

Mateusz ZIELIŃSKI 

Uniwersytet Wrocławski

mateusz.zielinski@uwr.edu.pl

CLAIMS OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL REPRESENTATION THEORY: DEBATE ON THE NATURE OF POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

In this work, I will attempt to address the question of what lies ahead for the theory of political representation after the “constructivist turn” that has dominated this theoretical field in recent years. In doing so, I draw upon the influential theory of Michel Saward, whose contributions have ignited inter-paradigmatic debates involving, among others, feminist authors and theorists advocating for radical democratic theory. In the article, I explore both Saward’s own arguments and the key propositions presented by his opponents. I emphasise that his assumptions not only necessitate a reformulation of the technical aspects of representation (its sources of legitimacy and principles of accountability) but also reveal the need for a theoretical reflection on the effects of new forms of “representative claims”. As I will endeavour to demonstrate, these claims lead us to a debate on the nature of “political relationships”, which I define as situations in which two or more political subjectivities mutually condition each other.

Keywords: political representation, representative claims, political relationship

INTRODUCTION

Michael Saward reshaped the vocabulary of political theory. He consciously abandoned the attempt to define representation in favour of analysing “representative claims”, which are performative acts where the claim-maker theatrically presents a representative (subject) and the purpose of their representation (object) to the specific audience.¹ As a result, what is considered to be a form of legitimate democratic representation arguably depends only on the acceptance of the claims by the appropriate constituency. Besides “strong claims” rooted in classic democratic institutions, the “economy of claims” may also include “weak claims” put forth by so-called “self-claimed” representatives.² The idea of “liberalising the system” undoubtedly brings potential benefits but also raises issues in terms of its accountability.

In this article, I aim to address the question of what lies ahead after the so-called “constructivist turn”, which has been dominating Western political representation theory for over a decade.³ To answer this question, I discuss not only the outline of Saward’s theory, widely considered the pinnacle achievement of this turn, but also the main premises of the inter-paradigmatic debate sparked by his work, which mainly involved representatives of the feminist and radical perspectives in this field. In both cases, the criticism was directed towards the limitations of constructivist theoretical intervention, though the issues constraining it were understood differently.

The feminist perspective revolved around the question of whether Saward’s anti-foundationalism obliges him to emphasise the structural limitations of political inclusion. In the radical perspective, primarily rooted in post-structuralist philosophy, the debate focused on the extent to which Saward’s anti-foundationalism acknowledges the contingency of elements within his own theory – what is considered social constructs and what is silently accepted as self-evident facts. In the end, however, neither of these criticisms adequately addresses the central problem of what comes after the constructivist turn, although both indirectly points to an evolving form of a political relationship that lies at the core of representative democracy.

I define a political relationship as a situation in which the scope of political subjectivity of two or more actors mutually conditions one another: a change in the status and political capabilities of one of them results in a change in that scope for others. Taking into account the experiences of feminist critique and the theory of radical democracy, I argue in a somewhat pessimistic manner that Saward’s attempts to “liberate political

¹ M. Saward, *The Representative Claim*, Oxford–New York 2010, pp. 36–37.

² See M. Saward, *Making Representations: Claim, Counterclaim and the Politics of Acting for Others*, Lanham 2020, pp. 41–51.

³ See: L. Disch, M. van de Sande, N. Urbinati (eds), *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation*, Edinburgh 2019; L. Disch, “The ‘Constructivist Turn’ in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?”, *Constellations*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2015), pp. 487–499; A. Schaap, “Critical Exchange on Michael Saward’s *The Representative Claim*,” *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2012), pp. 109–127.

representation” unfortunately lead to (1) inherently opaque and (2) fundamentally asymmetric forms of political relationships.

