proves this impression to be false. To be sure, my contention is that a careful reading of Mill's oeuvre reveals him to be a proponent of what contemporary democratic theorists call representative constructivism. Far from simply mirroring pre-given identities and demands, representation for Mill is endowed with constructivist power. Accordingly, the role of the representative is not only to describe the opinions and ideas that constitute citizens' identities, but also to construct them.

In what follows, I first explain what descriptive representation consists of. Based on the works of Frank Ankersmit, Hanna Pitkin and Stuart Hall, I claim in section two that three basic assumptions form the crux of descriptivism: (i) representation is bereft of creative power; (ii) representative democracy is a second-best system for direct democracy; (iii) the object to be represented is fully formed before representation takes place. Then, in section three, I show how each of these assumptions is challenged by constructivism, the main features of which are clarified with the help of contemporary political theorists such as Lisa Disch, Samuel Hayat, and Ernesto Laclau.

Next, in section four, Mill's democratic theory is scrutinized in order to substantiate the thesis that he subscribed to representative constructivism. It is argued that Mill's endorsement of constructivism is connected with his conception of representation as advocacy and his encomium on compromise. Section five shows that Mill espoused constructivism not only in theory but also in practice. Indeed, Mill's advocacy of female suffrage in the House of Commons in 1866 affords an empirical example of the mobilization power of representative constructivism. Studying this concrete example of constructivism, I contend, can help us identify the two main characteristics that differentiate democratic constructivism from fascism. Section six explains that Mill's democratic constructivism is connected with his *agora* model of political representation. The article concludes that Mill's theory and practice regarding political representation give us resources to understand what makes representative constructivism democratic. Constructivism is democratic to the extent it seeks to make

²For other interpretations that claim that Mill was a proponent of descriptive representation, see Paulo Corval (2015, p. 250), Pietro Costa (2012, pp. 233-34) and Sujith Kumar (2013, p. 128).

citizens themselves appropriate and contest the claims that their representatives construct on their behalf.

2. Descriptive representation

Chapter four of Pitkin's *The Concept of Representation* is the locus classicus for understanding what descriptive representation is. Put simply, descriptivism is the theory in which the role of representation is simply to describe a pre-given social and political reality that is formed before representation takes place. "What such an approach often produces, is the view that a representative body is distinguished by an accurate correspondence or resemblance to what it represents, by reflecting without distortion" (PITKIN, 1967, p.60). As one of its early proponents put it, descriptivism posits that "the legislature ought to be the most exact transcript of the whole society," "the faithful echo of the voices of the people" (WILSON quoted in PITKIN, 1967, p. 61). Descriptivism can thus be interpreted as "the *mimetic* theory of representation," according to which "the representation of the people should reflect the people represented" in an accurate manner (ANKERSMIT, 1996, p. 28). Mimesis, mirror, echo, reflection – these words all convey descriptivism's main characteristic: the idea that representatives should only copy (not construct) the object they aim to represent. Hence, argues Pitkin (1967, p. 90), descriptivism deprives representation of any creative power:

Finally, the view of representation we have been discussing [i.e., descriptivism] does not allow for an activity of representing . . . It has no room for any kind of representing as acting for, or on behalf of, others; which means that in the political realm it has no room for the creative activities of a representative legislature, the forging of consensus, the formulating of policy, the activity we roughly designate by "governing" . . . there is no room within such a concept of political representation for leadership, initiative, or creative action. The representative is not to give new opinions to his constituents, but to reflect those they already have.

According to Pitkin, descriptivism's longing for a "pure" representation that only copies and mirrors constituents' identities puts into question its very representative character. It "sounds odd to say that the mirror 'represents' my face . . . Somehow 'presents' or 'shows' seems more natural here, as if the image is so much like the

original, so faithful and accurate, that it is not a *re*-presentation at all” (PITKIN, 1967, p.72). In politics especially, representation is inextricably bound up with the idea of animated work, a sort of making that requires from representatives the power to act. According to Pitkin (1967, ch. 10), it makes no sense to talk about political representation when the power to act is the prerogative of only one side of the representative relationship. Political representation, she insists, emerges out of the joint action of representatives and the represented. When the latter do all the acting and decide everything, representation is no longer in place and what we have then is direct democracy.

