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Author(s): Bonin, Hugo

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How Theory Shapes Perspective, Or When Did Democracy Become Representative?

BY HUGO BONIN · PUBLISHED 25/06/2024 · UPDATED 24/06/2024

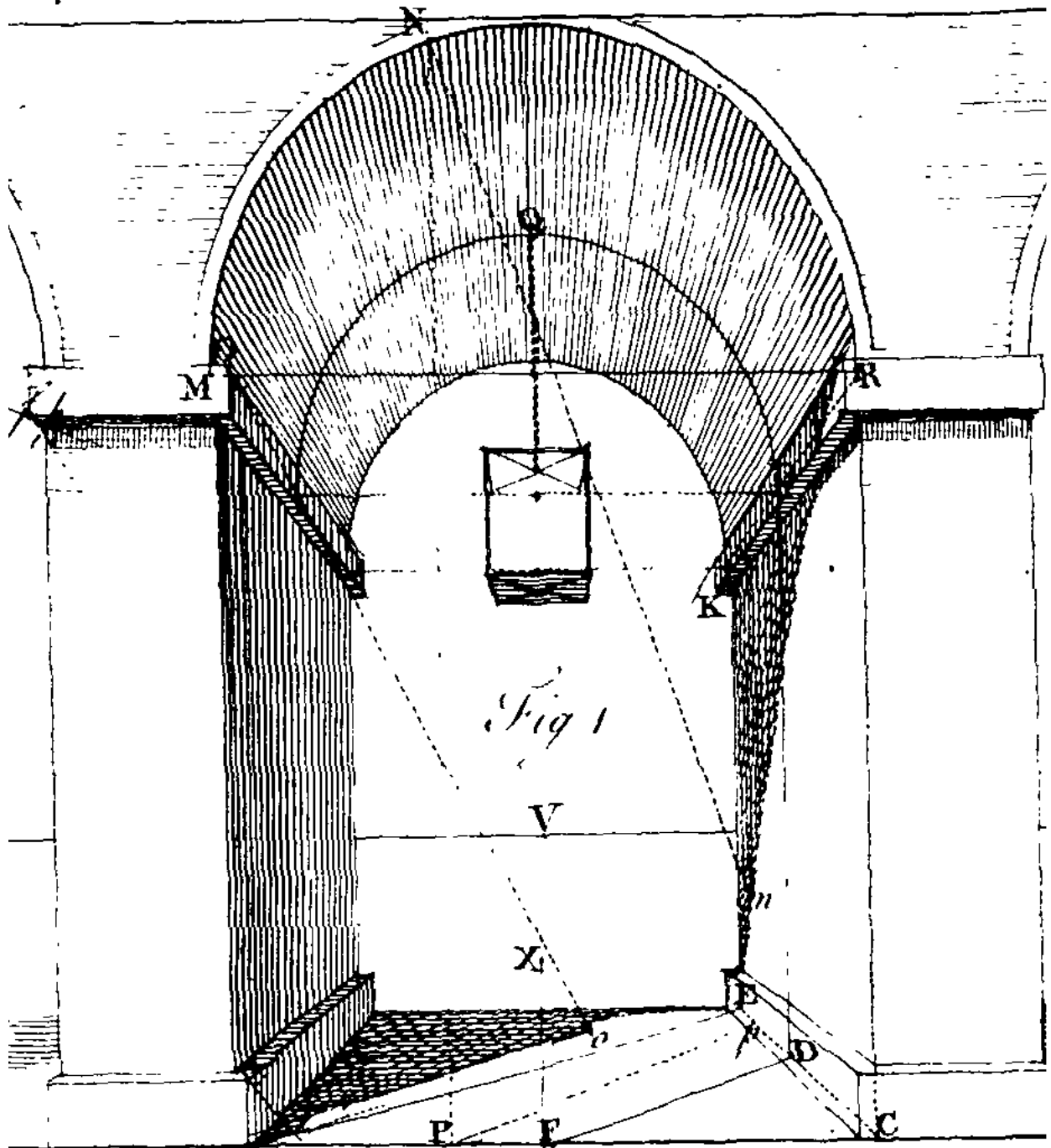


Illustration from Daniel Fournier, A treatise of the theory and practice of perspective, London 1761, p. 94.

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The Center for Intellectual History at the University of Helsinki and the “Political Representation” Project at the University of Jyväskylä recently organised a workshop entitled “Writing the Long-term History of Democracy”. While there were multiple points of convergence between the participants, some of the debates offer a glimpse of the divergences between different approaches to intellectual history, namely between a more contextualist framework and one informed by conceptual history. With respect to the former, I am broadly referring to interpretations that emphasise the importance of grasping ideas within their specific historical contexts, an approach especially associated with figures such as Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock. With respect to the latter, I am referring to a constellation of scholars, often influenced by Reinhart Koselleck, who focus on how

and why concepts have evolved over time, tracing their origins, transformations, and interactions within different cultural, social, and political contexts.