CLAIMS OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

“The Representative claim” by Michael Saward has become the most well-known expression of the constructivist turn, whose aims are *understanding what representation does, rather than what it is* and *exploring the effects of its invocation rather than its institutional embodiment*⁴. In other words, Saward argues that we may not know what representation is, but we do know how it originates. It begins with a representative claim, a performative act in which someone says, “I represent you”. The success of this claim hinges on the audience, who evaluate representation as an event unfolding before them. To analyse such events, Saward formulated an analytical model where: *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’)*.⁵

It is easiest to demonstrate its utility when analysing “strong claims”, which are claims rooted in classic democratic procedures, such as: *The MP (maker) offers himself of herself (subject) as the embodiment of constituency interest (object) to that constituency (audience). The referent is the actual, flesh-and-blood people of the constituency*.⁶

This schema has not only proven itself as the theoretical basis for numerous empirical studies,⁷ but it also allows us to trace how the main line of argumentation of the discussed theory unfolds. It begins by defining the crucial role of the claim-maker, who should not be automatically equated with the subject of representation. Saward presents claims as performative acts in the “theatrical sense” - one that *it is both done and shown to be done*.⁸ An effective performance requires someone who understands the cultural context of the spectacle and adeptly wields symbolic capital and aesthetic principles necessary for its favourable reception. A representative claim demands a true creator: *Political figures (and their scriptwriters and spin doctors and party supporters, etc.) are in this sense creative actors. They may well be ‘agents,’ as representatives are conventionally understood, but equally or more importantly they are ‘actors,’ makers of claims*.⁹

What’s important is that the figure of the claim-maker leads us to the central idea of the constructivist turn: representation is socially constructed, and this happens on

⁴ M. Saward, *The Representative Claim*, p. 4.

⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

⁶ Ibid., p. 37.

⁷ See P. de Wilde, “The Quality of Representative Claims: Uncovering a Weakness in the Defense of the Liberal World Order,” *Political Studies*, vol. 68, no. 2 (2020), pp. 271-292; E. Severs, K. Celis, P. Meier, “Representative Claims and Beyond: A Study of Muslim Women’s Inclusion in the Flemish Headscarf Debate,” *Politics, Groups and Identities*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2013), pp. 433-450.

⁸ M. Saward, “Shape-Shifting Representation,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 108, no. 4 (2014), p. 725.

⁹ M. Saward, *The Representative Claim...*, p. 47.

several levels. Firstly, the very event of claim-making is, of course, socially constructed. It requires the active coordination of actors who create a system of mutually complementary positions and roles.¹⁰ Political representation in this light is not a simple fact, a straightforward result of elections, but a multi-stage and multi-faceted performance, a process of claim-making.¹¹ The role of the claim-maker is crucial but does not go beyond democratic standards as long as it is not permanently assigned to a specific individual, and every aspect and mode of its implementation is negotiable.

Furthermore, along with claim-making, also the interest, and even the identity of the represented group are constructed.¹² As Saward states, *[t]here is an indispensable aesthetic moment in political representation because the represented is never just given, unambiguous, transparent.*¹³ The represented group is more of an effect than the source of representation, but this does not mean it is a passive spectator of claim-making. Their decision is the ultimate source of legitimacy for the accepted claim. Moreover, as Saward highlights, *the elements of the representative claim appear to be in a linear relation. However, it is better understood as a circular relation. For example, audiences are not simply passive recipients of claims – they make counterclaims about themselves as subjects or about the subjects proffered to them by others' claims.*¹⁴

Thirdly, on a normative level, the constructivist turn actively promotes the construction of a social situation favourable to potential claim-makers. According to Saward, the task of a democratic theorist is not only to describe the process of claim-making within existing institutional order but also to build an “open society” that enables diverse forms of collective accountability through open criticism and negotiations of various claims.¹⁵ In this way, the ontological postulate – that there is no objectively existing representation – is linked to a normative vision of society that assumes: *the constant potential for any citizens to assert themselves as representative of certain positions (again) without an immediate or stipulative ruling or assumption of its illegitimacy.*¹⁶

The vision of liberalising the democratic system, opening it up to weak claims that are not part of recognised democratic processes, is the primary reason for the popularity of the constructivist turn. Petra Guasti and Brigitte Geissel point out that the *paradigmatic change of the constructivist turn* primarily concerns *the potential of claims by non-elected actors to represent a wide range of constituencies.*¹⁷ Building upon this, Laura

¹⁰ See F. Rey, “The Representative System,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 6 (2023), pp. 831–854.

¹¹ L. Disch, “The “Constructivist Turn” in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?,” *Constellations*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2015), p. 487.

¹² L. Disch, *Making Constituencies: Representation as Mobilization in Mass Democracy*, Chicago–London 2021, p. 45.

¹³ M. Saward, *The Representative Claim...*, p. 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36–37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁷ P. Guasti, B. Geissel, “Saward’s Concept of the Representative Claim Revisited: An Empirical Perspective,” *Politics and Governance*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2019), p. 99.