Pitkin’s (1967, pp. 82, 84) extensive analysis of the concept of descriptive representation discloses that descriptivism conceives of representation as a second-best system for a direct, non-mediated form of politics:

Certainly some writers [who endorse descriptivism] seem to assume that the essential function of a representative body is to vote yes or no on proposals put before it, and that the measure of its representativeness is essentially whether it votes as the whole nation would if the question were put to a plebiscite. The representative must simply vote as their constituents would; and the same result could be achieved by local plebiscites . . . This kind of justification . . . is linked with radical democratic ideology, according to which direct democracy is the ideal system of government and representation a mere second-best approximation.

The justification for descriptive representation is premised on the fact that mass societies cannot institute direct democracy and hold plebiscites on a constant basis. Descriptivists’ abhorrence of any “impurity” that the intermediation process involved in representation could produce or add to constituents’ original views is connected with their aversion to representation. Representation becomes “impure” for descriptivists when, instead of reproducing citizens’ pre-given views, it “distorts” them by adding things that did not exist before.

Besides demeaning representative democracy as a poor substitute for direct democracy, another presupposition inherent in the logic of descriptive representation is that constituents have fully formed positions on every subject the representative will discuss in the national assembly. Descriptivists “sound as though everyone has opinions ready on every possible question, and hence the only political problem is to get accurate information about a national opinion which already exists” (PITKIN, 1967, p. 82). As Stuart Hall (1997, p. 24) explains, descriptivism assumes that the goal of representation

is simply to imitate a pre-existing object “that is already there and fixed in the world.” In sum, descriptivism is composed of three basic assumptions: (i) representation is bereft of creative power; (ii) representation is a second-best system for a non-mediated, direct form of politics; (iii) the object to be represented is fully formed before representation takes place.

3. Representative constructivism

Constructivism can be opposed to descriptive representation because it challenges the three main assumptions that undergird descriptivism. In contemporary democratic theory, constructivism became popular mainly through the work of Laclau (DISCH, 2015, p. 490). In *Emancipation(s)*, Laclau (1996, p. 87) claims that “no pure relation of representation is obtainable because it is of the essence of the process of representation that the representative has to contribute to the identity of what is represented.” To clarify his claim, Laclau gives the example of a representative who seeks to defend in the national assembly the interests her constituents have in maintaining the price of agricultural products. Even in this case, the role of the representative is not simply to reflect a fully formed interest, because

the terrain on which this interest must be represented is that of national politics, where many other things are taking place, and even something apparently as simple as the protection of agricultural prices requires processes of negotiation and articulation with a whole series of forces and problems that far exceeds what is thinkable and deducible from place A [i.e., the place where constituents initially formulated their interest]. So, the representative *inscribes* an interest in a complex reality different from that in which the interest was originally formulated and, in doing so, he or she constructs and transforms that interest. But the representative is thus also transforming the identity of the represented (LACLAU, 1996, p. 98).

For Laclau, this constitutive dimension is inescapable in representative politics. Representation is a constructivist relationship that transforms the identities and demands of the subjects involved in it. From such perspective, it would be incorrect to envisage representation as a relationship that takes place “between two constituted social identities” (HAYAT, 2013, p. 132). In the constructivist approach, representation is cast as an interactive process that generates “subjectivation effects” (DISCH, 2014, p. 25; HAYAT, 2013, p. 131). As a contemporary defender of constructivism remarks, “acts

of representation do not simply reflect constituencies and their interests but help to bring them into being” (DISCH, 2012, p. 600).

By underlining the creative power of representation, constructivism also casts doubt on the third assumption of descriptivism, namely, the idea that the object to be represented is fully formed before representation takes place. The object of representation – the interests and demands that constitute the identity of a political group – is fully formed only through the representative process. This may seem counterintuitive at first glance, but think about a situation in which constituents have no ready opinion about a topic the representative must analyze in the assembly. In such case, the role of a representative is precisely to construct a position her constituents do not have.³

