

The Representative Turn in Democratic Theory and Saramago's Critique of Representation

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ABSTRACT

The critique of political representation put forward by José Saramago in *Seeing* has been interpreted as a defense of the incompatibility between representation and democracy. Saramago's novel, however, can be read as a literary exemplar of the recent "representative turn" in democratic theory. Although Saramago's rejection of representation and mainstream political parties in *Seeing* might give the impression that Saramago was completely against representation and political parties, a comparison of this novel with one of Saramago's essays on democracy reveals that Saramago was seeking to investigate under what conditions democracy and representation are reconciliable.

KEYWORDS: José Saramago. Representative turn. Sovereignty. Political representation. Democracy.

RESUMO

A crítica à representação política exposta por José Saramago em *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* foi interpretada como uma defesa da incompatibilidade entre representação e democracia. Pode-se, contudo, ler o romance de Saramago como um exemplar literário da recente "virada representativa" na teoria democrática. Embora o repúdio de Saramago à representação e aos partidos políticos tradicionais em *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* possa dar a impressão de que ele era totalmente contra a representação e os partidos políticos tradicionais, o cotejo deste romance com um dos ensaios de Saramago sobre democracia revela que Saramago buscava investigar sob quais condições democracia e representação são conciliáveis.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: José Saramago. Virada representativa. Soberania. Representação política. Democracia.

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1. Introduction

One of the last novels José Saramago published in his life, *Seeing* advances a powerful critique of political representation.¹ The story opens up with a description of a deserted polling station where a handful of representatives from traditional political parties are desperately calling their family members in order to urge them to vote. After excruciating hours in which almost no one shows up, hordes of people go to the polling place in late afternoon and cast their ballots. Yet when the election is over, something unprecedented is observed: more than seventy percent of the votes cast were blank. Appalled with what it deems "a brutal blow against the democratic normality of our personal and collective lives," the government decides to call for new elections (SARAMAGO, 2013b, p. 27). The so-called "blank plague," however, is intensified in the second election, with more than eighty-three percent of the votes having been cast

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blank (SARAMAGO, 2013b, p. 135). Confronted with such a tremendous crisis of legitimacy, elected representatives decide to declare “a state of emergency,” whereupon a kind of war between representatives and the represented breaks out (SARAMAGO, 2013b, p. 29).

One standard reading among Saramago scholars is that the main goal of *Seeing* is to denounce political representation “as a distortion of the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty” (OLIVEIRA, 2017, p. 155). According to this reading, Saramago’s novel purports to show how democracy understood as popular sovereignty is incompatible with representation *tout court*. Contra this reading, this research note argues that *Seeing* can be read as a literary exemplar of the recent representative turn in democratic theory. After outlining the history and main arguments of the representative turn in the next section, I contend that the purpose of Saramago’s novel is not to argue that representation is the nemesis of democracy and that popular sovereignty can only be exercised in a direct, immediate way. A juxtaposed reading of *Seeing* with one of Saramago’s political essays makes it clear that the search for democratic representation is one of the major concerns of Saramago’s writings. By casting aspersion on the oligarchization of representation, *Seeing* urges us to pose the very interesting question with which an increasing number of political theorists are concerned nowadays, *viz.* what makes representation democratic?

2. The representative turn in contemporary democratic theory

The representative turn in democratic theory acquired force in opposition to participatory conceptions of democracy that, from the seventies onwards, tended to oppose representation and democracy (VIEIRA, 2017, p. 5). Take Benjamin Barber’s *Strong Democracy* for instance. According to this book, a democracy where citizens can participate and influence political affairs is incompatible with representation (BARBER, 1984, p. 146).² Political representation, some participatory democrats complained, asphyxiates democracy because voting for a representative implies delegating political power in its entirety. By arguing this way, participatory democrats reinforced the minimalist conception of representative government espoused by Joseph Schumpeter:

The voters outside of parliament must respect the division of labor between themselves and the politicians they elect. They must not withdraw confidence too easily between elections and they must understand that, once they have elected an individual, political action is his business and not theirs (SCHUMPETER, 2003 [1942], p. 295).

