

Book Review: Sonia Alonso,* John Keane and Wolfgang Merkel* (eds), *The Future of Representative Democracy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 307 pages. ISBN: 978-0-521-17703-0.**

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Opening Remarks

This edited collection is clearly the result of not one, but several meetings (imaginably at the *Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*) between the contributors designed to critically evaluate (if not describe) the crises of 'representative democracy'. It builds a careful conception of what this system of democracy is: namely, an invention of modern European qua US-American, Australian, and Canadian politics. This is considered to be the case because it was in these regions that this distinct form of government emerged at the level of the union-state. Republics and democracies around the world had not yet developed 'democratic' systems that could work on the scale of country-tier politics. (This, of course, is in the process of being challenged from many quarters including the birthplaces of 'representative democracy'. Such is, for example happening due to a plurality of actors over space and time transferring culturally-relevant lower-tiered democratic practices into the higher tiers of government). As Keane (2009) argued, this has been happening in India or as Alonso argued (in this volume, between pages 169 and 190), such has been occurring in contemporary Spain.

One (good) lament about *The Future of Representative Democracy* (heretofore *Future*) is that there were not more contributions. Each

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chapter struck out on important paths and developed arguments that should be widely known not only throughout our academy, but also by Members of Parliament (MPs – throughout the globe), the leaders of non- or quasi-governmental governance bodies (such as NGOs), and broader political communities. This is argued because the contributions in this work establish two crucial facts: the first, that representation and democracy are now marriageable terms (wherein the past they were argued to be contradictory, see page 25); and the second that representative democracy is in crisis (in *Future* it appears the concern is more for representation and how this can be democratized). The book provides a number of key descriptions of the situation, offers to us (the reader) a number of clever solutions, and ultimately provides hope for an ever more ‘democratic’ future.

Praise

Although this reader has certain reservations over the use of the term ‘nation’ in *Future* (one, however, is partial to the argument that it [national identities] is linked to personal sentiment), the discussion of how understandings of nationality in relation to the territorial state are changing is nothing short of stimulating (see p. 17).

[Alonso] demonstrates that the growth of plural national identities is moving representative democracy away from its traditional dependence on the nation state into new multinational state forms...membership of one nation ceases to exclude membership of another...

Indeed, in *Future* we come to see how the concept and *process* of sovereignty changes the nature of the State (if not nation) when we marry the terms ‘representative’ and ‘democracy’ (Urbinati’s contribution is especially relevant here). So the recognition that a plurality of political communities within the State is both sovereign and in the process of strengthening or exercising their sovereignty becomes quite clear: especially if we consider von Beyme’s arguments between pages 52 and 53. Therein is the expectation that ‘constituencies could impose concrete orders on how their representatives should vote in parliament’ which, although a strong notion, is not always the case due to the mandates given to representatives by arguably non-democratic parties (see p. 55).

Page 76 (from Saward’s contribution) has a magnificent Figure (3.1. *domains of representation*) for the reader to take in. It convincingly displays the ways in which government and governance occurs through different modes of representation. Indeed, the Figure is so convincing that it is referred to a number of times by other contributors in *Future*. The value lies in the Figure’s ability to let us visualize the many different places *governing* can occur. It suggests that ‘democracy’ happens in an

almost kaleidoscopic fashion which fits particularly well with Keane's contribution on monitory democracy. It also supports the view, quite possibly an anachronistic one, that this kaleidoscope of places for democratic governance may have been a reality in polities now only alive in history books.

In short, there is a world of (democratic) representation which, among other things, generates and operates with different senses of spatiality from the more limited category of territorial state-based representative democracy...Perhaps its past would also have been explored more in this way were it not for powerful stipulations in the theories and definitions of crucially influential figures such as Weber and Easton. (page 93)

Indeed, readers should take serious notice of the above argument from Saward: here is a new dimension for investigations into historical, critical, and analytic political theory that seems to beg for the attention of our academy. Using Figure 3.1 (p. 112) and the arguments of Saward to break away from the Weber-Easton stronghold may allow for a strategic (if not exploratory) re-reading of considerable amounts of literature. This work may even spawn empirical and or *in situ* investigations – the goal being to produce or discover (recover?) exciting primary data.