Montanaro develops the theory of “self-appointed representation”, a mechanism that, in a globalised world, *supplements democratic theory and practice by providing representation for affected constituencies within and across borders, but it also recasts some core premises of democratic theory and practice*.¹⁸ Hester van de Bovenkamp and Hans Vollaard follow a similar path, emphasising that such relaxation primarily serves actors who *claim to represent specific groups using local services, such as people on benefits, people with chronic conditions or disabilities, informal carers, the elderly, young people with problems, people with mental health or addiction problems, and people with work-limiting disabilities*.¹⁹

The constructivist turn raises significant expectations regarding the new forms of democratic representative institutions. However, it primarily fails to address the fundamental question: what comes next? How are we to understand representation after we have accepted that it begins with a claim? To answer this question, let's first examine the inter-paradigmatic debate sparked by Saward's work.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE – THE PROBLEM OF RECOGNITION

The feminist response to the constructivist turn was not uniform. Most feminists criticised Saward for neglecting the systemic significance of the process that generates political exclusion. Some did so directly, as Eline Severis, Karen Celis, and Petra Meier, who pointed out that theories built around the concept of the representative claim might have the *unfortunate effect of reducing democratic inclusion to individuals' capacity for participation, overlooking the stratified structure of representative systems and individuals' unequal capacity to exert influence on the central agents within such systems*.²⁰ In a different context, Severs stated also that the too narrow application of a claims-based approach downplays the iterative and procedural aspects of representation as *[i]n most instances, representation is reduced to the formulation of claims to 'speak for' the represented, obscuring the interaction between representatives and represented which occurs within the representation process*.²¹

Some researchers had doubts but ultimately seemed to embrace Saward's theory with relief. Lisa Disch, like Severs, notes that there is a growing concern regarding *how constructivists might sustain a non-foundationalist epistemology while maintaining their political commitments to democracy*.²² However, unlike Severis, she is pleased that

¹⁸ L. Montanaro, “The Democratic Legitimacy of Self-Appointed Representatives,” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 74, no. 4 (2012), p. 1095. See also L. Montanaro, *Who Elected Oxfam? A Democratic Defense of Self-Appointed Representatives*, Cambridge–Port Melbourne–New Delhi–Singapore 2018.

¹⁹ H. van de Bovenkamp, H. Vollaard, “Representative Claims in Practice: The Democratic Quality of Decentralised Social and Healthcare Policies in the Netherlands,” *Acta Politica*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2018), p. 109.

²⁰ E. Severis, K. Celis, P. Meier, “Representative Claims and Beyond...,” p. 435.

²¹ E. Severs, “Substantive Representation Through a Claims-Making Lens: A Strategy for the Identification and Analysis of Substantive Claims,” *Representation*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2012), p. 179.

²² L. Disch, “The “Constructivist Turn” in Democratic Representation...,” p. 488.

Saward rejects the “pedagogical model” of the theorist’s work, which explains to voters how to evaluate the proposed claims of representation²³. In her view, *If we want to assess the democratic legitimacy of representative claims in a democratic ‘way’ (and, as democratic theorists, we should), then we must leave it up to the ‘would-be constituents of claims’ to decide whether or not to accept them*²⁴. A similar position is taken by Karen Celis and Sarah Childs, who use Saward’s proposal to challenge the dominant – in their view – perspective of the leftist-feminist women’s movement²⁵. To do so, they draw extensively from his theory to build an approach they call the “gendered economy of claims”²⁶.

Saward’s proposal thus led to a dispute, the essence of which is difficult to understand without a broader historical context. Most of the mainstream feminist movement’s demands align with the assumptions of the constructivist turn. Furthermore, Saward openly acknowledges that he adopts elements of feminist theory, such as the assumptions of the so-called “standpoint theory”,²⁷ or the understanding of performativity itself.²⁸ Nevertheless, his work decisively departs from the feminist proposal of understanding “representation as presence”, offering a rival conceptualisation of “representation as event”.

