Representative democracy and information society – A postmodern perspective

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1. Introduction

Representation is a key concept for parliamentary democracy. It is, however, a broader concept than is commonly believed. Representative democracy has a fourfold meaning. First, representative democracy is a depiction of the people's will. Secondly, it is a process of deliberation and negotiation. Thirdly, representative democracy is the institutional linking mechanism between political power and political control. Fourthly, representative democracy is the constitution of democracy in the broad sense of a public domain with 'checks and balances'.

Whilst these four images narrate the story of a vital democracy, in the praxis of democracy serious flaws can be identified within them. On the hand the political parts of the politico-administrative institution claim their primacy according to the classical Weberian doctrine. On the other hand, societal developments have led to new and autonomous domains of politics and governance. As a consequence the functioning of representative democracy has come under pressure.

ICT developments play a very important role in this respect, because they tend to function as a catalyst for broader societal developments, thus causing serious flaws in the various perspectives on representative democracy. Here the argument is that in an information society three trends – horizontalization, deterritorialization and virtualization – are both magnifying and radicalising already existing flaws in the functioning of representative democracy. In an information society, representation must be reinvented. The conclusion seems justified that representation as constitution of a democratic republic is most suitable for the information society.

2. The information society

My interpretation of the information society is as a metaphor for the transition of the industrial era to a new era in which information, communication, knowledge, images, and meanings are crucial factors

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in the economy, in culture, in social relations, and in the world of politics and administration. Just as the transition from the feudal to the industrial era was a very far-reaching transformation process, so is the transition to the information society. There is a crucial difference, though: this transition will not take ages but decades, and the dominant technology is not an extension of our physical but our intellectual capacities. This also immediately colours the problems involved in speaking about this transition, as both the institutions themselves as well as our thinking about them will be affected by it. Representative democracy is one of the most important institutions of the industrial era.

The information society affects politics, public administration and therefore representative democracy in several ways. In the first place ICT is applied in various domains of the politico-administrative institution, not only in policy implementation but increasingly so in the field of policy development and policy making. As politics and democracy are affected, so is representation, although few claims that ICT is supporting direct democracy are justified. Changes that can be observed are: communication patterns becoming increasingly horizontal; interactivity of the new media becoming an alternative for linear and one-sided policy participation procedures; the virtual world escaping political-administrative control. In addition, we see the development of a relatively autonomous virtual reality, of what Castells has so expressively called the "space of flows", characterized by "timeless time" [3]. He speaks of a "real virtuality" which escapes many limitations of space and time. In this complex of change three patterns can be discerned.

2.1. Horizontalization

The increasing capacity of individual systems and the network connections between them is leading to horizontalization in communication and the provision of information. That societal relations are becoming ever more horizontal, as a cultural trend, is being given a strong boost by ICT. The internet was initially designed by military strategists. It was conceived as a communication system without a centre, so that the Russians would not be able to eliminate it by bombing its headquarters. It is a superior piece of irony that the American military-industrial complex thus invented anarchy. The internet is a system without centre, which owes its vitality precisely to the fact that there is no central control and coordination. Thus the impossible, a system without a centre that nonetheless does not succumb to chaos, has become possible. Against all intuition, and in the face of all political and public administration theory, we must seriously take account of the vitality of anarchism as a pattern of organization.

2.2. De-territorialization

In the virtual world of information and communication, a dissociation of action and effect of action takes place. 'Place' thus loses both its limiting and its signifying meaning. What matters is no longer where I do things, but where my actions produce an effect. Activities thus become footloose. The virtual world is a reality without territory, without geography. What in the old days was the prerogative of multinational companies, 'shopping' all over the world to obtain the most favourable tax regimes, now comes within the reach of every individual citizen. In a world without territory, the nation state has become problematic, since this state is the example *par excellence* of an institution that is tied to a territory. In *Staat zonder land* ('State without Land'), the WRR (a scientific advisory council to Dutch government) observes that ICT is eroding the territorial basis of politics and public administration [11]. It is this process of deterritorialization that makes all attempts to grip the virtual world by the states of the physical world highly problematic.