Their contempt towards Schumpeter’s ideas notwithstanding, participatory democrats such as Barber (1984) never questioned the Schumpeterian assumption that representation requires the confinement of political participation to the solitary act of voting (MIGUEL, 2014, ch. 1).³ Rather than seeking to understand under what circumstances representation can be democratic, they accepted without objection Schumpeter’s assumption and determined that political representation necessarily leads to an oligarchy where only elected representatives are imbued with sovereign power. This gloomy diagnosis they issued can be cited for furthering political apathy. After all, if the expression “representative democracy” is nothing but an oxymoron, then why should we waste time trying to transform our representative institutions into a vehicle of democratic power? From the premise that representation and democratic participation are irreconcilable, the consequence that follows is that in order to have democracy, we must destroy existing representative governments and start from scratch, so to speak.

In the nineties, theorists coming from politically underrepresented groups started to devote more attention to and garner more respect for representation (VIEIRA, 2017, p. 2). Rather than despising rep-

2. Barber has recently qualified his views on representation and no longer opposes democracy to representation *tout court*. See the interview he gave to Michael Saward (2012, pp. 35-6).

3. For an analysis that challenges the conventional reading of Schumpeter as a minimalist who reduced representative democracy to electoral competition between political elites, see John Medearis (2001).

resentation as an oligarchic device that ought to be abolished, feminists such as Anne Phillips (1995) surmised that representation could further democracy if the composition of representative assemblies was diversified. The positive reevaluation of representation gained force with the publication of Franklin Rudolf Ankersmit's (1996, p. 51) *Aesthetic Politics*, which boldly ascertained the superiority of representative democracy as opposed to direct democracy. The democratic credentials of representation became even more pronounced in David Plotke's (1997) "Representation is democracy" – an article whose very title would sound oxymoronic for some participatory democrats of previous generations – and Pierre Rosanvallon's (1998) *Le peuple introuvable*, a book-length study about the history of democratic representation in France. Like Ankersmit, neither Plotke nor Rosanvallon reputed representation to be a poor substitute for the direct democracy of the ancient city-states, which mass societies can no longer have because of their size. Representation for them was valuable in itself.

In the past two decades, the number of scholars arguing that representation should not be seen as a second-best device has increased significantly (VIEIRA, 2017). For the sake of concision, here I focus mainly on the oeuvre of Nadia Urbinati, one of the most outstanding scholars of the representative turn. Besides explaining why democracy and representation should not be considered inimical to one another, a concise overview of Urbinati's work will be useful for our purposes because her reconceptualization of sovereignty rebuts the thesis that some scholars associate with Saramago's novel (that is, the thesis that representation negates popular sovereignty).

In the beginning of *Representative Democracy: Principles & Genealogy*, Urbinati (2006, p. 6) explains that "the modern conception of sovereignty" is the reason why several scholars deem representation incompatible with democracy. Elaborated by Rousseau (1964) in the eighteenth century, the modern conception of sovereignty identifies political autonomy with immediacy and establishes that sovereignty, which pertains solely to the will, can only be exercised directly. The expansion of the franchise that was initiated in the end of the nineteenth century, however, has put Rousseau's conception of sovereignty into question. According to Urbinati (2006, p. 8), the creation of a mass electorate has transformed sovereignty in a way that Rousseau could not foretell. Once the seat of power becomes an empty place whose holders are periodically subject to popular elections, a new element is woven into the fabric of sovereignty.

In a representative democracy, sovereignty is diarchic – that is, it comprises two elements: *will* and *judgment* (URBINATI, 2014, p. 22). "Diarchy" is a portmanteau word that joins two Greek terms: *dis*, an adjective that translates as "twofold; double" and *arché*, a suffix that can be rendered as "rule; office" (ACCETTI, MULIERI, BUCHSTEIN *et al.*, 2016, p. 209). To establish that sovereignty in a representative democracy is diarchic is, therefore, to state that in a representative democracy there are two main ruling powers. On the one hand, there is the *will*, a traditional component of sovereignty (which Rousseau contemplated in his theory) that is linked to the power of decision and instantiated in the act of voting. On the other hand, there are the *judgments* of citizens that interact and exchange their political opinions in the public sphere.⁴

Although it lacks formal authoritative power, judgment has sovereign power in a representative democracy to the extent that those making laws inside state institutions are responsive to what citizens think of them. Albeit not directly translatable into laws, public opinion constitutes a major determinant of decisions made by representatives. According to Urbinati, democratic representation emerges out of the interaction between will and judgment. Representation is democratic when the state and civil society maintain a circular relationship, that is, when the inside and outside of state institutions are connected in a way that allows citizens to influence the outcomes of legislative proceedings.