Wessels (page 97) supports Saward's argument with his point that 'different visions of democracy aim at different types of representation'. This statement has far-reaching conclusions and contributes to the point that there are different types of democracy in action: potentially in manners that contradict or reinforce each other. This is a unique statement and not one actively made in the literature: '[t]o put it simply, the proportional vision of democracy focuses on the representation of as many voters as possible; the majority-control vision on the representation of a majority of voters'.

Wessels (near the end of page 118) makes an argument that is of such critical importance that it warrants repetition:

...[I]n the evaluation of elections, it matters more whether there are political actors who perform well as representatives. For the evaluation of democracy, it matters more whether the institution, elections in the first instance, perform well. While political representation and judgements about it continue to be a complex issue, *institutional designs matter*: for the feeling of being represented, and the interplay of institutions with the performance of political actors are vital for the legitimacy and support of democracy, and, thus, the system of democratic representation itself. (emphasis added)

The argument made above can be used by post-foundationalists to continue arguing for the need of non-'western' polities to better design

their own institutions (if possible, create them for the union-state level government from endogenous culturally-relevant systems that work at lower-tiers of government). Conversely, this modus of thinking may also be used by Fukuyama (2011) to support his argument that 'western' institutions are the key institutions for the world to adopt (and freely change to be certain). Whether or not this is a 'truth' remains to be seen.

A very strong point, made in a very strong chapter, comes from Beetham¹ (see especially p. 125). The reader gains an understanding that parliaments 'have no collective' identities, there are no persons 'or body to speak for it as an institution'. Truly, all that parliaments have are 'individual parliamentarians...[p]arliament is simply a building, in which a multitude of activities is carried on, but without any corporate identity'. This critical insight (put to Beetham by Tony Wright, MP, UK House of Commons) is possibly flabbergasting. To think that the option has existed for parliaments to develop corporate identities separate from political parties which could police the behaviours of MPs (indeed, to deploy various monitory functions across and throughout political parties and intra-parliamentary bodies) both excites (for the possibilities we now have with this institutional dimension) and angers (because this was not something conceived of hundreds of years earlier).

The point about institutional reform, or the potential to do so, made above relates to an important argument from Dahlerup (pp. 144-168). She argues that electoral systems have an impact on women winning elections (or even participating in election).

The very low position of the United Kingdom and the USA in the world rank order of women's parliamentary representation, numbers 51 and 72, can be explained in part by their use of single-member constituency systems. (Dahlerup, p. 155)

The statement above relates to excellent arguments made by Keane and Eckersley. The combination of monitory democracy and its effects on current living institutions is palpable in Eckersley's account of critical political ecology (CPE). This perspective (CPE) owes a considerable amount to critical feminism and it seems that gender, monitorism a nature will continue contributing to the formation of ever 'better' conceptions of democracy and representation. Indeed, Keane's critical insight (p. 213) to the effect that although democracies do not have to happen but still *can and have* happened simply by chance, should be remembered. It points toward the potential of democracy being inherent to the human – possibly a recurrent default condition before (or after)

¹ Beetham offers a clever line on p. 128: that we are witnessing an electoral 'arms race'.

stronger non-democratic powers (autocrats, crises, and wars for example) destroy democracy's plurality of institutions should they have had enough time to be built.