As Anne Phillips points out, the theoretical distinction between representing interests and representing people, or in other words, the “politics of ideas” and the “politics of presence”, was a key point of feminist intervention that dominated the political representation theory in the 1990s.²⁹ During this period, a mature form of descriptive representation theory emerged, which criticised the assumptions of the dominant substantive theory of representation, most often associated with the works of Hanna Pitkin³⁰. Theorists such as Iris Marion Young attempted to demonstrate the need for group representation³¹, meaning the presence of individuals in representative bodies who shared the “linked fate” with marginalised communities³². The movement was aware of its limitations, arising from the evident diversity and conflicting interests of the groups it directly originated from. As Melissa Williams stated, *[t]he mere presence of members of marginalised groups in legislatures is not sufficient for the fair representation of citizens from those groups, even though it is often necessary*.³³ Nevertheless, it had

²³ L. Disch, *Making Constituencies...*, p. 45.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ K. Celis, S. Childs, *Feminist Democratic Representation*, New York 2020, pp. 67-68.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 88. See also M. Saward, “The Representative Claim,” *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2006), pp. 297-318.

²⁷ M. Saward, *The Representative Claim...*, pp. 146-147.

²⁸ Saward refers here to Judith Butler – see J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York–London 2015.

²⁹ A. Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*, Oxford–New York 1995, pp. 1-26.

³⁰ H.F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1972, p. 211.

³¹ I.M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton 1995, pp. 183-191.

³² S. Dovi, *The Good Representative*, Malden 2007, pp. 155-161.

³³ M.S. Williams, *Voice, Trust, and Memory: Marginalised Groups and the Failings of Liberal Representation*, Princeton 1998, p. 6.

a concrete impact on changing political practices worldwide in the form of new representative mechanisms such as reserved seats, party list quotas, and group vetoes. In this way, it attempted to redefine political representation as a practice of the recognition of groups suffering systemic injustice. Representation was meant to become an ethically sensitive political relationship, where not only their interests but also their presence mattered. Saward's work departs from these demands.

For Saward Pitkin's theory was also a major point of reference. However, unlike feminist authors, Saward abandoned the distinction between substantial and descriptive representation in favour of mechanisms of a free market of claims, supposedly situated beyond the realm of ethical judgment. As Saward states, *in principle, a representative claim is neither good nor bad. Representative claims can activate and empower recipients or observers, even if that is not the intention of the makers. Recipients are 'on the map' by being invoked in representative claims, even if the initial effect of a claim is silencing.*³⁴ This illustrates what Peggy Phelan referred to as the ideology of the visible: *an ideology that erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken, and unseen*³⁵. Saward acknowledges the risk of silencing or misrepresenting hitherto excluded groups. However, he justifies this by arguing that at least they will be 'on the map' [sic]. This is a blueprint that can be applied to various underprivileged groups seeking recognition through representation: it may not be what you wished for, it is not what you agreed upon, it may be somewhat abusive, but at least you are visible. It ignores the fact that representing someone without consent or request can be an act of symbolic violence that cannot be automatically erased by a letter rejecting the claim.

RADICAL PERSPECTIVE – THE PROBLEM OF POWER

The reception of Saward's work among radical perspective theorists was generally more critical but for different reasons. For example, Thomas Decreus stated that if Saward is correct and representation is constitutive of what is represented, then paradoxically any reference to the referent, *the entity existing in reality or the 'thing in itself' to which the representation refers*,³⁶ becomes problematic or unnecessary. Similarly, Thomás Zicman De Barros argues that Saward's model doesn't actually require the subject of representation (the representative). According to him, not only can claims exist without the subject, but a theory of "better representation" may even need their absence. He proposed the idea of the post-representative claim, which is *marked by the exclusion of the subject from the analytical scheme and by a maker who restricts itself to discursively constructing the object*.³⁷ Both illustrate how (late) radical theory thinks of representation

³⁴ M. Saward, *The Representative Claim...*, p. 55.

³⁵ P. Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London–New York 1993, p. 7.

³⁶ T. Decreus, "Beyond Representation? A Critique of the Concept of the Referent," *Representation*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2013), pp. 33–34.

