Symbolic representation at work: on privilege and subordination

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Petra Meier¹
Universiteit Antwerpen
petra.meier@uantwerpen.be

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Abstract
Symbolic representation is one of the four dimensions Pitkin (1967) distinguishes in her seminal work on the concept of political representation, and the one which has received least attention over the course of the years. In this article we argue that (feminist) political science should engage more with symbolic representation. We develop our argument starting from the understanding of the symbol in symbolic representation as being constructed. Based on this constructivist understanding of the agent in symbolic representation we develop the argument that we need to distinguish three important functions symbolic representation fulfils within political systems, that is the construction of social identities, the legitimisation of social groups and their political control.

Key words
Political representation, symbolic representation, agent, principal, identity, legitimacy, political control

¹ This paper is based on research conducted together with Emanuela Lombardo, Universidad Complutense Madrid, elombardo@cps.ucm.es
Symbolic representation is more than political symbolism

In her seminal work on the concept of political representation, Pitkin (1967) distinguished four dimensions: formalistic, symbolic, descriptive and substantive representation. While the first dimension deals with the formal rules of the process of representation, symbolic and descriptive representation both focus on ‘who’ is represented, describing the ways in which agents or those doing the representing, ‘stand for’ principals, those being represented, either symbolically or literally. Pitkin herself was most charmed by substantive representation, since it focuses on the act of representation itself, on what the agent does in order to represent the principal. According to Pitkin, we can only speak of representing as substantive activity when such action is involved.

Out of the four different dimensions of political representation theorised by Pitkin (1967), symbolic representation has long remained neglected in the literature. Numerous scholars in the fields of gender, but also ethnic and racial studies have studied the phenomenon of descriptive representation, and more recently also of substantive representation. Pitkin’s work has been an important touchstone in this, as Celis and Mazur (2012) underline in their introduction to a series of Critical Perspectives on Gender and Politics. Taking the field of gender studies as an illustration, since the early 1990s, a growing body of literature has focused on the imbalance of men and women in politics, the causes of this imbalance and the means to overcome such inequality. At the outset much of this work was normative and attempted to construct an argument for why more women were needed in politics. Looking into existing theories on representation and citizenship, it argued why these approaches were wrong and what was needed – a politics of presence or parity democracy – to redress the gender imbalance (Phillips 1995; Mossuz Lavau 1998). In the shadow of this body of thinking, more empirically oriented researchers broke open political systems, unravelling electoral systems and procedures of candidate recruitment, selection and election. They pointed out the gender bias inherent in institutional structures, rules and procedures (Rule and Zimmerman 1994; Tremblay 2012). This was the point when gender quotas made it to the political agenda (Dahlerup 2006; Krook 2006; Marques Pereira and Nolasco 2001), first in Argentina, France and Belgium, nowadays all around the world.

This focus on women’s underrepresentation in politics and the argumentation for an increased or equal number of women in politics, led feminist scholars to the question of what exactly is the added value to politics of women. This question generated an impressive body of research linking descriptive and substantive representation, exploring to what extent and under what conditions women are better able to represent women citizens than their male colleagues would (for an overview see Childs and Krook 2008). The results in these scholarly works on the substantive representation of women were mixed, ranging from, ‘yes, women definitely make a huge difference’,
to the argument for ‘more feminists, not more women’ (Tremblay and Pelletier 2000), which implied that feminists could also be men and that men could thus substantially represent women. Studies on substantive representation such as by Celis et al. (2008; Celis 2009) put into question the idea of women’s interests, challenging their unitary character, and discussed the role of ‘critical individuals’ as being more crucial than ‘critical mass’ in influencing women’s substantive representation.

In the wake of this feminist interest, a broader renewed interest in the concept of representation arose, leading to discussions about political representation as a construction (Squires 2008), as an issue of making claims on behalf of others (Saward 2010) and about the fact that the principal might not even have elected the one claiming to represent her or him (Saward 2009). This scholarly interest in a broader concept of political representation opens the door to reflections on the symbolic dimension of representation.