2.3. Virtualization

In virtual communities, we are free to choose our own identity. Women can be men; old people young; shy types can be serial killers in a game. Physical limitations fall away, and thus also social, cultural, and moral boundaries. At the same time, when entering virtual reality environments that play around with heights, I suffer from the same vertigo that afflicts me in the physical world. In the process of virtualization, we see that images, meanings, and experiences produced by computers and networks become life-like. This means that in the virtual world we can see the emergence of economies, cultures and subcultures, social relations, and hence of politics and governance. In other words: history emerges. Partly, it will coalesce with history as we know it; partly, it will be the history of a new world. Hence, politics and public administration, and representative democracy in particular, will be reinvented.

3. Representation as depiction

The first meaning of representative democracy, that of 'depiction', is the most common one. In a parliamentary democracy, citizens elect representatives. These representatives make decisions on their behalf. They depict, as it were, the will of the people. This amorphous mass of the populace acquires a precise and legitimized depiction in a centre. This centre, in its turn, governs society on behalf of this same society. In an ideal situation, parliament is an accurate reflection of the substantive preferences in that society. Political parties articulate the different though interrelated currents in society. This image of a depiction suggests unambiguity and precision, like a mirror or a photograph. Moreover, the image is seen as fair, because elections, the quintessential instrument of representative democracy, legitimize representation.

Representative democracy in this sense is however under severe pressure. Complaints about the representativeness of parliament are, of course, familiar ones and we can accept that parliament can scarcely be a true mirror of the population. However, the main problem with the contemporary representativeness is the loss of function of the major political parties. Not only have the membership figures of most parties dropped considerably, the significance of political parties in formulating principles and programmes and in articulating social issues and interests is minimal. This means that parties are now primarily job providers: thirty thousand political positions are given to approximately thirty thousand active party members. In default of the ideological function, the legitimacy of this personnel selection is extremely limited.

In addition, an increasing number of alternative routes to the administrative system are open to citizens and social organizations. On the one hand, there is an extensive system of legal protection. On the other hand, there is increasingly more interactivity. This also undermines the representativeness of parliament. The large-scale introduction of ICT will further these developments.

In the everyday reality of parliamentary democracy, we see varied uses of ICT by parliaments and political actors [4]. Political parties are also active with websites. Increasingly, individual parliamentarians develop their own homepages.

It is interesting that ICT is increasingly generating alternatives for contacts between citizens and their representative organizations in the world of politics and public administration. The mediating role of parties and people's representatives is being eroded, a fate similar to that facing many intermediary organizations in the information society. The depicting function of representative democracy seems less important now that both contacts and interactivity are becoming more direct. This, of course, is not direct

democracy in the classical sense, but rather a variety of direct interaction patterns in divergent fields of public activity.

In the virtual world, we see a variety of forms of public regulation and governance. Mostly, the activities in question are activities by private actors with public significance. One might think of the issuing of internet addresses by private associations all over the world. Incidentally, much of the public regulation and governance is functional in nature, that is to say, tied to a particular subject or a specific community. Again, one could conceive of bodies evaluating communication standards and protocols. Functional governance and regulation are also non-integral and non-territorial. Integral assessments are seldom made, nor can a territory be recognized.

All in all, we see that, in the process of horizontalization, representative democracy in the depicting sense becomes more direct. On the one hand, the information society evidently has less need of mediation by political actors. On the other hand, representation is no longer directed at a central point either, simply because such a centre no longer exists. Obviously, this has to do with the process of deterritorialization referred to earlier. The information society has no geography. Therefore, representation is not directed at integral assessment and decision making, but is spread over countless domains and realities. The information society is polycentric and hence fragmented. The process of virtualization contributes to this. Numerous worlds with their own cultures and normative frameworks are developing. Representation and legitimacy, therefore, are no longer univocal or uniform.

4. Representation as imagination

The second meaning of representative democracy is a process of deliberation and negotiation, wherein the will of the people is not only depicted, it is also imagined. Through deliberation, representatives formulate the social agenda of problems and questions. These processes involve the gauging of social opinions, public debate and, ultimately, the forming of opinions. In these processes of imagining, the 'public interest' is always the frame of reference as well as the outcome [10]. It is clear that this imagining, in contrast to the first image of the depiction, suggests a distance between representation and that which is represented [1]. Again, it is in this sense also that parliament as representation is under pressure. Social issues and problem are expressed in numerous places in the public domain. Public debate is extremely lively yet seems to be politically hampered rather than stimulated. Parliament and its Members play only a marginal role in the public debate yet when they do so it is often accompanied by annoying claims to political primacy.

