

COMMENTS ON FRANK ANKERSMIT'S *POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND POLITICAL EXPERIENCE: AN ESSAY ON POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY*

Quentin Skinner

The 2007 edition of *Redescriptions* carried an exceptionally thought-provoking article by Professor Frank Ankersmit entitled 'Political Representation and Political Experience: An Essay on Political Psychology'. Early in 2008 Professor Ankersmit presented a version of this paper at a symposium held in his honour in the University of Cambridge. Two commentators were invited to speak on that occasion, Professor Raymond Geuss and myself. Professor Geuss chiefly addressed the latter part of Professor Ankersmit's lecture, in which he had focused (as in his published article) on the public/private distinction in contemporary political philosophy. I spoke about the opening section of the lecture, in which Professor Ankersmit (again following his published article) had raised some doubts about the prevailing understanding of the concept of political representation. I attempt, in what follows, to develop the suggestions I put forward in my commentary, although I shall quote not from Professor Ankersmit's lecture, but rather from the published version of it.

Ankersmit begins by arguing that in current political theory the figure of the citizen, and more specifically the voter, is treated as the most elementary unit in the political system. He adds that the relationship between such citizens and the state is taken to be one in which citizens are essentially viewed as persons who are represented. As

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he graphically puts it, political representation is held to begin where citizens ends, and to end where the state may be said to begin (p. 23). As a result, the concept of political representation is 'used exclusively for referring to how our parliaments may represent the electorate or the nation' (p. 24).

It is undoubtedly true that citizens within liberal democracies take part in politics largely through the medium of representation. But why, Ankersmit asks, does contemporary political theory pay so little attention to the fact that citizens at the same time represent the political system to themselves? Why do we talk so much about the representation of citizens, and so little about the representation of politics by citizens?

One possible answer is bound up with Ankersmit's way of thinking about what it means to be represented. When Ankersmit speaks of representation, he always describes it as an act of picturing, portraying or imagining a situation or state of affairs. As a paradigm of what it means to furnish a representation, he gives the example of a painted landscape: the painting is the representation; the landscape is the object represented (p. 25). For Ankersmit, representation accordingly has a close connection with the idea of resemblance, the idea of providing a recognisable image or likeness of whatever is being represented.

If, however, we reflect on the two main traditions from which we have inherited our current ways of thinking about political representation, we find that the notion of offering an image or likeness occupies at best a marginal place. The two traditions I have in mind both arose in antiquity, and more specifically in ancient Rome, where the idea that magistrates may be said to represent the *civitas*, or that ambassadors and other officials may similarly be said to serve as representatives, both came to occupy an important place in discussions about public duties and roles.

One resulting model of representation may be said to have originated with Cicero, and was based on the language of the theatre. As Cicero notes, we say of actors that they 'bear the person' of someone else when they appear on stage. The persons whose parts the actors play will not of course be present, and will generally be nothing more than fictions that remain lifeless until an actor to speak their lines for them. If these actors are sufficiently skilled, however, the characters whom they are playing can nevertheless be made to seem present or,

as we put it, can be more or less effectively personated or represented.

Is it important that actors who represent such fictional or historical characters should at the same time resemble them? It is certainly important that, as we say, the actor should 'look the part'. If, for example, he is playing Agamemnon, he should be able to comport himself with the dignity and grandeur befitting a warrior and a king. To help with this act of mimesis, it was customary in the ancient theatre for actors to wear masks — *personae* — to indicate which particular characters they were playing. But it was never supposed that actors needed to look and sound as much as possible like the historical characters they personated. This is even more clearly the case in the modern theatre. For example, no one finds it in the least untoward if a black actor plays the part of Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's tragedy of that name, although everyone knows that Julius Caesar was not in fact black.