My goal in contrasting these two perspectives is not to oppose them, or to call for some kind of a rematch of Skinner versus Koselleck. Nor is it an exercise in how to formally reconcile both perspectives – something attempted by several other scholars.¹ Rather, I would like to take this opportunity to illustrate how theoretical frameworks strongly guide and shape empirical work and interpretations. I will do so by looking at a specific example explored on that day, representative democracy. In doing so, I will briefly outline mainstream ideas of how representation and democracy came to be associated, before presenting and contrasting a contextualist interpretation of the topic (based on Markku Peltonen's presentation), as well as a conceptual one (based on Pasi Ihalainen's ongoing work). In the third part, I raise three points that warrant further investigation: reception, the relationship between a focus on ideas versus words, and the issue of qualifiers of key political concepts.

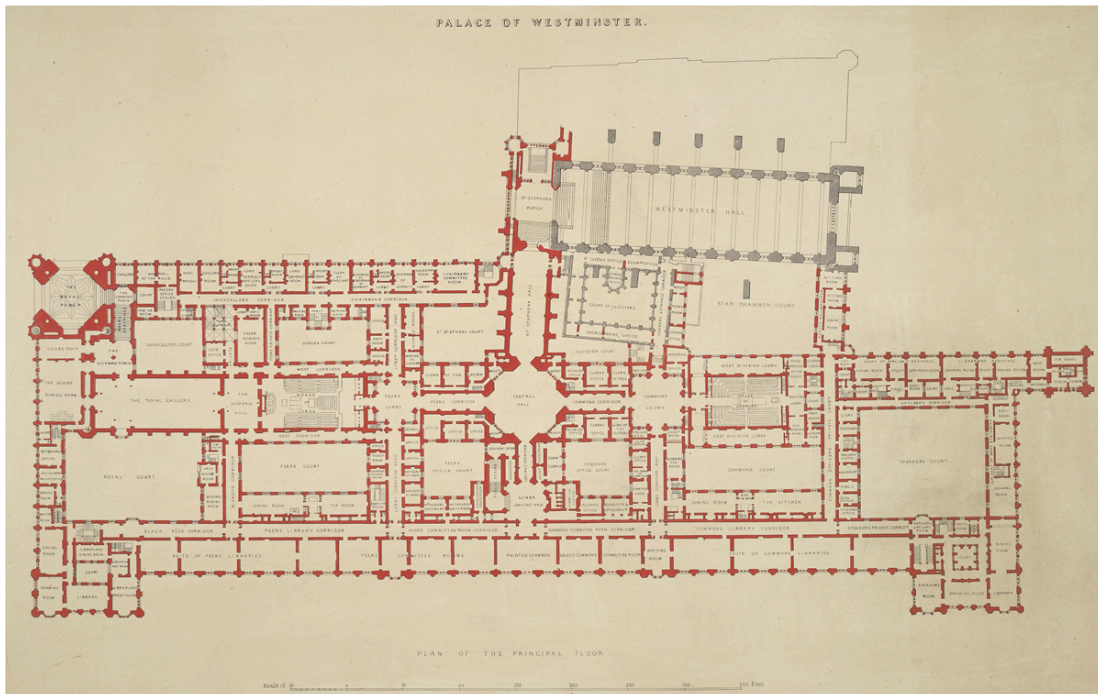
Before diving in, a word of caution: the following is based on my own understanding of the positions and ideas of the participants. Anybody who has tried to summarise the contents of a full-day workshop is aware that such an understanding is always partial and prone to error. This is not intended as the official record, and I look forward to any diverging interpretations.

An oft-noted evolution of the concept of democracy in the modern era is its fusion with the idea of representation. The standard narrative goes something like this: although democracy was born in Ancient Greece, and in Athens specifically, it was a "direct democracy", which according to its critics was disorderly, unstable, and unsuitable for larger political entities. The eighteenth-century revolutions (in America, France, and across the Atlantic) were a decisive break in many respects, partly because they merged democracy and representation through elections, thereby transforming it into its modern political form. This is when the seeds of representative democracy were sown, before blossoming during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this account "representative democracy" became the norm, with its "direct" form subsequently requiring an explicit qualifier.²

Such a narrative rests on a number of preconceptions in terms of temporalities, geographies, and transmissions. It creates an almost mythical link between Greek Antiquity and modern politics, usually with a strong teleological perspective: "representative democracy" is the accomplishment of a centuries-long story. Its focus is also quite Eurocentric and diffusionist, with democracy emerging in the so-called West, and later spreading across the globe. A historical standpoint more sensitive to postcolonial thought, among others, would probably examine the various practices and conceptualizations of 'democracy' that flourished across the world.³ But what I want to show here is that even without fundamentally

questioning several of these assumptions, even in two approaches as similar as contextualism and conceptual history, the range of disagreement on this specific issue can be quite broad.