Countless processes which are referred to as 'the relocation of politics' [2] and in which ICT plays an important role have also relocated the process of imagination. The public debate has been socialized and hence fragmented, rightly resisting attempts at political monopolization. Instead of the once familiar denominational groupings, a much more pluralist and varied societal field of public activity has developed.

The deployment of ICT by the existing political-administrative institutions gives a strong impulse to the new pluralism of imagination as more and varied citizens and organizations can participate in interactive policy processes. In many policy fields, we see so-called digital discussion platforms. As a result, the process of consultation becomes stronger, more intensive, and richer. In addition, ICT makes possible a more intensive use of images, enhancing democracy and diminishing the elitism of an oral culture as it does so. Thus, the deployment of ICT can be said to serve the general interest. At the same time, there is the not infrequent complaint that interactive policy-making, certainly through the deployment of ICT, puts pressure on the existing forms of representation. What role is left for parliament, and what happens

to political primacy if the new forms of interactivity have ensured broad public support? All that is left for parliament to do is to 'codify the consensus'.

It is expected that the increasing deployment of ICT will cause public consultation to move even more to areas outside the conventional frameworks of parliament and parties. Increasingly, discussions within the virtual world will have an effect on decision-making in the physical world, if only because official policy-makers will consult this world to strengthen their power base.

In this virtual world, we can observe an extension of public discussions even now. There are discussion groups about the widest variety of subjects. It is also remarkable that, in many virtual communities, discussions often concern the role of the person moderating the discussion and the rules of the debate. In these communities, very varied regulatory systems with respect to the conduct of public deliberation are developing. Typically there is no discernible hierarchy among all these communities and patterns of virtual activity. Of course, within a particular community, such a hierarchy *can* exist. But insofar as one can speak meaningfully of *one* virtual reality, this virtual reality knows no centre in which the public debate is sealed and legitimized, and in which the results are codified. The virtual world as a whole is thus a horizontal network. As a result, representation as a process of imagination is not only horizontal in the sense of being 'decentred', but also fragmented. It is not necessary for a story about overall authority to be told about the whole. In a world without territory, the forms of representation that wish to tell such a story disappear. Deterritorialization and virtualization create an endless reality of small, fragmented stories.

5. Representation as institution

The third meaning of representative democracy sees it as an institution linking political power and political control in modern, industrial society. The representatives of the people control the executive power. Legislation, execution, and control are linked in order to limit and legitimize political power. This is also at issue in ministerial responsibility: the duty of accountability of government to parliament is regulated and, at the same time, this duty legitimizes political power. This image of representation as an institution is again linked to the idea of a centre. In one specific place, parliament, democratic control takes place, hence also the concept of political primacy surrounding the institution of parliament.

This meaning of representative democracy can be seen as the institutionalization of political power. Its historical origin is rooted in a new political centre in opposition to and, in constitutional terms superior to, the absolute power of the monarch. The people's sovereignty is embodied in parliament. Through this political centre, society governs itself.

Within this meaning of representative democracy, politics has been relocated, not only in terms of substance but institutionally as well. If there are centres at all, there are many of them. In the present societal complexity, parliament is only one of the actors, and a modest one at that. If representativeness is inadequate, if the societal agenda is determined by many players, then the central position of parliament as an institution has become a tragic one; much as in a Greek tragedy the hero cannot escape his fate. Every rational attempt to recapture and reconfirm political primacy is evidence of its loss. Postmodern society is a decentred society, which neither in the meaning of a grand narrative, nor in the meaning of an hierarchical institution feels the need for an overall coherence. Postmodern citizens are nomads composing their own story.

