Reading Resources: Set 2

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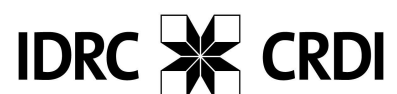
Title

'Representative democracy and information society – A postmodern perspective'

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Representative democracy and information society – A postmodern perspective
(Excerpted text. Dotted lines indicate snipped passages.)

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 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.

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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.