³⁷ T. Zicman de Barros, "Not All Claims Are Representative Claims': Constructing 'The People' in Post-Representative Movements," *Representation*, vol. 57, no. 4 (2021), p. 523.

as a declining political practice that paves the way for new forms of political competition. As Aylon Cohen points out, the *failure of representative claims-making is the very premise of radical representation's normative success since failure is meant to mobilise the represented into action*.³⁸

Lasse Thomassen took up the defence of Saward's arguing against Zicman De Barros that it is impossible to abandon the idea of representation as it is impossible to create political claims without subjects representing them: *There is no object without a subject... objects are never entirely independent of subjects*, and consequently, *all claims are representative claims*.³⁹ However, while such reasoning can be inferred from a Derridean deconstruction, it does not directly result from Saward's theory, which is only loosely compatible with post-structuralist philosophy. Moreover, Thomassen failed to demonstrate that the constructivist turn does not offer the essential arguments against completely rejecting political representation, an idea that has gained popularity lately. The critique by post-structuralists does not directly answer the question of "what next", but it sufficiently challenges the belief that such an answer can be constructed based on Saward's theory.

This rather harsh critique may surprise someone who recognises some similarities between the constructivist and radical perspectives. For example Ernesto Laclau also treated representation as a creative process, involving the active construction but in a more specific form of a "floating signifier", a central symbolic element overdetermined by a plurality of prescribed meanings *in order to unify a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands in equivalential chains*.⁴⁰ The difference, as argued by Nadia Urbinati, is even more visible at the ideological level, as Saward's work is primarily of a liberal nature: *representative claim-making in the pre- or not-institutional stage relies solely upon civil rights; it is associated with the construction of opinions and claimants in the public sphere and the freedom of speech and association to advocate and organise for or against. It complies in all respect with liberal legitimacy*.⁴¹ Radical representation theory arises directly from the criticism of these assumptions and the liberal vision of democracy.

In her seminal works, Chantal Mouffe critiques Jürgen Habermas' paradigm of communicative rationality, from which Saward draws extensively.⁴² According to Mouffe and Laclau political representation is always both: a mechanism of emancipation and oppression, a space of popular struggle for power.⁴³ In contrast, Saward does not seem to recognise that for most people, the representative claim functions as a claim for power,

³⁸ A. Cohen, "The Inter-Est Between Us: Ontology, Epistemology, and the Failure of Political Representation," *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2021), p. 62.

³⁹ L. Thomassen, "All Claims Are Representative Claims: Response to Thomás Zicman de Barros," *Representation*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2022), p. 316.

⁴⁰ E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London–New York 2005, p. 154.

⁴¹ N. Urbinati, "Representative Constructivism's Conundrum," in L. Disch, M. van de Sande, N. Urbinati (eds), *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation*, Edinburgh 2019, p. 191.

⁴² C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London–New York 2000, pp. 83–98.

⁴³ See E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed., London–New York 2001.

placing weaker part in a subordinated position. Therefore, his theory cannot provide a practical solution to the question of “what’s next for representation?” which, for post-structuralist philosophy is crucial: it designates the realm of thought that can be deconstructed but not transcended. As Cohen points out, for advocates of this perspective, representation is *a cruel attachment to a political relationship that will necessarily fail*⁴⁴.

LIMITS OF POLITICAL RELATIONSHIP

I agree with Saward that perhaps we do not know what political representation truly is about. However, if it begins with a representative claim, it should bring a specific type of “political relationship”, connecting all the actors of performative events. I define a political relationship as a situation in which the scope of political subjectivity of two or more actors mutually conditions one another: a change in the status and political capabilities of one of them results in a change in that scope for others. Such a political relationship takes into account the experiences of feminist critique and the theory of radical democracy.

On the one hand, the next “relational turn” potentially opens up a space for deeper recognition, as advocated by Severs and Suzanne Dovi⁴⁵. Representation as a form of interpersonal relations provides a more intimate space where the “ethics of care” might be particularly pronounced, especially for individuals from marginalised groups. On the other hand, the idea of relational turn also incorporates elements of radical representation theory, while recognising that the essence of this relationship, is intrinsically linked to the concept of power. This reference is particularly rooted in the thinking of Michel Foucault, who showed that *[r]elations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations) but are immanent in the latter*.⁴⁶ In the analysis of political relationships, we need to examine the ways in which they involve processes of “entangled subjectification”. The act of recognising someone as a full-fledged political subject and including them in the political community always entails a relation of power, which follows its own rules and governing rituals.⁴⁷ In this sense, representation is a fundamental political relationship for contemporary liberal democracies.

Saward’s theory argues that political representation is always “first claimed”. The fundamental question is what is the quality of relationships that can be simply claimed? I believe this leads to a non-transparent political relationship, marked by a fundamental power asymmetry. Saward does not recognise the threat, as he essentially becomes a claim-maker himself when he defines and defends the claim-maker in two different

⁴⁴ A. Cohen, “The Inter-Est Between Us...,” p. 62.

