

Book Reviews

The Future of Representative Democracy

Edited by Sonia Alonso, John Keane and Wolfgang Merkel
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, 328 pp., £19.99, ISBN 9780521177030 (pbk)

I began reading *The Future of Representative Democracy* in July of 2011 when thousands of Greeks gathered in front of their national legislature and protested against decisions for coping with the economic crisis. Parliamentarians in Athens were accused of representing interests of the international (or just German) financial institutions rather than of their own Greek electorate. Media attention soon moved to Washington DC, where political wrestling on Capitol Hill had sparked worldwide financial turbulence. US parliamentarians managed to strike a last-minute deal, but it failed to arrest the global stock market crash and prevent downgrading of the credit rating status of the largest world economy. Even the mother of parliamentary government, United Kingdom, found herself in trouble in the summer of 2011. When major riots spread across English cities, the House of Commons took pains trying to present itself as the major source of legitimate authority. The expenses scandal was still recent history: the 2009 public disclosure of the misuse of MP allowances and expenses aroused widespread anger among the UK electorate and a loss of confidence in parliamentarians. So, is there any future for representative democracy? The above events suggest that the answer is 'no'. Yet the book under review shows that matters are more complex if seen from a broader theoretical and empirical perspective.

The book does not try to deny that the key pillars of representative democracy – parliaments – are facing a crisis of confidence. Moreover, it admits that reforms undertaken by parliaments fall short of public expectations. However, the book convincingly argues that the roots of parliaments' problems are often to be found outside them: in political parties becoming largely 'cadre' and 'cartel' parties, in executives relying on ever more refined and expensive instruments of public opinion testing or in hegemonic mass media replacing parliaments as the key forum for political debate. In short, the performance of parliaments should be considered against the broader political, socio-economic and even cultural context. Parliaments would not be likely to do any better if the ability to attract huge sums of money was the prime criterion for winning parliamentary seats or if the media were able to engineer the headlines and direction of political discourses.

However, this book also shows that representative democracy is not only about parliaments as formal institutions but that its nature also evolves with time and circumstance. According to the editors of the book, representative democracy is based on three core elements: the open public expression of social needs and interests; the appointment of representatives through free and fair elections; and the temporary granting of powers by the represented to representatives who make laws within the framework of a written constitution. Moreover, Michael Saward in his chapter argues that the state-centred model of representative democracy, with its

formal reliance upon parliaments, parties, elections and constitutions, does not exhaust the potential of contemporary democratic representation. In his view, an ever greater scope and intensity of public engagement by local and transnational organisations of civil society is also, if not chiefly, about democratic representation. Non-state democratic representation occurs in and around various interest and pressure groups, the workplace or the corporation, social movements both old and new, and in clubs, societies and advocacy groups in local communities. Michael Zürn and Gregor Walter-Drop in their chapter add numerous examples of international and transnational forms of democratic representation resulting from what they call 'societal denationalisation' of the modern world.

These views are reinforced by John Kean's chapter identifying and analysing the new 'post-parliamentary' phenomenon of 'monitory democracy' manifested by the rapid growth of numerous extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinising mechanisms. The ever growing number of political think-tanks, surveys, focus groups, deliberative polling, online petitions and advocacy services, to mention only some of nearly 100 new types of power-scrutinising devices found by Keane, change the nature of representation and democracy. Monitory bodies put politicians, parties and elected governments permanently 'on their toes'. They question the authority of formal institutions, force politicians to change their agendas, and break long-standing corporatist arrangements. Democracy is no longer about delegating power to elected officials within confined territorial states. Nor is democracy a government implementing the common 'will' of any given (national) majority. Today, according to Keane, democracy is more about self-governed networks monitoring traditional political institutions and forcing them to make regular adjustments of their policies.