During the above-mentioned workshop, one of the key points made by Markku Peltonen (Helsinki) was that historians should pay more attention to the various democratic practices and concepts of democracy that flourished before the eighteenth century. In other words, what happened with democracy after Athens, but before the Atlantic revolutions? In line with his previous work, he argued that the English Civil War contained some of the most innovative uses of democracy, especially with regard to political representation. Through a fine-grained analysis of a few select publications, he explained how some publicists and parliamentarians actually defended a democracy based on representation as the best form of government during the English Free State (1649-1653).⁴



Later in the day,

Plan of the principal floor of the Palace of Westminster in London. Collection of architectural drawings formed by Frederick Crace. Image Rights: [Wikimedia Commons](#), [Public Domain](#).

Pasi Ihalainen (Jyväskylä) offered a *longue durée* perspective on the uses of democracy and representation in parliamentary debates within numerous Northwest European countries from the late eighteenth to the twenty-first century.⁵ Using the United Kingdom's Parliament as an "analytical nexus" (that is, a place where a wide variety of political discourses and concepts meet), he argued that in the British case, the word "democracy" remained negatively charged for most of the nineteenth century.⁶ While MPs might favour a "representative parliament" or "government", the concept of "representative democracy" itself only took hold in Westminster after the Second World War. Mostly used by Americans in the 1930s, "representative democracy" has become more common since the post-war era, although it has remained a rather technical term within the British context.

Those two perspectives on “representative democracy” seem at first difficult to reconcile, especially in terms of periodization. The first one argues that the idea emerged in the mid-seventeenth century, while the other points to a much more recent breakthrough. The divergences are also stark in methodological terms. Peltonen uses an onomasiological approach, meaning that he takes a contemporary concept and explores its various incarnations. He is interested in how “representative democracy”, a concept that was not yet coined, could be expressed through different linguistic combinations such as “popular government”, or how a “simple democracy” differed from one where representatives had more authority. Ihalainen takes a semasiological perspective that starts out from words and explores their meaning. He focuses specifically on the signifier “representative democracy”, and how it differs in its use from signifiers such as “representative government” or “parliamentary democracy”.

We can also see how the first is interested in a specific moment of political crisis and theoretical innovation, while the second takes a longitudinal view, focusing on practical political language. To put it in another way, one underscores breakthroughs and first occurrences, the other receptions and normalisation. These differences in theoretical perspectives thus lead to quite diverging views on the history of “representative democracy,” once again in terms of temporalities and transmissions. For the former, the contextualist approach tends to concentrate on smaller timespans, usually the length of an intellectual or political controversy, while conceptual history highlights the long-term—and often slow—transformations of a concept. As for transmissions, while Peltonen’s case is rather self-limited, Ihalainen underlines both the transfers and particularities of national cases.

However, there are also convergences between these two approaches. Both are highly concerned with language, and more precisely with actor-based concepts and ideas. Their goal is to pay special attention to the words used by historical writers and politicians, in order to gain a more practical understanding of what these figures were doing when using specific concepts. Both also illustrate and highlight the malleability of “democracy”, which could be used to denote a variety of political forms, with a range of connotations. Neither Peltonen nor Ihalainen pretend to arrive at a working definition of the concept that could be used across centuries or countries. They thereby helped lift the fog of mythologies that too often prevent us from gaining a clearer view of the past.

What is the outcome of comparing these approaches? In terms of periodization, it seems to me that focusing too much on the first occurrence of an idea as opposed to its normalisation creates an artificial opposition. One can recognize that representative democracy was (re)-invented multiple times (during the English Civil War, the French Revolution, and the Cold War), before the expression “representative democracy” itself became more common. This entails adopting a

more open-ended temporalisation, and being wary of linear and teleological narratives. In other words, historians have been increasingly aware of paying attention not only to the enunciation of certain ideas, but to their reception as well. The case of “representative democracy” shows that they should continue to do so.

Furthermore, we need to consider both onomasiological and semasiological perspectives: democracy could be linked to representation even if the qualifier “representative” was not used clearly. For example, one could argue that the emergence of a discourse related to “direct legislation/democracy” in socialist and anarchist movements of the second half of the nineteenth century implies that more mainstream understandings of democracy were always strongly linked to representation. Yet, as proponents of semasiology argue, the fact that the concept of “representative democracy” became increasingly expressed through these specific words is also to be questioned and investigated. From a theoretical perspective, it seems that a balancing and self-reflecting juggling act between onomasiology and semasiology is still necessary.

