Making representations

In *The Representative Claim,* Michael Saward provides an extremely rich and stimulating analysis of political claim-making. The title of my commentary – 'making representations' – can be understood in two senses: to make representations is both to make claims but also to construct objects. I chose it because I want to focus on Saward's thesis that representation has a constitutive or creative dimension. That is to say, the makers of claims actually constitute or create the objects of their claims in the process of representing them. Such a claim suggests that Saward aims to challenge the commonsense notion that acts of representation can be read in terms of or judged in relation to their referents. So what role can the concept 'referent' play in such a constitutive notion of representation?

Saward retains this concept, proposing a distinction between object and referent that bears further analysis. How does he suggest that an object is 'related to' a referent? To mention just one of Saward's examples, how are 'the true believers in our project' (referent) related to 'the flesh-and-blood people addressed' (object) (53)? He describes this relationship in several ways: (1) the referent is 'all the other things' the object 'is, or might be' (36); (2) it is 'the thing itself' (74), rather than a particular picture of it; and (3) it is 'the materially existing group or entity' (79) on which representations are based. I would suggest that these different ways of characterizing the referent serve different purposes: (1) makes the plausible suggestion that rival accounts of the object are possible; (2) suggests that, since direct access to the thing itself is impossible, interpretation is always necessary; and (3), by asserting that there is something real behind all the competing interpretive claims, seeks to deny that (1) plus (2) imply a radical scepticism about the existence of the material world.

It seems to me that (1) is a useful and valuable part of Saward's analysis, emphasizing that there can be different interpretations of the same object of representation. But to defend (1), neither (2) or (3) are needed. Positing something beyond representation, to which we cannot gain access without interpretation, simply adds an unnecessary metaphysical flourish to the argument. Even in the many examples of representative claims that Saward gives, the referent rarely figures. To sustain his persuasive account of the way in which objects and audiences may accept or reject the maker's claim that the subject represents them, and may then challenge the maker by offer competing accounts of the object , all he need assert is that it is possible to offer rival interpretations of the same object (52-4). It seems to me that this account describes (and illuminates) a good deal of ordinary political discourse.

This puzzling and, to my mind, extraneous notion of something beyond representation re-surfaces in Saward's discussion of what he calls the 'aesthetic' or 'cultural' dimension of representation (73). He claims that just as artists may seek to represent things by creating objects, so elected politicians may seek to represent their constituents by portraying them in a particular way. With regard to the cultural dimension of representation, Saward maintains that in any given place at any given time there is a cultural field which defines the

limits of the representable: 'there are cultural limits to the types of subject-object links that can plausibly be made in a given context' (75). Things inside this field can be represented, and things outside cannot. The strongest version of this claim would present us with a logical conundrum. How can we know that there is an outside to the field of representation, given *ex hypothesi* that this exterior space contains that which cannot be represented? In this regard, it may be useful to consider Wittgenstein's famous declaration that 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world' (*Tractatus*, 5.6) and Derrida's claim that 'il n'y a pas de-hors texte' (*Of Grammatology*, pp. 158-59). For both of these philosophers, it is a mistake to imagine that we could have unmediated access to the world itself; and yet this is just what we would need in order to describe the exterior of the existing field of representation.

A more moderate version of this claim, however, makes Saward's proposition look much less mysterious and much more useful. Consider a simple example. It is possible that, in a particular set of circumstances, it would be literally inconceivable that women should be enfranchised. In a second set of circumstances, the cultural resources could be available to make such a claim, even though it would be almost universally dismissed as absurd. It might be widely accepted, for example, that women are adequately represented by their fathers and husbands, while women themselves are represented as incompetent. In a third set of circumstances, available cultural codes could make it plausible to claim that there are no differences between men and women which could justify the former but not the latter being enfranchised. Here the cultural materials are available to make the claim that women should have the vote. Bearing this simple example in mind, I would suggest that Saward's idea of a cultural field of representation is interesting and important since it invites us to examine the ways in which claims-makers draw on existing cultural resources, or attempt to reshape or create new resources, as they make claims on behalf of particular objects.

Apart from these concerns, Saward's analysis of the aesthetic dimension of representation is appealing for a number of reasons. Here I want to focus on its implications for the imbrication of facts and values in representative claim-making. Consider Jean-François Millet's well-known picture *The Gleaners* (1857). This painting is usually placed in the tradition of French realism. One could say rather disingenuously that this painting is realistic in the sense that it looks like the thing it portrays: three women work in a field, picking up the ears of corn which the harvesters have left behind. But of course things are not as simple as this. Millet's picture does not seek to be realistic in the sense of being purely imitative. Michael Kimmelman, for instance, argues that Millet's depiction of the gleaners was intended 'to suggest the gravity of their existence through a kind of religious transfiguration' (*New York Times*, 27 August 1999). Thus, while this depiction of three women from the rural working-glass is in some sense descriptive, it is at the same time laden with value.

If we turn now to political representation, I would suggest that similar considerations apply. When an MP says: 'this policy won't go down well with the hard-working families in my constituency', she is not simply reporting impartially the views of her constituents. Rather, she is offering an account of what they are – honest, decent, respectable, etc. – which creates a more or less explicit contrast with the ideologically driven or self-interested political class who proposed the policy in question. One of the strengths of Saward's account of representative claim-making, then, is that it provides a phenomenologically accurate account of the everyday business of politics in which claims about what things are and what they should be are entwined in complex and sometimes problematic ways.

The final point that I would like to make concerns what I shall call the responsibilities of representation. According to the 'standard' principal-agent account, the representative, as agent, is to be 'accountable' to the principal, or constituency. In the orthodox model of representative democracy, it is elections which provide at least minimal accountability. If, as Saward argues, agents actually help to constitute their principals in acts of representation, then I would suggest that their degree of accountability surpasses what elections can provide.

Consider this well-known if apocryphal story told about Bono. Half way through a U2 concert, he asks the audience to be silent. He begins slowly clicking his fingers, and then says to the crowd: 'every time I click my fingers, a child in Africa dies'. A wit in the front row instantly retorts: 'well stop clicking them then!' It seems very unlikely that this story is true. Yet despite its uncertain status, there are understandable reasons why this story is told and retold. For one thing, it is a good way of mocking the narcissistic delusions of its protagonist. Another and perhaps less obvious reason is that this story can be read as a comment on the responsibility that someone like Bono bears when (if) he makes a comment of this kind.

As Saward reports, in 2004 Bono *did* say: 'I represent a lot of people [in Africa] who have no voice at all … They haven't asked me to represent them. It's cheeky but I hope they're glad I do' (82). I would argue that Bono should do more than 'hope' that people in Africa are glad that he claims to represent them. First, he should ask if he needs to represent them by considering whether people in Africa could in fact speak or act for themselves. Second, if they cannot, then he should consider helping to build the capacity for them to do so. Third, if this is not possible, then he should try to find out whether they are 'glad' to be represented by him or not. Specifically, he should try to determine whether they are happy with the picture he paints of them. This is, of course, a highly simplified account of a highly complex moral situation. I present it in order to underscore the way in which Saward's account of the constitutive character of representation brings new normative elements to the standard account, intensifying the responsibility of those who claim to represent by holding them accountable for such claims in more complex, potentially dialogical ways.