Doctor of Political Science

THEORIZING REPRESENTATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE REPRESENTED. HOW PEOPLE IN SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DIFFICULT SITUATIONS IN BRUSSELS UNDERSTAND REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Today’s representative malaise is marked by rising dissatisfaction with representative democracy and increased crises of legitimacy. This thesis asserts that members of society who have prospered least from representative democracy are best placed, and more able to, reimagine the representative relationship. I show how people in socio-economically difficult situations understand and think about political representation, and how this enables normative theory-building that prioritises the representative relationship from the perspective of the represented. I show the continued relevance of Pitkin’s principal-agent relationship, but draw attention to the importance of the dyadic dynamics in the representative relationship. In this vein, an ideal representative relationship called the problem-solving principal-agent relationship, is theorized and tailored to what participants problematized and looked for in representation. To that end, a co-constructive framework embodying a specific epistemological premise is developed to elicit alternative ways of knowing in political decision making. This ideal relationship suggests that elected representatives bear the responsibility for but should work together with people to resolve problems.

The thesis makes four key theoretical and methodological contributions. First, it prioritizes the perspective of the represented for normative theory-building. Secondly, it shows the importance of both empirically and methodologically underpinning normative ideas to reimagine the representative relationship. Thirdly, it develops an ideal relationship that is
derived from extensive qualitative fieldwork conducted in Brussels with people in socio-
economically difficult situations between September 2018 and November 2021. This means it
builds on data collected before, during and after the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally,
it develops a participant-oriented research approach to facilitate research collaboration. This
approach refutes the assumption that people in socio-economically difficult situations are “hard
to reach”, and rather establishes that fieldwork and meaningful collaboration are a precondition
for research participation.