The last assumption of descriptivism that constructivism denies is the idea that representative democracy is the second best of direct democracy. Constructivism is part of the so-called “representative turn” in contemporary democratic theory, an intellectual movement which gained force in the 1990s that “set about reclaiming representation in the name of democracy” (VIEIRA, 2017, p. 5). According to constructivism, the proper response to the democratic deficit of coeval representative governments is the demand for more representation, not less (LACLAU, 1996, p. 99). As one constructivist has explained,

Representation is not a device for solving the practical problem of getting all citizens together somewhere, not a *faute de mieux* for direct democracy, but the indispensable and the only constitutional procedure for generating the political power needed to solve our most difficult political and social problems. Even if a direct democracy were realizable . . . representation would *still* be preferable by far. Without representation, our society degenerates into a chaos in which we are both helpless and powerless (ANKERSMIT, 1996, p. 51).

Representation is indispensable for coping with the problems democracies face nowadays insofar as it allows collective power to emerge. Representation is crucial to the generation of democratic power because it requires individuals to group their demands into a more or less coherent whole, which then will be defended by their elected representative in the assembly. In the absence of representation, popular

³Such construction should not be confused with an arbitrary imposition of demands by the representative over the represented. This will be further explored in section five where I differentiate democratic constructivism from the fascist theory of representation.

participation risks flowing into an ocean of idiosyncratic demands that are unable to coalesce into a collective program of action, the upshot of which is political powerlessness.

4. Representative constructivism in Mill

Before spelling out Mill's representative constructivism, it would be good to explain why he should not be read as a proponent of descriptive representation. Mill's rejection of descriptivism becomes explicit in chapter twelve of *Representative Government*, where the delegate conception of representation is rejected, and the use of imperative mandates discouraged. Popular in the Middle Ages, the imperative mandate forbade representatives from doing anything beyond what had been expressly ordered by constituents (GOYARD-FABRE, 2003, p. 128 and TOMBA, 2018, pp. 108-10). Imperative mandates thus presumed representation should be purely descriptive and reduced representatives to the function of "mere delegates" who could only describe the static interests constituents had previously instructed them to defend (CW XIX, p. 504).⁴

To the extent they further descriptivism, Mill thinks imperative mandates should not be adopted in a representative democracy.⁵ He argues that "electors" would act "unwisely" if they expected "absolute conformity to their opinions" from their representative (CW XIX, p. 506). When citizens who belong to the same political group ask a representative to present in the assembly a common demand they have, they cannot foresee the opposition, or even sheer indifference, that their demand might arouse from the part of other representatives. Unlike them, the representative has to negotiate with people who come from very different social and political backgrounds. The debate she has to carry out in the assembly is much more agonistic than the one where the demand to be represented was originally drafted. As Mill remarks, the national representative assembly is

at once the nation's Committee of Grievances, and its Congress of Opinions; an arena in which not only the general opinion of the nation, but that of every section of it, . . . can

⁴ Following common practice among Mill scholars, references to *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* are written as follows: CW VII, p. 313, for *Collected Works*, volume VII, page 313.

⁵ For representative governments that are not properly democratic, however, Mill thought the use of imperative mandates was acceptable (see CW XIX, p. 508).

produce itself in full light and challenge discussion; where every person in the country may count upon finding somebody who speaks his mind . . . not to friends and partisans exclusively, but in the face of opponents, to be tested by adverse controversy (CW XIX, p. 432, emphasis added).

Mill's endorsement of constructivism is quite pronounced in this passage. The role of representation is not simply to reflect constituents' pre-given opinions and demands, but rather to *produce* them in full light. Such transformation of constituents' opinions and demands is due to the conflict-ridden deliberative setting of the representative assembly. Mill believed that discursive conflict was a constructive force in politics (ROSENBLUM, 2008, pp. 144-45). The collision of rival political perspectives enlarges citizens' comprehension of the problems that beset the polity and in that sense, Mill argues, improves the perspective of each participant.

At first glance, one might think that relating Mill to representative constructivism, a theory that has become prominent in democratic theory only recently, would be subject to the charge of anachronism. Yet, its recent acclaim notwithstanding, constructivism, as Pierre Rosanvallon shows in *Le Peuple Introuvable*, was already present in nineteenth-century theories of political representation. The title of his book alludes to the fact that, for several French thinkers in the nineteenth century, "the people" did not pre-exist their invocation made by the representative process (ROSANVALLON, 1998, p. 24). The task of representation for them was precisely to "construct" the people like a sculptor constructs "a work of art" (ROSANVALLON, 1998, p. 208). Rosanvallon (1998, p. 231) thus concludes that a significant part of nineteenth-century theories of representation was "constructivist" not "descriptive."