⁴⁵ See E. Severs, S. Dovi, “Why We Need to Return to the Ethics of Political Representation,” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2018), pp. 309-313.

⁴⁶ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, New York 1978, p. 94.

⁴⁷ J. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis 1999, p. 35.

ways: 1. as someone who makes the claim; 2. as an “ingredient” of the claim.⁴⁸ It is a deliberate act of self-reference aimed at convincing the audience that by accepting the claim, we always acknowledge the maker, who somehow conceals himself/herself within the text. But this is also the moment when Saward betrays a perspective that has refreshingly interpreted representation as a political performance. As Judith Butler reminds us: there is no “doer” behind the deed; there is only the act, the performance⁴⁹. Perhaps it is right to say that there is no claim-maker behind the “political relationship” that performatively evokes representation.

The risk is that if we focus too much on the idea of the “maker of representation”, we might cease to see the people as the sovereign source of power in democracy. Saward doesn’t question the crucial role of the constituency, but he no longer views it as a sovereign power creating representation. If Saward is correct, the creation of representation begins before the public’s verdict and continues after its announcement. This results in a fundamental shift of symbolic resources, disrupting the traditional model of democracy. In this new reality, the audience can reject the claim, but it cannot fully remove it from the public space. The ability to create such forms of representation is a form of political power. Power exercised without (proper) justification becomes a form of violence. The relationship that emerges from such a claim is therefore marked by the threat of violence. We need a theory of political representation that helps us understand this threat and propose effective ways to counter it. We need a way to build better political relationships.

CONCLUSION

In my work, I have aimed to demonstrate the consequences of the so-called constructivist turn in representation theory. This shift is primarily associated with Michael Saward’s work, “The Representative Claim”, which was arguably the most significant development in representation theory in recent decades. Saward departs from attempts to provide an abstract definition of representation and instead focuses on analysing how it comes into existence and functions. He shifts the focus of the debate towards the analysis of “representative claims”, in which a politician, in an artist-like manner, presents a performance before the audience, giving birth to representation.

In my work, I show how this theory has also triggered responses in other key currents of representation theory, particularly within feminist and radical perspectives. I illustrate how their representatives have questioned the possibility of reconstructing how representation works using different ontological and epistemological stances. The feminist perspective raises concerns that by excessively liberating representative democratic procedures, we might detach them from deeper structures of inequality to which they should correspond. In the case of the critique from the radical perspective, the

⁴⁸ M. Saward, *The Representative Claim...*, p. 36.

⁴⁹ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble...*, p. 33.

argumentation is fundamentally different. Authors are more concerned with identifying moments in which (liberal) constructivism is inconsistent in its assumptions, concealing the residues of some essentialist thinking.

Finally, in the paper, I present my own perspective on political relationships, understood as a situation in which the political subjectivity of two or more entities mutually conditions itself: a change in the status and scope of power of one affects the scope of others. This allows me to address part of the presented criticism and pose a fundamental question about the type of relationship that arises as a result of representative claims. I argue that this relationship is primarily marked by its lack of transparency and extreme asymmetry of the formative power. I show that Saward's approach creates an ideological image that is distant from the reality of the current "makers of representation", who are professional image producers, the political marketing industry, and holders of financial and technological resources. Above all, I aim to demonstrate that an open, relational understanding of politics can help us reformulate the debate on representative politics and perceive it as a participatory political relationship intrinsically connected with an ethical predicament. Such a perspective may encompass issues of responsibility and emotional responsiveness in the analysis of representative claims, aspects that are absent in Saward's work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- van de Bovenkamp H., Vollaard H., "Representative Claims in Practice: The Democratic Quality of Decentralised Social and Healthcare Policies in the Netherlands," *Acta Politica*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2018), pp. 98-120, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-017-0040-6>.
- Butler J., *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York-London 2015, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979>.
- Celis K., Childs S., *Feminist Democratic Representation*, New York 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190087722.001.0001>.
- Cohen A., "The Inter-Est Between Us: Ontology, Epistemology, and the Failure of Political Representation," *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2023), pp. 46-69, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-022-00559-4>.
- Decreus T., "Beyond Representation? A Critique of the Concept of the Referent," *Representation*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2013), pp. 33-43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2012.742455>.
- Disch L., van de Sande M., Urbinati N. (eds), *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation*, Edinburgh 2019, <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474442602.001.0001>.
- Disch L., "The 'Constructivist Turn' in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?," *Constellations*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2015), pp. 487-499, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12201>.
- Disch L., *Making Constituencies: Representation as Mobilization in Mass Democracy*, Chicago-London 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226804477.001.0001>.
- Dovi S., *The Good Representative*, Malden 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470754948>.
- Foucault M., *The History of Sexuality*, New York 1978.