The 'refolution' (i.e. revolutionary evolution) of democratic representation described above is seen by Keane and other contributors to this book as a natural response to societal and technological changes. Democracy cannot be expected to function alike in the ages of papyrus and the internet, for instance. The question is, however, whether the new developments enhance or hamper civic participation in political decision-making. Access to social networks can be restricted for various formal and informal reasons such as class, profession or money. The notion of public participation within the prime monitoring institution, the media, is very one-sided: audiences are invited to take part in media debates, but editors can choose only some of the inputs to reach the public. Networks may well be self-governed, but they are not always governed in a democratic manner, and they are notoriously unaccountable. Monitory democracy tends to focus on single simple issues better than on complex aggregated problems requiring broader, informed and sustained deliberation. The selection of issues highlighted by monitoring institutions can be either manipulated or accidental. For instance, the public attention is often diverted to politicians' private lives and away from their voting records.

Monitory democracy is said to work hand in hand with traditional representative democracy, but the nature of the relationship is unclear. A growing body of evidence suggests that the former undermines rather than reinforces the latter. This is why David Beetham insists in his chapter that parliaments with law-making and tax-raising powers 'remain indispensable elements' of a democratic polity, even though there are several 'perfectly understandable reasons' why they rarely enjoy a positive public profile.

We tend to think about democracy as representative, but Nadia Urbinati points out in her chapter that democracy is a Greek word with no Latin equivalent, while representation is a Latin word with no Greek equivalent. This means that the fusion of the two terms is a historical phenomenon and may not last forever if left unimproved and unprotected. Populism is the most likely response to the apparent crisis of representative democracy, argues Klaus von Beyme. If crucial monitory devices slip under the control of populists, even an Orwellian scenario might become

likely. A careful reading of the book under review will alert us to the dangers – and opportunities – ahead. The book is well written and edited; it is balanced and comprehensive, original and sophisticated. It should therefore become a standard reference point for students of democracy and representation.

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Sociology of the European Union

Edited by Adrian Favell and Virginie Guiraudon

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Theories in international relations have shown the path, and European studies followed suit. Albeit considered to be ‘latecomers to the ball’ by George Ross’ thought-provoking conclusion in the volume under review, sociological approaches are increasingly numerous in the study of European integration since the end of the 1990s. Based on the observation that the EU is less and less a purely economic and political affair, but that the single European market and EU law have influenced the European society as a whole, sociological approaches occupy an important niche of European integration studies. Virginie Guiraudon’s and Adrian Favell’s most recent publication in this field presents a wide range of these sociological analyses of the European Union. While constructivists, historians, critical theorists and anthropologists have imported sociological ideas into the study of European integration, the editors’ objective here is more specific. They aim to make explicit the ontology, methodology as well as the epistemology that *empirical sociological approaches* to European integration have in common. In a very convincing introduction, the editors present precise elements that distinguish an empirical sociology of the European Union from mainstream political science approaches. They argue that three characteristics unite the contributions: taking sociological classics such as Weber, Marx, Durkheim or Gellner seriously, studying a specific social dimension of the European Union and finally combining qualitative and quantitative research designs in their studies. Among these three elements, however, the contributions make clear that it is particularly the second one – the change in the object of study in European studies – that is central.

In the two parts of the book – *social foundations* and *politics and policies* – the authors illustrate these differences through empirical studies of social class, social and spacial mobility, cities and elites as well as markets and firms. It is particularly in the first part that the enormous potential for sociological approaches to EU studies can be found. All contributors show how European integration over the last 60 years has influenced the social and economic stratification of society. Based on both qualitative and quantitative research designs, the authors produce convincing and balanced empirical results, arguing that while European integration certainly had a tremendous impact, there are no such generalised phenomena as European social classes or European firms or a uniform European market. Yet, at the same time, this research result is sometimes similar to more sophisticated Europeanisation studies which stress that legal and social underpinnings, or cultural frames account for variance in the way European integration affects the national as well as the European level.

The second part of the collected volume is extremely ambitious. It is here that the added value of empirical sociology aims to be illustrated, not applied to new objects but to classical or, as the authors call it, ‘mainstream’ political science objects: European institutions, European policies, social movements, the media and social