One could retort that, even if representative constructivism was present in France, in England only the mirroring conception of representation existed. That is, for instance, the interpretative strategy taken up by Selinger. Seeking to offer a very general and comprehensive analysis of political representation in modern political theory, he differentiates the French theory of parliamentary representation from its British counterpart, arguing that the main difference between them was that the latter, unlike the former, was solely descriptive (SELINGER, 2015, p. 20).

The aforementioned passage extracted from Mill's *Representative Government* suffices to put Selinger's interpretation into question (see CW XIX, p. 432). As John Wyon Burrow's (1988, p. 71) study of Victorian political thought indicates, there were

two rival conceptions of representation in nineteenth-century British political thought.⁶ Whereas theorists such as George Charles Brodrick (1879, p. 137) submitted that the role of the representative was only to mirror and echo citizens' pre-given opinions, other British writers believed the representative should oftentimes be a "guide rather than a receiver, with a responsibility to his vision of what Mill called 'a certain order of possible progress'" (BURROW, 1988, p. 71).

Why have some scholars misread Mill as a supporter of descriptive representation? The answer to this question lies in chapter seven of *Representative Government*. There, Mill advocates for proportional representation and affirms that "minorities should be adequately represented. No real democracy, nothing but a false show of democracy, is possible without it" (CW XIX, p. 452). Given Mill's endorsement of proportional representation, it is understandable that some readers have associated him with descriptive representation, for proportional representation has been historically used as a justification for descriptivism (PITKIN, 1967, p. 62). For many proportionalists, the representative should be a replica of her constituents whose main function would be to reflect without distortion their opinions. That, however, is not Mill's view. As Nadia Urbinati has argued, what is unique about Mill's defense of proportionality is that it is based upon a concept of representation as advocacy, not descriptivism.

"Advocacy has two components: the representative's 'passionate' link to the electors' cause, and the representative's relative autonomy of judgment" (URBINATI, 2002, p. 81). On the one hand, the passionate link to the electors' cause gives representatives strong opinions and thus injects conflict in political deliberation. The fact that representatives are partisans and not impartial observers is good because objections have force when they come "from persons who actually believe them, who defend them in earnest, and do their utmost for them" (CW XVIII, p. 245).⁷ On the other hand, their relative autonomy of judgment avoids deliberation degenerating into blind dogmatism and gives room for political compromise, a practice Mill deemed necessary for the provisional resolution of public problems to be achieved (CW XIX, p.

⁶On the presence of both descriptive and non-descriptive theories of political representation in Victorian political thought, see also Gregory Conti (2018).

⁷ On Mill's appreciation of parties and partisanship, see Gustavo Hessmann Dalaqua (2018c), Bruce Kinzer (2007, ch. 6) and Russell Muirhead (2014, pp. 99-105).

344). In representation as advocacy, “the conflict of interests is admitted, but also controlled by the distance that representatives are able to keep in relation to the positions they advocate” (MIGUEL, 2014, pp. 247-48). This distance is what allows representative constructivism to emerge.

“[C]ertainly, all interests or classes ought to be represented, that is, ought to have . . . advocates” (CW XIX, p. 465). For Mill, when we select a representative, we do not look for a copy of ourselves who will simply repeat verbatim our demands in the assembly (URBINATI, 2002, p. 87).⁸ Were that the case, selecting a representative would not make any sense, for our wish would then be direct participation in the legislative process, not representation. When a political group chooses a representative, Mill contends, what they look for is a skillful advocate, someone who will best defend their interests in a deliberative setting where negotiation and compromise are unavoidable. Indeed, representative democracy for Mill is inconceivable without “the spirit of compromise,” an expression he uses to denote a non-dogmatic approach to politics (CW XIX, p. 344).⁹