- Guasti P., Geissel B., "Saward's Concept of the Representative Claim Revisited: An Empirical Perspective," *Politics and Governance*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2019), pp. 98-111, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i3.2103>.
- Laclau E., *On Populist Reason*, London–New York 2005.
- Laclau E., Mouffe C., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed., London–New York 2001.
- Montanaro L., "The Democratic Legitimacy of Self-Appointed Representatives," *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 74, no. 4 (2012), pp. 1094-1107, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000515>.
- Montanaro L., *Who Elected Oxfam? A Democratic Defense of Self-Appointed Representatives*, Cambridge–New York–Port Melbourne–New Delhi–Singapore 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108297721>.
- Mouffe C., *The Democratic Paradox*, London–New York 2000.
- Phelan P., *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London–New York 1993, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203359433>.
- Phillips A., *The Politics of Presence*, Oxford–New York 1995, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198294158.001.0001>.
- Pitkin H.F., *The Concept of Representation*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1972.
- Rancière J., *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis 1999.
- Rey F., "The Representative System," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 6 (2023), pp. 831-854, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1808761>.
- Saward M., "The Representative Claim," *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2006), pp. 297-318, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300234>.
- Saward M., *The Representative Claim*, Oxford–New York 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199579389.001.0001>.
- Saward M., "Shape-Shifting Representation," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 108, no. 4 (2014), pp. 723-736, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000471>.
- Saward M., *Making Representations: Claim, Counterclaim and the Politics of Acting for Others*, Lanham 2020.
- Severs E., "Representation as Claims-Making: Quid Responsiveness?," *Representation*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2010), pp. 411-423, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2010.518081>.
- Severs E., "Substantive Representation Through a Claims-Making Lens: A Strategy for the Identification and Analysis of Substantive Claims," *Representation*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2012), pp. 169-181, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2012.683491>.
- Severs E., Celis K., Meier P., "Representative Claims and Beyond: A Study of Muslim Women's Inclusion in the Flemish Headscarf Debate," *Politics, Groups and Identities*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2013), pp. 433-450, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2013.816633>.
- Severs E., Dovi S., "Why We Need to Return to the Ethics of Political Representation," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2018), pp. 309-313, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517002414>.
- Schaap A., "Critical Exchange on Michael Saward's *The Representative Claim*," *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2012), pp. 109-127, <https://doi.org/10.1057/cpt.2011.42>.

- Thomassen L., "All Claims Are Representative Claims: Response to Thomás Zicman de Barros," *Representation*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2022), pp. 311-318, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2021.1931952>.
- Urbinati N., "Representative Constructivism's Conundrum," in L. Disch, M. van de Sande, N. Urbinati (eds), *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation*, Edinburgh 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474442626-013>.
- de Wilde P., "The Quality of Representative Claims: Uncovering a Weakness in the Defense of the Liberal World Order," *Political Studies*, vol. 68, no. 2 (2020), pp. 271-292, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719845199>.
- Williams M.S., *Voice, Trust, and Memory: Marginalised Groups and the Failings of Liberal Representation*, Princeton 1998, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400822782>.
- Young I.M., *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton 1990, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc4g4q>.
- Zicman de Barros T., "Not All Claims Are Representative Claims': Constructing 'The People' in Post-Representative Movements," *Representation*, vol. 57, no. 4 (2021), pp. 515-530, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2020.1853598>.

Mateusz ZIELIŃSKI - doctor of Political Science, assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Wrocław. A graduate of political science at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Collaborator of the MiserArt centre, which combines art and life experiences of socially excluded and homeless individuals in crisis. The researcher of two grants from the Polish National Science Centre, conducting research in several countries such as Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Co-author of three monographs and several scientific articles. In his professional life, he focuses on the theory of political representation.