Constructive Criticism

The use of the term 'nation' appears frequently in this text, and although, at the end of page 7 and the beginning of page 8, the editors provide a conception of the term, it is still found to be unconvincing. The literature debating the potential meaning of the term is burgeoning: indeed, at this stage, it appears that most if not all countries are union-states. This differs to what Alonso wrote in her work that what we see are nations within a nation. The trouble that this reviewer has with the term nation is that it seems bent on producing some homogeneous conception of a plurality (this relates to the discussion on page 17). The nation requires that a population over which it rules 'functions...as a political community' (p. 8). But given that representative systems are in crisis, that governments can scarcely get more than 60 per cent of registered voters and exclude denizens of all types, how can a political community be defined? Indeed, in this book, it seems that the answer lies in the cumulative understanding of plural communities together forming the nation. This may very well be the case (as in nations within a nation), but that is up to the individuals within the State themselves. At this stage, what may only be reliably said seems to be that the complex plurality of political communities form a type of union within the State: or else, it is as Urbinati argued through Kelsen (page 39), that the nation is a political fiction.

What is also lacking is a discussion as to exactly how the State differs from the above mentioned conception of the nation. Is the State not that which contains power within a defined territory and rules over a population? But, if all within the State are part of the nation, how then can the two be separate? It seems that, at least in democratic ethoi and teloi, the population is the State and the State is the population: one and the same. But of course, that is not the case. The State is the impersonal construct of the efforts of a series of populations through time and space. It is, as Hobbes argued so convincingly, the Leviathan – except in this case, we are through a unique twist of dualities supposedly the absolute ruler and the ruled. Nevertheless, the use of nation as a term is not a critical flaw in this work.

Of more significance is the argument from Wessels (pp. 96-123), that voters are misled or misleading themselves into thinking that elections do not serve political representation well. Indeed, a combination of Saward's (pp. 74-95) and Beetham's (pp. 124-143) contributions lead the reader to

think that Wessels is possibly over-optimistic in this instance. Given the problems political parties are facing and the variety of flaws inherent to contemporary representation, it is difficult to share Wessels' optimism about elections (especially because elections themselves are increasingly riddled with problems such as content-less campaigning, questions over legitimate sources and methods of funding, and accessing political office without pandering or 'selling-out' to the 'usual' financiers).

Two issues arise on page 58. There, von Beyme writes:

[S]ocio-economically developed societies and politically more mature systems, such as the Czech Republic or Hungary, chose parliamentary government, whereas less developed countries opted for semi-presidentialism, a mode among the mature Western systems, that proved to work efficiently only in France.

The first concerns the use of the term 'Western'. This term, as with the 'nation', is nebulous and should be given greater care than it presently is in our literature. Namely, it should be conceptualized (as is necessary for example with the term 'democracy' which was done well in this book) for the reason that as a standalone term it confuses more than clarifies. Indeed, as Marquand (2011) rightly asked: what is the 'West'? Or, as this reviewer has come to ask, why is the 'West' the 'West' and not an 'East'? (The answer may lie with the view that imperialist Europe dominated the world into agreeing to place it 'in the middle' – an argument that resonates strongly with the critiques found in *Orientalism*). The second issue concerns *who* in Hungary or the Czech Republic came to decide which representative system to use? The answer would potentially be the representatives of the political community. But as representative systems are, and have been, troubled (in that they have not been particularly strong at representing interests of constituencies nor including the political plurality in important decisions) it seems that the answer would have to be more toward the 'political elite' and not a 'constituency' as seems to be argued in von Beyme's contribution.

There is another issue on page 66 that warrants some attention. There von Beyme argues republicanism to be a product of the renaissance when, according to other literature (Fukuyama 2011; Isakhan and Stockwell 2011; Keane 2009), republicanism is argued to have predated the Italian renaissance. Although we could do well to involve republican Rome in this discussion, we only have to look to 9th century Novgorod, medieval Venice, or the republics of the Naga indigenous people in northern India. Von Beyme's discussion reads a little parochially, with a bent too much towards Europe and her histories. It may be that only 'western Europeans' had forgotten about the republic of Rome and 'rediscovered' it during the renaissance as some dusty scroll or tome on a Swiss monastery's shelf. It

is argued that von Beyme's line is too ingrained in the 'old' narratives (that before the post-foundationalist movement) of democracy's history and would benefit from careful rewording.