Another issue concerns the question of adjectives for key political and social concepts. One could argue that the more frequent and older they are, the more concepts have a chance to acquire qualifiers and nuances. For example, a political movement dating back to the nineteenth century, such as socialism, has more flavours (democratic, revolutionary, etc.) than a recent one such as trans-humanism. Again, taking democracy as an example, it is worth pointing out that the number of its potential qualifiers now numbers in the thousands, from the well-known “liberal” to the more puzzling “espresso democracy”.⁷ As both a consensual and contested concept, we can expect democracy to gain an increasing number of attributes, all while remaining subject to debate regarding its “true” form. This is partly the case because the need for attributes appears especially when concepts are challenged. Adding a qualifier to a concept can enable one to fend off criticism: think of Bernie Sander’s use of “democratic socialism” as a way to (partly) avoid the negative connotation of socialism in US politics. However, as I have argued elsewhere, in France and the United Kingdom the notion of “liberal democracy” became preeminent only as a reaction to the participatory critique of representative institutions in the 1970s. Faced with a more extensive conception of democracy, many right-wing political actors described the established model of democracy as being “liberal,” focusing on the defence of the rule of law and individual rights.⁸

In conclusion, the examination of representative democracy through contextualist and conceptual frameworks reveals the intricate interplay between theory and historical interpretation. By juxtaposing these perspectives, historians navigate beyond linear narratives, recognizing the multiplicity of reinventions and adaptations inherent in the evolution of political concepts. This calls for an open-ended temporalization that captures the genesis of ideas as well as their

subsequent normalisation, while also acknowledging the dynamic nature of language in mediating political discourse. It also calls for constant self-reflection on our own theoretical assumptions.

Moreover, exploration of onomasiological and semasiological perspectives highlights the centrality of language in shaping conceptual understandings. As concepts evolve, acquire qualifiers, and undergo semantic shifts, they become arenas for contestation and negotiation, reflecting broader socio-political dynamics. Embracing this complexity enables historians to offer nuanced interpretations of the past, thereby enriching our understanding of the enduring significance of political concepts in contemporary discourse and practice. Clearly recognizing these divergent starting points, in addition to how they shape our work, is central to fruitful scholarly dialogue.

Hugo Bonin is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, specialising in the histories, practices, and theories of democracy. He recently published *'At the sound of the new word spoken': Le mot démocratie en Grande-Bretagne, 1770-1920* (Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes). His current research focuses on the conceptual history of liberal democracy in twentieth-century French and British politics. Before joining JYU, he conducted research at the Center for the Study of the History of Political Thought at Queen Mary University of London (2020-2022).



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1. See, among others, Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; Kari Palonen, *Politics and Conceptual Histories: Rhetorical and Temporal Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016; Christian Nadeau, "L'histoire Comme Construction Sociale Politique: Une Lecture Croisée de Reinhart Koselleck et Quentin Skinner," in *La Philosophie de l'histoire: Hommages Offerts à Maurice Laguerre*, ed. Christian Nadeau and Alexis Lapoint. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007, 279-300. [[↗](#)]
2. See, from widely different perspectives but following a similar periodization: John Markoff, "Where and When Was Democracy Invented?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (1999), 660-690; Luciano Canfora, *Democracy in Europe: A History of an Ideology*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2008; David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013; Paul Cartledge, *Democracy: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. For a counter-narrative, see Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell, *The Secret History of Democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. [[↗](#)]
3. Temma Kaplan, *Democracy: A World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. [[↗](#)]

4. As partly covered in Markku Peltonen, "All Government Is in the People, from the People, and for the People": Democracy in the English Revolution," in *Democracy and Anti-Democracy in Early Modern England 1603–1689*, ed. Cesare Cuttica and Markku Peltonen. Leiden: Brill, 2019, 66–87. [↗]
5. As part of his Academy of Finland Professorship, see the [Political Representation Project website](#). [↗]
6. This work is ongoing, but see his latest monograph as a partial example: Pasi Ihalainen, *The Springs of Democracy: National and Transnational Debates on Constitutional Reform in the British, German, Swedish and Finnish Parliaments, 1917–1919*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2017. [↗]
7. See Jean–Paul Gagnon’s [Democracy with Adjectives Database, at 3539 entries](#). [↗]
8. See Hugo Bonin, "The Last Politeia?: A Short(er) History of Liberal Democracy," *JHI Blog* (12.06.2023), URL: <https://jihblog.org/2023/06/12/the-last-politeia-a-shorter-history-of-liberal-democracy/> (30.04.2024). [↗]

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