The willingness to compromise, which Mill associates with representative constructivism, recognizes one basic feature of Millian democracy: anti foundationalism, the theory according to which transcendental foundations and absolute certainty are not available in politics. Presenting an idea that would be later explored by Hans Kelsen (1929), Mill links democracy with the recognition of citizens’ fallibilism.¹⁰ Since we can all be equally wrong, the best way to reach public decisions is by listening to what everybody has to say. Democracy for Mill requires giving up the pretension that one has access to absolute certainty – that is, it requires that one recognizes oneself as a fallible being who, in order to acquire knowledge, needs to analyze opposing arguments about the same issue. The mind-set of compromise, which ensues from representative constructivism, fulfills this requirement and, to that extent, favors democracy. As Mill highlights in his vindication of the French Revolution of 1848, those who are used to

⁸On the differences between descriptivism and representation as advocacy, see also Urbinati (2006, p. 46).

⁹For a fuller exploration of Mill’s theory of compromise, see Dalaqua (2018a, pp. 114-16) and Dennis Thompson (2007).

¹⁰On the similarities between Mill’s fallibilism and Kelsen’s democratic theory, see Dalaqua (forthcoming) and Lars Vinx (2007, pp. 136-37).

compromise end up recognizing the value of conflict and the necessity of constructing public policies that can accommodate the largest number of political perspectives possible (CW XX, p. 331). As the next section underscores, democratic constructivism is bound up with an agonistic conception of politics.

5. Mill's advocacy for female suffrage as an example of the mobilization power of political representation

After writing extensively about political representation, Mill was elected to Parliament for Westminster in 1865. In this section, I briefly overview his performance as a political representative in the House of Commons in order to argue that Mill subscribed to representative constructivism not only in theory but also in practice. Mill's advocacy for female suffrage affords an empirical example of the mobilization power of representation that contemporary democratic theorists ascribe to constructivism:

[Constructivism] makes the mobilization conception of political representation analogous to aesthetic and literary models of representation that emphasize that representations are performative: representing is an activity that produces ontological effects while seeming merely to follow from an existing state of affairs . . . Representing rouses a constituency to action by giving it a picture of itself that enables it to recognize itself in terms of a "generality" – a common enemy, shared problem, shared virtue – that is neither given nor self-evident but must be narrated into being (DISCH, 2017, p. 145).

When in 1866 Mill proposed in the House of Commons a bill that sought to legalize female suffrage, he mobilized several citizens to action and brought a new constituency into being: the National Society for Women's Suffrage (COLLINI 1984, p. xxxiii; GRIFFIN, 2012, pp. 12-3). This is not to obliterate the fact that before 1866 there were women in England who were fighting against their subordination and who organized to demand, for instance, greater access to education and to the job market; Mill himself recognizes that in *The Subjection of Women* (CW XXI, pp. 270-71). Rather, it is only to acknowledge – as Françoise Le Jeune (2010, p. 116) does – that Mill's representation in the House of Commons introduced a topic that until then was

non-existent in parliamentary politics in England, namely, female suffrage.¹¹ As Mill narrates in his autobiography, a consistent social movement advocating for female suffrage in England only emerged with the National Society for Women's Suffrage, which was mobilized and constructed because of Mill's political performance in the representative assembly:

For women not to make their claim to the suffrage at the time when the elective franchise was being largely extended, would have been to abjure the claim altogether; and a movement on the subject was begun in 1866, when I presented a petition for the suffrage But it was as yet uncertain whether the proposal would obtain more than a few stray votes in the House: and when . . . the votes recorded in favour of the motion amounted to 73. . . the surprise was general and the encouragement great The time appeared to my daughter, Miss Helen Taylor, to have come for forming a Society for the extension of the suffrage to women (CW I, p. 285).

The Society Helen Taylor created was the National Society for Women's Suffrage, a social movement that was instrumental in winning women in England the right to vote. No wonder then that Millicent Garret Fawcett, one of the leading activists in the British women's movement, claimed that the very existence of a women's suffragist movement in England was due to Mill (STANTON, 1884, p. 35).