3. Saramago's critique of representation

The elected representatives of *Seeing* are baffled with the blank plague's attack on "the system's most sensitive organ, that of parliamentary representation" (SARAMAGO, 2013b, p. 140). Although they

4. Following Urbinati, I make no distinction between "judgment" and "opinion." I also do not differentiate "public sphere" from "civil society."

are right to read the high number of blank votes as a criticism of representation, what the politicians from the story fail to perceive is that the kind of representation they promote is very different from the kind of representation that the rebellious citizens – the *brancos*, as the government starts calling them – long for. In a dialogue that is very illustrative of Saramaguian irony, the prime minister of *Seeing* declares:

The ministers of culture and of defense can continue elsewhere the academic debate in which they appear to be so hotly engaged, but I would just like to remind you that the reason we are gathered together in this room, which, even more than parliament, represents the heart of democratic power and authority, is in order to make decisions that will save the country from the gravest crisis it has faced in centuries (SARAMAGO, 2013b, p. 33).

The irony of the passage lies in the fact that these few men, rejected by an overwhelming majority of the *demos*, still consider themselves representatives of democratic power. Yet for the *brancos* nothing could be further removed from democratic representation than the political performance of these few men. For what led citizens to vote blank was precisely the perception that the existing representative system, as one of the *brancos* puts it, “isn’t democracy, sir, far from it” (SARAMAGO, 2013b, p. 90).

Two rival conceptions of representation wrestle with each other in Saramago’s novel. On one side, there is the non-democratic representation defended by elected politicians and, on the other, the democratic representation that the *brancos* aspire to create. In the former, political activity is the prerogative of incumbents and the selection of a representative is the only political action reserved to citizens outside the assembly. Demonstrations and petitions are, just like any other activity that links state institutions to civil society, deemed useless and may be prohibited whenever the government thinks necessary (SARAMAGO, 2013b, p. 120). In short, the first conception of representation reduces popular participation to electoral authorization.

In the second conception – which is the democratic one – voting is only one form of participation among others. In the first conception, demonstrations and other non-electoral practices of popular participation are considered superfluous because they “never achieve anything” (SARAMAGO, 2013b, p. 120). Conversely, in the second one, the existence of a vibrant civil society and the continuous maintenance of several venues for popular participation are deemed indispensable. For the *brancos*, democratic representation is not something that a few men insulated from the public in a secret room can possess. Democratic representation is, instead, a *relational event* that can only come about through the interaction between representatives and the represented. As soon as the former and the latter are insulated from each other, democratic representation vanishes. One could thus infer that democratic representation is reminiscent of Sisyphus’s predicament, for its work has to be redone time and again. Democratic representation is a never-ending process of synchronization between the inside and the outside of state institutions.

It is possible to argue that the critique of political representation presented in *Seeing* applies only to the first conception of representation. In other words, it would be imprecise to read Saramago’s novel as a dismissal of representation *tout court*. Rather, what Saramago criticizes in his novel is non-democratic representation. This interpretation finds textual support in one of the essays Saramago wrote about democracy. In “Verdade e ilusão democrática,” after exposing and criticizing the oligarchic character of contemporary representative governments, Saramago (2013a, p. 67) writes: “Do not conclude from what I just said that I am against the existence of parties: I am an activist in one of them. Do not think I abhor parliaments: I want them, instead, to work more.” Political parties and parliaments, two of the most crucial pillars of representation, are both endorsed by the author of *Seeing*. This seems to disprove the interpretation that one of the principal objectives of Saramago’s novel was to affirm the incompatibility between democracy and representation. Perhaps *Seeing* is better read as a literary exemplar of the representative turn in contemporary democratic theory.

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