Many attempts at restoring the hierarchy are, therefore, ritual in nature. Every parliamentary survey confirms the myth that central control would help. All clashes between politics and senior civil servants lead to the illusion of restoration of power. In the meantime, control is stacked on control and supervision

on supervision. In this, a very ambiguous role is played by modern technology. Although it appears that ICT enhances transparency, horizontal network formation is simultaneously the dominant pattern. Implementation agencies, having become independent, take their cue from this by developing new forms of horizontal responsibility. If they succeed in doing this, a source of legitimacy will come into existence that can strongly compete with the weakened legitimacy of vertical supervision.

Representative democracy as institution is about the control of political power. At present, there is very little to show that parliament uses ICT to control political power. Obviously, there are many ways to use ICT to reinforce control of political central power. One of these options is through the interactive functions of ICT, which parliament could use to enter into coalitions with societal organizations in order to reinforce control.

Thus far and predominantly we see attempts by the political-administrative institution to regulate and control the virtual world. These attempts are successful in as far as they concern actors that physically operate within the nation-state. This is the case, for instance, with a regulatory agency that regulates and control telecommunications operators. Much less successful are attempts to regulate and control activities within the virtual world itself.

In the virtual world there is little evidence of institutional control of power, whether political or otherwise. Control tends to be the result of combined processes of a 'free-market system' and self-regulation, whose codification takes place by way of 'best practices' and standardization rather than by institutional controls. This can be understood by reference to the horizontalisation that characterizes the information society. Contradictory to the pyramid as a symbol of political control in the physical world, there is another quite different symbol: the archipelago or the network, where there is no single centre but rather many centres. These centres are not tied to territory, but to processes and activities.

The image of the nation state, including its parliament as its legitimised centre, and tied in to territory for its jurisdictional authority, is inadequate in the information society. The normative foundations for such an institution are fragmented to the point that they are unamenable to being lumped together.

6. Representation as constitution

Finally, we turn to the constitutional meaning of representative democracy. This takes us to a broad concept of democracy, one that also involves the public domain in a broad sense and a system of 'checks and balances' in a society. This is the republican interpretation of representation; democracy is formed first and foremost by citizens and their organizations. In representation, the primary issue is the protection and, where necessary, the shaping of the republic. This representation is mainly procedural and aimed at the maintenance and creation of checks and balances; of the formation of countervailing political power; of plurality in the public domain; of the balanced process of societal deliberation and decision-making. In this image of representative democracy, the political place of power is empty, in a certain sense, because content is elsewhere [6].

Parliament, therefore, is an institution that is subservient to democracy, not by considering itself its ultimate expression, but by conceiving of democracy in the republican sense as the republic of free citizens.

In many political discussions, this view of representative democracy seems to be a forgotten dimension. Indeed, many politicians identify with the idea that they embody democracy. Many statements about political primacy and ministerial responsibility can be explained from that attitude. Clearly, now that politics has been relocated and parliament no longer occupies a central position, this meaning of representative democracy is urgent and topical. In a public domain that has been further socialized, in

which relations are ever more horizontalized, more thought must be given to responsibility, to checks and balances, to power and countervailing power. It is these points that parliament should give more attention.

The image of representative democracy as 'constitution', appears surprisingly relevant to an information society. If we argue from the existing parliamentary institution, ICT could contribute to the ongoing emancipation of the citizen as citoyen. This means, however, that the forgotten dimension of checks and balances must be reinstated. This, in turn, also means that the citizen is given back the primary role in the republic, for ICT appears to remove the classic obstacles to public participation. However, experience with political innovation does not augur well. It seems that parliament and politics more generally tend to consider the citizen their competitor.

In its dynamics and logic, the information society is in keeping with the social and cultural characteristics of the postmodern citizen. It is better able to sustain fragmentation and individualization than industrial society with its pyramidal institutions. Owing to its network-like character, the information society is more in line with the symbol of the archipelago, as sketched above. This archipelago is a consequence of the process of horizontalization, which is further radicalised by ICT. Of course, networks are not free of uncontrolled power, oppression, and exclusion, but their horizontal nature does offer better safeguards for the exercise of countervailing powers. Free-market processes and self-regulation are subtle forms of check and balance. They are also inevitable in a society that has no geography and, hence, no centres with any clear jurisdiction. Though virtual reality shows many developments towards monopolization and exclusion, the internet as a social, cultural, and economic reality is still without a centre. In terms of politics and governance, this would be an anarchist reality. It is crucial here to gauge the democratic quality of the information society. In other words: is the virtual world also a republic?