In a letter sent to a friend in 1866, in which he explained why he advocated for female suffrage in a time when most voters in England were not in favor of such cause, Mill wrote: "I look upon the House of Commons . . . as an elevated Tribune or Chair from which to preach larger ideas than can at present be realized" (CW XVI, p. 1234). Mill knew that what mattered was mainly the performative effects of his speeches in favor of female suffrage, not the legislative outcome per se. He predicted that politicians would be "shocked" with his proposal and anticipated that the bill was not going to be approved by the majority of the House of Commons (LEYENAAR and OLDERSMAN, 2007, p. 65). Mill was not frustrated when his prognosis turned out to be right, for his main goal was to recruit constituencies that would themselves demand female suffrage.

In a letter sent to Caroline E. Liddell in 1866, Mill explained he wanted women *themselves* to fight for political emancipation, if only because that would offer a very

¹¹ This is not to say that female suffrage was non-existent outside parliamentary politics. To be sure, representative constructivism should not be read as a creation *ex nihilo* (ALMEIDA, 2018, p. 6). The performative power of constructivism to bring a new reality into being is always limited by an already existent and sedimented political milieu. Although Mill's performative representation was doubtless responsible for aggrandizing and transforming the concern for female suffrage into a topic of great political import, such concern was already shared among some individuals in England.

effective response against conservative politicians who argued that women did not care about the suffrage (CW XV, p. 168; POPPA, 2017, pp. 67-8). The italics on themselves are to highlight the democratic credentials of Mill's constructivism. To be sure, Mill's political theory indicates that representative constructivism should not be seen as necessarily inimical to democracy.¹² This is not to deny, of course, the historical connections between constructivism and "the fascist theory of representation" (PITKIN, 1967, p. 107). From the historical association between fascism and representative constructivism, however, one should not infer that the latter is doomed to be at odds with democratic representation. The articulation between fascism and constructivism is contingent and, therefore, can be avoided. As Mill's advocacy of female suffrage testifies, representative constructivism *can* be democratic.

A good prolegomenon for understanding how constructivism and democratic representation can become compatible is to figure out in what ways fascism made representative constructivism incompatible with democracy. Once again, Pitkin's seminal work is of great help. In chapter five of *Concept*, Pitkin (1967, pp. 107-8) explains that the fascist theory of representation amounts to a denial of democracy because

in fascist theory . . . the leader must force his followers to adjust themselves to what he does. . . . The leader creates the unity of wills among his followers out of his own inner resources, and aligns them to himself. . . . Representation is a power relation, that of the leader's power over his followers; Hitler claimed that he had greater right to say that he represented his people than any other statesman. Representation may be a matter of consent, but this consent is created by the leader's energy, intelligence, and masterful personality. For the fascist, no other conception is possible, because the people are amorphous and incapable of action and will.

The fascist strand of constructivism is incompatible with democratic representation because it turns the people into passive recipients of the representative's constructions.¹³ In fascist representation, constituents cannot complement, let alone

¹² For interpretations that stress the incompatibility between representative constructivism and democracy, see Debora C. Rezende de Almeida (2017, pp. 6-16) and Paulina Ochoa Espejo (2017, pp. 619-20).

¹³ Hannah Arendt (1973, p. 325) observes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that without the totalitarian leader, the masses "would lack external representation and remain an amorphous horde . . . Hitler, who was fully aware of this . . . expressed it once in a speech addressed to the SA: 'All that you are, you are through me'." I concur with Arendt's (1973, p. 325) distinction between fascism and totalitarianism and agree that not every fascist leader is totalitarian, but that every totalitarian leader is necessarily fascist insofar as he also seeks "uncontested rule over the country." The kinds of representation that the

contest, the claims that the representative constructs and imposes upon them. Fascism thus impedes the emergence of the two main attributes of democratic constructivism. For one thing, fascist constructivism makes representation linear and unidirectional, as though political interests and demands could flow only in one direction: from the representative to the represented, from the fascist leader to the people. By thus conceiving representation, fascism effaces the interactivity that characterizes democratic constructivism (DISCH, 2016, pp. 94-5). Constructivism is democratic when the representative relationship it implies is circular and functions as “a two-way process: a movement from represented to representative, and a correlative one from representative to represented” (LACLAU, 2005, p. 158). Democratic constructivism is necessarily “a two-way street” because it entails multiple communicative exchanges between representatives and their constituents (SAWARD, 2010, p. 47).

