

REVIEW

Nadia Urbinati 2006. *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 328.

Lisa Disch

This book is the most comprehensive effort to “elucidate the political conception of representation” since Hanna Pitkin’s 1967 classic, *The Concept of Representation* (25). Whereas Pitkin made a linguistic analysis of the term, Urbinati participates in what she calls the “democratic *rediscovery* of representation” by way of a reappraisal of historical texts authored by Rousseau, Kant, Sieyes, Condorcet and Paine (5). Urbinati’s turn to these authors—writers who either inspired, were inspired by, or directly participated in theorizing political representation in the French Revolution—is an important move that has the potential to reorient the subfield of democratic theory. Beginning with the mid-twentieth century theorists of pluralism in the United States, descriptive and prescriptive scholarship on democracy has almost exclusively taken North American political systems and political debates as its touchstone. Urbinati breaks with the parochialism of those writings to recover lost democratic possibilities in the French Revolution. She explains, “since its constitutional inception, representative government has belonged to a complex and pluralistic family whose democratic wing was not the exclusive property of those who advocated for participation against representation” (2). This insight links her to such scholars as Gary Kates, Lynn Hunt, Keith Baker, Pierre Rosanvallon and others who have found in France a much more profound struggle for representative *democracy* than occurred in the Unit-

ed States. For at the American founding, the fact that the Federalists succeeded in implementing a system of governance on a large scale ensured that representation would be rather an antidote to democracy than a means of achieving it.

This Federalist legacy left its mark not only on US political institutions but also on the way that normative theorists of democracy have conceived of the relationship between political representation and democratic practice: there is a deep-seated prejudice against political representation as that which saps political participation of its vital force. A central contribution of this book is to counter that prejudice. Urbinati contends that “representative democracy is neither an oxymoron nor merely a pragmatic alternative for something we, modern citizens, can no longer have, namely direct democracy” (10). Disputing Benjamin Barber’s and Carole Pateman’s theories of participatory democracy on the one hand, and contesting Bernard Manin’s analysis of representation on the other, Urbinati argues that political representation is neither an alienated form of politics nor an aristocratic one. It is actually the best means of achieving government by the people provided one can accept one simple but devastating premise: that citizens’ “direct presence” is “much *less* representative of their ideas than their indirect presence in a representative democracy” (113; emphasis added).

This is by no means a simple return to the elitism of Edmund Burke, who held that citizens were better off being represented because they are neither capable of knowing the public interest nor inclined to sacrifice for it. Urbinati’s ambitious goal is “to inquire into the conditions under which representation *is* democratic—that is, a mode of political participation that can activate a variety of forms of citizen control and oversight” (4). She pursues this goal by a reworking of the concept of “indirectness in politics” which, as she notes, “has never enjoyed much currency in democratic theory” (17). Urbinati argues that democratic self-government is not direct but indirect by virtue of being discursive. It involves communication and also, perhaps more importantly, its “rupture” by citizens exercising “*judgment* about just and unjust laws” (27, 25).

Urbinati argues that the antipathy against indirectness is deeply rooted in contemporary democratic thought by virtue of the misconception of sovereignty on which the predilection for directness rests. She explains that democratic politics has inherited from Rousseau a

“voluntaristic and decisionist conception” that, because it identifies sovereignty with immediacy, what is willed here and now, cannot help but regard representation as alienation (7). She continues with the startling but ultimately utterly persuasive claim that “when it came to sovereignty, [Rousseau] advocated an antihumanist conception of politics” (79). She contends, paradoxically, that he reached this *antihumanist* conception by humanist means. Urbinati argues that Rousseau first “applied the Aristotelian principles of poetics to politics” by defining “politics in terms of *immediacy or the unity of space, time, and the object.*” Next he “conjoined” Aristotle’s distinct worlds of rhetoric and poetics so as to cast persuasive speech and inventive speech as equally deceptive (79). This conviction that all speech is deceptive prompted Rousseau’s anti-humanist conception of the general will as a norm that must be accorded the quality of a self-evident empirical fact—something that is not only beyond discussion but must be protected from it. To permit a people to deliberate as well as to vote would mean that it “could lose its sense of mission as its will gets lost in the spiral of opinions and controversies” (83). Rousseau’s distrust of speech explains his distrust of representation in turn, for once the people has voted, what need has it for representatives to deliberate or act on its behalf? It needs only delegates to register its will and ensure its execution.

In light of Urbinati’s fresh and surprising reading of Rousseau, it becomes ironic that so many proponents of participatory democracy today take inspiration from this French thinker: few among them would want to be implicated in an “antihumanist” conception of politics. At the very least, then, this first line of Urbinati’s argument will have some democrats rethinking their canonical allegiances.