The second and closely related way of thinking about representation which we have inherited from antiquity originally stemmed from the law-courts. Litigants were permitted to represent themselves, but the usual practice, then as now, was for plaintiffs and defendants alike to appoint professional representatives. There was a sense in which the position of such lawyers was akin to that of actors (and we still speak of 'having someone to act for us' in a court of law), for they similarly spoke not merely on behalf of someone else but also in their name. But there was an important difference between representation in the theatre and representation in the law-courts. Then as now, lawyers had to be authorised either by the person they represented, or else by some other accredited authority, for their act of representation to count as legally acceptable.

This understanding of representation as nothing more than *having authority to act in the name of someone else* was gradually extended in antiquity from the law-courts to the public arena more generally. The only significant change undergone by the concept in this process was that, whereas in the law-courts it was generally assumed that the person being represented would be present, the main purpose of employing the concept more broadly was to cope with cases in which some authoritative person was *not* present, but needed to be *represented* in such a way that their authority continued to hold good. This is the sense in which ambassadors were said to be capable of representing the authority of the emperor, or bishops the authority

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of the pope. When, for example, Pope Gregory the Great nominated a bishop to serve in Sicily, he wrote to reassure the local congregation that, by means of this appointment, 'our authority will be represented (*repraesentetur*) by someone to whom we give instructions when we ourselves are unable to be present.'

Is it important in the case of this second model that the representative should resemble the person being represented? The question at first sight looks absurd, and it is important that this initial reaction will normally be appropriate. But there are at least two exceptions to be noted. First, it was usually thought important, as in the theatrical case, for legal and political representatives to 'look the part'. This no doubt helps to explain why, even in modern law-courts, lawyers continue to wear formal robes, and the same applies to bishops, ambassadors and anyone else who has been granted authority to represent a church or state. The second exception arises when the person being represented is a collective – for example, the whole body of the people – which in turn is represented by another body of persons – for example, a Parliament. Here it is usually thought important that the representative body should indeed be a recognisable image of the 'real' one, at least in the minimal sense that all the different parts of the real body should be equally and fairly represented. Apart from these exceptions, however, the idea of representation as the act of providing an image or likeness plays no role in this second account of what it means for one person to represent another. What is essential to these acts of legal or political representation is simply that the representative should have been duly authorised to speak and act in the name of the person being represented.

When we currently think about the concept of political representation, it seems to me that we generally have in mind some combination of the two traditions I have sketched. When we speak, that is, of one person representing another, what we are generally saying, I think, is simply that the representative has been authorised to speak the lines of the person being represented. According to Professor Ankersmit, one weakness of conceptualising our politics in this way is that the figure of the citizen, and more particularly the voter, is misleadingly made to appear to be lacking in any internal complexity. Professor Ankersmit's comments on this issue – which bring us to the heart of his argument – seem to me exceptionally interesting and perceptive. As he emphasises, voters do not simply register their preferences,

even though this may be the sole function in which political leaders and institutions are interested. They are also sites of internal conflict, picturing to themselves their ideal of the public interest, weighing its demands with their own private interests, and at the same time picturing the strengths and weaknesses of political leaders and parties. Ankersmit's basic claim is that contemporary political theorists need to pay far more attention to the fact that citizens are not merely represented, but also engage at the same time in this continual process of picturing or representing the political realm to themselves.

I agree with Ankersmit that current political theory takes the figure of the citizen too much for granted. But it seems to me misleading to characterise this weakness as a limitation in current theories of political representation. When Ankersmit speaks of being *politically represented*, and proceeds to contrast this condition with *representing politics to ourselves*, he does not seem to me to be adding, as he claims, 'a new dimension to the notion of political representation' (p. 25). Rather he seems to me to be talking about something else. As he makes clear, to speak of representing politics to ourselves — call this *representation* (1) — is to refer to the act of portraying or imagining the political arena in a variety of ways. As I have tried to show, however, to speak of political representation — call this *representation* (2) — is basically to refer to the act of authorising other people (members of Parliament, Legislatives, Executives) to speak and act in our name. To plead as Ankersmit does for a fuller inclusion in contemporary political theory of *representation* (1) seems to me valuable. But to claim that this is to make an addition to current theories of *representation* (2) seems to me confused.