Page 69 brings more difficulty. The discussion here of why direct democracy needed to be replaced by representative systems does not seem to take into consideration the full scale of governmentality involved in a contemporary (or even 19th century) polity. Various conceptions of direct democracy (or deep democracy) could function at the level of the small municipality or locality. These conceptions could even be used in non-governmental forms of governance (something that Saward might argue). It would have been good to distinguish between the tiers of government in this discussion as this would have added greater clarity. One point that this review raises, however, is that there could very well be numerous types of democracy in action within a multi-tiered polity. Indeed, in one tier of government, there can be competing conceptions of democracy: in this instance, representative, direct, and monitory all working together or against each other possibly in the quest for 'more' or 'better' democracy.

Finally, and to leave von Beyme alone, his end statement (p. 70) arguing that 'political science seems to follow "kitchen-sink art" and other variants of postmodernism' is possibly one that is difficult to agree with. Is it not the constant condition for politics in the present to be challenged in a mixture of past-worship and future-ambition that are often used to deal with the anxieties of the present? It is argued here that whether a polity strives for the higher aesthetics of art or trudges backwards into 'miserable everyday life' depends entirely on the ethoi and teloi of those alive: those most capable of making these decisions (possibly only those with the power to affect political outcomes). Criticisms of democracy which argue that corruption reigns, accountability lacks, transparency is gone, representation is weak, constitutions are irrelevant, and long-term goals from the citizenry are lacking may even date back some three thousand or more years. Quite possibly, the more important question to ask would have been over why – despite centuries of effort – we are still making the same critiques in our political systems.

Turning to Wessels (p. 101, 119), we see an issue (raised by Beetham) that a 68 per cent voter turnout in an election is not a point that is worth boasting about.

Based on data drawn from these countries, 68 per cent of citizens feel either represented by a party of a leader or both. Certainly, this is not close to what is normatively desirable. That one-third do not feel represented is a sizeable proportion. On the other hand, by empirical standards 68 per cent is quite a high level of satisfaction with the working of democracy. (Wessels, p. 119)

Indeed, the very fact that 68 per cent is considered a high turnout is lamentable and points not to the success of electoral systems but to their failure. In an argument that this reviewer has made elsewhere, it appears that we as an academy must have a discussion about what an agreeable level of performance would be for contemporary democracies. If 68 per cent is considered by some to be poor, would an 80 per cent voter turnout be a 'better' option? (Why not, for that matter, 90 per cent?). It is argued that a point missed in this contribution is the potential for creating a 'voter's academy' (or some other better suggestion) where voters are trained in electoral methods. This may create 'better' voters. There is even scope to venture into the realm of politicians to argue that we should establish special post-graduate academies qua boards of ethics for politicians: if teachers, doctors, lawyers, and dentists have to undergo specialized training (typically) after an undergraduate degree, why not politicians?

There is also the point, from the block quote just above, that normative and empirical accounts differ qualitatively in regards to results found in democracy metrics. It is argued here that this disjunction is a critical flaw in our academy. To accept that empirical realities are not meeting normative expectations, but that such, when comparing results, is an empirical 'good' is worrying. As established in the paragraph above this one, we should be striving (through innovative methods and new political systems) to bring our empirical reality 'up a notch' to an 80 or 90 per cent minimum. To be fair, *Future* is rigorously contributing to this need.

A possible problem arises on page 163. Therein, Dahlerup argues '[a]s systems of representation predated democracy, so do gender quotas'. The bone to pick lies with the argument of which came first: representation or democracy? Given that much of the recent literature has been arguing democracy (non-human, campfire, kin-based, tribal, village assembly qua republican) to have occurred in systems with different forms of representation (quite possibly no 'conventional' representation at all should we consider the Bambuti cultures in the Ituri Forest), it seems highly unlikely that representation came first. Then again, this might be a 'chicken and egg' discussion: perhaps democracy and representation are consanguineous and have always existed in tandem.