Urbinati directs a second line of argument against the pervasive misconception that “there is something preexisting [political representation], like for instance a single or collective sovereign that seeks pictorial representation through election” (33). Outmoded as it may seem, there is a stubborn attachment to this “pictorial” understanding among two very different camps in contemporary debates. On the one hand, there are those who hold to what Jane Mansbridge has aptly termed a “promissory” notion of representation which takes democratic legitimacy to require that acts of representation follow from a prior declaration of the popular will. On the other hand, there are those who renew arguments for what Hanna Pitkin termed “descrip-

tive" representation, calling for groups to be served by representatives who resemble them. Urbinati observes that either of these positions actually depoliticizes representation; they reduce representation to preserving "a kind of naturalness or irreducible social determinism that exists prior to political action" (49). Urbinati counters that representing "can never be a mere registration of a given social configuration" (46). It has to do neither with fidelity to decisions that an electorate has already made, nor with resemblance in fact to whatever characteristics of a particular constituency are taken to be pertinent. She explains, "electors do not seek an existential identification with their representatives"; they "want an advocate, not a rubber stamp" (46).

The idea of representation as "advocacy" is the centerpiece of Urbinati's effort to redefine representation as a mode of democratic participation. What makes an advocate a representative is not that she reasons dispassionately but, rather, that she speaks as a partisan on behalf of "a part of the nation," putting its "claims *before* the whole nation and *in the name of* the principles" embraced by "the community as a whole" (227). Urbinati provocatively emphasizes that representation is a "constitutive process" (115). Neither the identity of the constituency nor the representative's "belonging" to it are matters of fact; they are, rather, products of ideology, partisanship, and persuasion (118-19). Presumably, the speeches of a good advocate would mobilize a constituency to recognize itself at once in its particularity and in its relation to a national, inter- or trans-national community as a whole.

As to whether an advocate is to be judged by the eloquence of her speeches or by her effectiveness, Urbinati does not say. She does emphasize that what links a representative to her constituents is not what might be termed *representativeness* but, rather, by what Urbinati proposes to call "representativity" (27). Urbinati makes this concept a bit more difficult to grasp than it need be because she develops it over the course of various arguments without offering a succinct and comprehensive statement of its meaning. It begins, however, from an idea of sovereignty as a "*negative power*" (29). Not to be confounded with the liberal notion of limits to the sovereign, negative sovereignty is Rousseau's voluntarist model *temporally* reconceived. Rather than the immediacy of decision, it consists in the exercise of sovereignty over time as the people "investigate, judge, influence, and censure

their lawmakers" (29). Urbinati draws the institutional architecture of representativity from Condorcet who, by his model of interlinking primary assemblies from the local level to the National Assembly and giving each the right to scrutinize and vote on the decisions from below, effectively diffuses the capacities to judge and vote throughout the citizenry.

Urbinati's text is the first in over forty years to challenge Pitkin's oft-cited linguistic conception of representation as the "re-presentation of something absent." Urbinati's dynamic and rhetorical model makes a significant departure from Pitkin's view by embracing the symbolic and ideological aspects of representing that Pitkin aligned with fascism. Thus, Urbinati succeeds spectacularly in changing the terms on which representation and democracy have been paired, as well as in challenging the preference that theorists of democracy have typically accorded the American Revolution over the French. The question is: how fully does she realize her ambitious proposition to redefine representation as "a mode of political participation" (4)?

On this point, Urbinati's choice of the term "advocacy" is puzzling. An advocate is typically associated with the juridical model of representation that she so persuasively rejects as being private and contractual rather than "broadly political and public" (78). Certainly advocacy can also have public facets – Amnesty International, the Sierra Club, the NAACP and other such organizations might be taken as advocates in a public sense – but Urbinati provides neither sufficient detail nor specific examples to detach this term from its legalistic context. Even were she to elaborate it more fully, there would still be a striking absence in this model of any mention of *action*. By her nearly exclusive focus on judgment and deliberation, Urbinati leaves herself vulnerable to the participatory democrat's most basic criticism: Do citizens take action in this model or does Urbinati mean to suggest that deliberation *is* action where the citizen is concerned? If she imagines that the citizenry is to act by means of its "negative" power, investigating, monitoring and censuring its representatives, then Urbinati's proposal risks turning democracy against itself as what Pierre Rosanvallon has recently termed "contra-democracy": citizen action that paralyzes representatives and fragments policy-making so that modes of action that are democratic in form turn out to be anti-political in their effects (see *La contra-démocratie*. 2006. Paris, Seuil).