7. The anarchist republic

The virtual reality of the information society is a reality without space and without a centre. In other words, the information society is decentred. For politics and governance, this means that we can no longer assume a political-administrative centre. Scholars of public administration, in their part, take it that the physical world too has less and less of a political-administrative centre. For the virtual world, this is all the more true. Public regulation and governance will be more or less spontaneously occurring processes whose legitimacy will only be demonstrated in retrospect. Transience and alternation, moreover, will increase.

The virtual reality of the information society is also a fragmented reality. The information society is multicultural in the widest sense of the word. This multicultural nature, however, does not imply any coherence. The fragments of the information society are separate and sliding panels. Coherence and connection are coincidental. Universal norms and values are absent. All meaning and sense have become 'local' in a non-spatial sense. The charge of cultural relativism, often made against postmodern thinkers, has become a reality in the information society. This means that politics and administration can no longer focus on coherence and cohesion, they will have to live with fragmentation. Or, rather, such fragmentation may serve as a precondition for societal vitality.

The virtual reality of the information society is not a univocal reality. Variety is king, and nothing needs to be what it appears to be. Information is multi-interpretable, and images can be deceptive. Even as an individual, I may change my identity at will and be a different person in different communities and domains. Technically, it will soon even be possible to take my pick from various lifelike outward

appearances. This means that establishing and confirming identity and meaning will evolve into important public functions.

If these are important features of the information society, the following can be said about politics and public administration.

Democracy in a decentred reality will evidently have no centre. It will be a quality of various processes and domains in this information society rather than a value that has become solidified in institutions. Sometimes, democracy may chiefly lie in the representative quality of the actors in processes of governance and regulation. Sometimes, democracy may chiefly be found in the carefulness and pluriformity of public deliberation. Sometimes, democracy sits in the balance of power, including countervailing powers.

In a fragmented information society, democracy will not be able to pursue the ambition of being integral and coherent. The integral has lost its meaning in a multicultural society. Subcultures exist alongside each other and may or may not enter into alliances. Politics and public administration no longer have the option of telling a comprehensive and coherent story. In the various subcultures of the information society, patterns of signification cannot be reduced to a common denominator, let alone be founded in one grand narrative.

Democracy in the non-univocal reality of the information society will be pluriform. At present, too, democracy and pluriformity are often bracketed together. In a virtual context, however, pluriformity is much more radical. Identity needs to be re-established over and over again and need not even be consistent at the level of the individual citizen. Reliability will depend on agreements and codes to a much greater extent than is already the case at present. It is precisely in this establishment of identity and reliability that we constitute political communities. Only this will make the public domain truly pluriform. Politics and governance will likewise fragment.

One may conclude that the fourth meaning of representative democracy that I sketched, representative democracy as 'constitution', seems to fit the information society best. This image of representative democracy focuses on checks and balances, countervailing powers, and the procedural quality of public formation of judgement. Democracy, in this image, is not geared towards end results, but towards processes. To put this differently: the information society courts an aesthetic conception (Ankersmit, 1996) of democracy in which the quality of forms and styles holds a prominent place, for the content is fragmented and multicultural. This fragmentation and multiculturality also harbours the most important safeguard for the protection of minorities. Indeed, the notion that representative democracy is especially tied up with majority formation no longer has any currency in the information society. An information society consists only of minorities.

Public regulation and governance link to the fragmentation and ambiguity of identities and meanings. There is pluriformity without a centre and without an all-embracing narrative. In this sense, almost literally derived from the Greek, the information society is anarchist. It is an anarchist republic if representative democracy is primarily focused on the confirmation and protection of citizens and their associations as the central actors. Especially at the level of citizens and their associations, the public domain exists in all its pluriformity. (See for instance: Van de Donk, 2001) Thus the links between the physical world and the political-administrative institutions are re-established. In the information society, parliamentary democracy will be only one among many kinds of representation. Appeals to democratic primacy are in vain, because the pluriformity of the public domain, with its widely diverging kinds of representation, is its most important democratic quality.

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