The contributions of Alonso and Schmitter raise certain questions about the way we 'speak' and 'think' about democracy. Alonso uses terms such as 'our', 'western' and 'east' when speaking of 'consolidated' or imaginably 'non-consolidated' democracies. But indeed, what are the measures of the aforementioned terms and who decided that these measures are the ones to be used? Alonso's discussion reads as if it was

meant mainly for certain Europeans. It would have been good to try to move beyond this kind of parochialism. There are similar difficulties with Schmitter. He uses the term ‘real existing democracies’ or REDs but this is contentious: given the broadening of understandings about democracy that is occurring in our literature, are all countries not in some state of perpetual democratisation? It is difficult to argue that some countries are REDs whilst others are not as all countries have democracy problems. All polities have difficulties with democracy at each tier of government. In sum, this reviewer is uncertain if we can come to differentiate between ‘good’, ‘consolidated’, or ‘real’ democracies with ‘bad’ or ‘fake/ersatz’ democracies as we are still exploring the meaning of democracy. To hammer this point further, even in REDs such as Germany, New Zealand or the USA, depending on the perspective one has of democracy (and the inherent expectations attached to that), it can be argued that those aforementioned countries are ersatz democracies because they perform poorly when we think of elections, campaigning, inclusivity, deliberation, or system efficacy. There is ambiguity here: perhaps because studies writing in the name of ‘democracy itself’ and not one specific conception of democracy and supported by empirical indices (such as Freedom House) are considered to be theoretically flawed.

Finally, Schmitter’s argument (p. 205) that liberal democracy has become a global norm and that overt autocracy only ‘persists...in countries with markedly different cultures and social structures’ is not considered sound. Liberal democracy (however that is defined) may have spread throughout the globe due to a number of reasons – one being colonialism and imperial dominance by a Europe that developed certain systems that were effective at involving greater numbers at the higher tiers of politics. If Schmitter’s argument is using the term ‘overt’ as a lynchpin, then his point may stand: it is hard to find ‘overt’ autocracy in the majority of States. That being said, autocracy is still present, even in REDs (the internal workings of many political parties come to mind). Given that the term ‘culture’ is itself embroiled in definitional problems, and because overt autocracy *was* very much a reality in ‘western’ histories, it is unlikely that culture has anything to do with the persistence of non- or anti-democratic rulers. The reasons for this phenomenon must be more complex and varied.

Concluding Remarks

Future ends with contributions from Keane (pp. 212-235), Eckersley (pp. 236-257) and Zürn as well as Walter-Drop (pp. 258-279). Each of these contributions brought the reader to the edge of three specific ‘futures’ for democracy: with Keane, we see the very evident rise of monitory systems in diverse (pluriverse) places and the effect ‘new journalism’ has had on

this process. We come to learn how monitorism has affected 'world summits' which themselves have undergone some internal mutations through the self-reflexivity demanded by monitory bodies. Eckersley carefully detailed the rationality behind CPE: her chapter challenges normative conceptions of citizenship by convincingly arguing that nature should form part of our citizenry. That it, like ships, corporations or the mentally disabled, needs if not deserves the equal right to political voice in democracies. Indeed, Eckersley argues that contemporary democracies may not even deserve such a title without giving 'voice' (democratic representation) to nature. Finally, Zürn and Walter-Drop strategically approach the changing nature of the demo: whereas a demos used to be thought of as only realizable within the territorial confines of a State, now we can argue that an international, if not global, demos or union of demoi to exist. Their chapter has profound implications for systems of representation beyond the State and questions the democratic legitimacy of multinational organizations.

The Future of Representative Democracy is nothing short of a truly important work. It will hopefully serve as a 'benchmark' book for the discourse of representative democracy as in sum it enlightens the already well informed. It too will likely change the way the less-informed think about the systems of representation and democracy in which they might find themselves. The academy of democratic theory will surely benefit, as it already has with *Future*, from further strategic meetings held by the WZB's democracy unit and future productions of such impressive works.

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