Rather than transparently transmitting pre-given interests, or simply constituting them in a top-down fashion, democratic constructivism comprises a to-and-fro movement between the representative and the represented that constantly modifies and adapts the political interests in question. Unlike fascist constructivism, there is no clear-cut distinction between a purely active role and a purely passive role in democratic constructivism. The representative claims that emerge out of democratic constructivism are constituted by both representatives and constituents. The former are, of course, the ones who first construct and advance a representative claim in the public arena. Nevertheless, once exposed to the public, a representative claim is engaged critically by the audience it seeks to address (GEENENS *et al.*, 2015, p. 520). In a democratic government, a representative claim is successful only to the extent it is absorbed and reshaped by constituents.

Moreover, fascism obliterates the agonistic dimension of representation that is part and parcel of democratic constructivism. As Michael Saward (2010, p. 54) puts it, what constructivism emphasizes is that “there is no representative claim without its being open to a counterclaim or a denial of claim from part of its audience.” The meaning of representation is not fixed in democratic constructivism; rather, it is always

totalitarian and fascist leaders embody are similar, for both of them evacuate contestation from political representation (SACCOMANI, 2010, p. 466). Therefore, Pitkin is right when she identifies Hitler as an exponent of fascist representation.

caught up in a battle of interpretations (ARDITI, 2015, p. 97).¹⁴ Constructivism is democratic when constituents have the power to contest and alter the representative claim a politician had originally put forth on their behalf. Even though both fascist and democratic constructivism presume that political interests and identities are formed through representation and are not prior to it, only the latter acknowledges that the conflict between representatives and constituents – and among constituents themselves – has constructivist power over political interests and identities.

Especially in the case of Mill, democratic constructivism builds upon the thesis that conflict is a prime source of both political and individual development. Like many writers of the nineteenth century, Mill was deeply influenced by the *Bildungstradition* and considered conflict to be of paramount importance for self-development (AUDARD, 2009, pp. 86-92; MERQUIOR, 2014, p. 56).¹⁵ His democratic agonism identifies contestation as a way to give vent to the creative possibilities of the self. Mill's endorsement of representative constructivism is related to his dynamic conception of the self as a social construct that is shaped, *inter alia*, by political conflict.¹⁶ By allowing contestation between representatives and constituents to take place, democratic constructivism is conducive to self-development and liberty. It is therefore incorrect to suggest that Mill defended female suffrage only on protective grounds. Mill did not think women needed the vote just because they lacked an instrument to defend and protect their pre-given interests. To the contrary, he believed

¹⁴ Constructivism presumes that “it is proper to the nature of meaning not to exist in things themselves. Meaning has to be searched for, a search that constitutes its own foundation” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 13). This constitutes a major difference with descriptivism, which assumes that meaning lies in the object itself (HALL, 1997, p. 24).

¹⁵ One of the main theses advanced by the *Bildungstradition* is that conflict has the power to construct the self: “with the beginning of the nineteenth century it became clear that *Bildung* is connected to the development of the individual subject, to the development of a person, who has to ascertain him/herself in an area of conflict which is given from the experience of its regulations originating from its nature and social contexts” (WINKLER, 2012, pp. 96-7).

¹⁶ It is one thing to argue that the Millian self is a social construct, and yet another to argue that it is *entirely* a social construct. That Mill subscribed to a conception of human nature does not deny the social construction of many attributes that constitute the Millian self. Affirming the social construction of the self does not rule out the presence of a natural basis upon which this construction takes place. On the social construction of the Millian self, see Dalaqua (2018b) and Katherine Smits (2004).

women should be enfranchised precisely because that would be an opportunity for them to develop themselves and formulate collectively their interests.¹⁷

6. Democratic constructivism and the *agora* model of political representation

Citizens' power to contest the proposals offered by their representatives is what safeguards the democratic character of constructivism. But what makes contestation possible in the first place? Mill addresses this concern in *Representative Government* when he advances his "*agora* model" of political representation (URBINATI, 2002, ch. 3). In the beginning of the book, he asserts that if representative governments are to be democratic, they need to create an equivalent of the ancient "*agora*" (CW XIX, p. 377). The *agora* was the place in ancient democracies where citizens gathered "to discuss public matters" (CW XIX, p. 377). In the *agora* citizens could meet whenever they thought necessary and exchange their opinions about the decisions enacted in the "Pnyx," which was the official meeting place of the Athenian democratic assembly (CW XIX, p. 377). Albeit without formal authoritative power, the discussions which took place in the *agora* influenced deeply the decisions reached inside the Pnyx. This comes as no surprise, for the citizens who judged about political issues in the *agora* were the same ones who voted on public matters in the Pnyx.

Mill knew that modern representative governments differed from Athenian democracy, because in the former only a tiny percentage of citizens has the power to vote on political issues inside representative assemblies (RILEY, 2007, p. 231). The vast majority lack the power to do so, and that is why some scholars claim that a real democracy, one that effectively empowers the demos, cannot be reconciled with representation. Mill thinks otherwise and holds that representative governments can be democratic if they create a modern *agora*, a public space where the demos can contest the policies constructed by elected politicians and force them to take into account the views of the people. How could that be possible?

Mill answers that "the press" can offer a "real equivalent" of the ancient *agora* by upholding a space where public opinion can emerge and propagate in such a way as

¹⁷ Mill espoused an ethical conception of voting, according to which the exercise of the franchise was a source of self-development (CW XVIII, pp. 311-40).

to influence elected representatives (CW XIX, p. 377). Mill is careful enough to add that the press can be a more or less “adequate” equivalent of the ancient *agora* (CW XIX, p. 377). As Mill warned in his 1859 critique of the tyranny of the majority, the means of communication in mass society can preclude public and critical debate once they start to propagate the ideas of only one social group (CW XVIII, ch. 2). According to Mill, the democratic character of representative governments can only be secured if the discourses and opinions circulating in the media are not monopolized. As Bruce Baum (2000, p. 82) has explained, Mill’s political theory shows that democratic representation requires the democratization of the media, for “concentration of ownership and control of the means of communication . . . profoundly conflict with democratic ideals.” The contestability of public policies constructed by elected politicians is possible only if citizens have access to a genuine public forum, which includes and voices the judgments of all groups comprised in the demos. Mill’s *agora* model of political representation shows that protecting people’s power to contest the public policies enacted by politicians requires a democratic media, one that is open to and inclusive of all political views held by citizens. Democratic constructivism cannot do without a media system that allows citizens from all social groups to contest and influence their elected representatives.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that Mill’s theory of representation is constructivist and that a proper understanding of his political theory can help clarify what makes representative constructivism democratic. Contrary to what some scholars have claimed, Mill should not be read as a proponent of descriptive representation. The fact that he proposed a bill to legalize female suffrage in England bestows great force to our thesis. Why would Mill represent a cause of which his electors were not aware if he subscribed to descriptivism? Had Mill thought the duty of the representative resided solely in mirroring constituents’ existing views, he would not have advocated for female suffrage (see CW XVI, p. 1234).

According to Mill, the role of the representative assembly was not simply to reproduce already existing opinions but rather to be a place where the opinion of every

section of the political community could “produce itself in full light” (CW XIX, p. 432). The speeches a representative makes inside the assembly have the power to construct new opinions, which in turn can alter the way citizens see themselves and one another. Put differently, representative constructivism testifies to the social constitution of the self and promotes the formation of collective identities. It demonstrates that citizens’ interests and identities are shaped by collective processes and negates an atomistic view of society. Constructivism, in short, invalidates the idea that society is the sum of discrete and dissociated individuals.

As Mill’s advocacy of female suffrage demonstrates, representative claims can call forth the creation of new collectivities and political movements. His political performance as a representative, moreover, can also answer a quandary that, since Pitkin (1967, p. 107), has led several scholars to dismiss constructivism as a non-democratic form of representation. If constructivism argues that constituents are formed by acts of representation, then how is one to guarantee that it does not transform constituents into passive recipients of whatever views the representative feels like attributing to them? This article has suggested that a response to the question can be found in Mill’s political theory and practice: what makes representative constructivism democratic is the maintenance of a circular and multidirectional relationship between representatives and constituents, one in which the latter can interact with and contest the former whenever they deem necessary. Constructivism is democratic to the extent it seeks to make citizens themselves appropriate and contest the claims that their representatives construct on their behalf.

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