The few works on symbolic representation within the literature on gender and politics have discussed symbolic representation in relation to descriptive representation. Its appearance in these works is more about what descriptive representation generates at the level of symbolic representation. Schwindt-Bayer (2010, 6), for instance, refers to symbolic representation in terms of ‘what the symbolic consequences of women’s election to office are for the electorate’. The way she and others (Childs 2008; Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo 2012; Zetterberg 2009; 2012) put symbolic representation into operation is by looking at the effect of women’s presence in politics on public opinion by using surveys and opinion polls, and by studying changes in political attitudes, such as a more positive attitude towards politics or an increase of the perceived legitimacy of political institutions. This research on symbolic representation looks at the broader effects of women’s descriptive representation, relating women’s presence in politics to attitudinal or normative changes. The focus is also rather on a broader audience of citizens than on the relation between the principal and its agent.

Pitkin (1967), though, defined the symbolic dimension of representation as the representation of a group, nation or state through an object to which a certain representative meaning is attributed. A symbol is commonly defined as an image or object that suggests or refers to something else, and symbolic representation is indeed a process in which something by association or convention represents something else; much as the circle of 12 golden stars on a blue background represents the European Union. Thus, the particularity of symbolic representation resides in the capacity of the symbol, the agent, to evoke or suggest a meaning, belief, feeling and value related and appropriate to the principal (Childs 2008; Northcutt 1991; Parel 1969). These symbols themselves ‘make no allegations about what they symbolize, but rather suggest or express it’ (Pitkin 1972, 94).
Following Pitkin, we argue that symbolic representation is more than a simple effect of descriptive representation at a symbolic level and that it deserves a thorough analysis in itself. This is because in symbolic representation the agent suggests meanings that present the principal in a particular way, which has consequences for women and men. We develop our argument taking a constructivist approach to symbolic representation. In the first part of the article we unpack the constructed nature of the agent in symbolic representation. This then allows us to distinguish three important functions symbolic representation fulfils within political systems: the construction of social identities, the legitimisation of social groups and their political control. These functions will be developed in the remainder of the article.

The construction of symbolic representation

Following Pitkin’s (1967) definition of symbolic representation, scholarly works have analysed a great variety of objects that serve as agents in symbolic representation. Typical such objects that citizens experience in their everyday lives are national flags (Cerulo 1993). Objects – or agents – of symbolic representation are often related to nations or states: the military and uniforms, public parades and mass rallies, public buildings and particularly assembly buildings (Edelman 1976; Manow 2010; Puwar 2010); statues, the design of public spaces, and capitals (Matveeva 2010; Parkinson 2009; Sonne 2003); currency (Galloy 2000; Hawkins 2010; Hymans 2004; Kaelberer 2004; Pointon 1998; Unwin and Heweitt 2001); or stamps (Brunn 2000); the calendar of national and public holidays (Halas 2002); religious symbols (Miller 2000); language politics (Fierman 2010); flowers and plants, national aviation companies and their logos, cuisines, folk, and popular culture (Edensor 2002); and many more.

Symbolic agents such as those mentioned above have the power to suggest a meaning (Pitkin 1967), so that people will immediately associate a particular agent with what it represents. For example, Marianne, the white female profile between the blue and red colours, symbolically represents France or rather the French Republic. Do we need to explain who Marianne is? No. This simple answer is illustrative of the strength symbols possess. As Marianne shows, states are sometimes symbolised by the figure of a woman. The European Union, for instance, is not only represented by a circle of twelve golden stars on a blue background but also by a Phoenician young woman named Europa who according to Greek mythology was courted and carried off by a white bull (the god Zeus in disguise). Another example of such a symbolic female figure is Elissa, a mythical ruler (also known as Dido) and the founder and queen of Carthage, who represents modernity, women’s equality, and Tunisia’s connectedness to the Mediterranean on Tunisian coins.

Because of their power to evoke meaning, symbols used in political representation do more than just communicate meaning. They, to a certain extent, embody such meaning. As Kertzer (1988,
7) states: ‘Many of the most potent political symbols have a palpable quality to them, making it easier for people to treat concepts as things. (...) Similarly, a flag is not simply a decorated cloth, but the embodiment of a nation; indeed, the nation is defined as much by the flag as the flag is defined by the nation.’ Any menace to this symbol is a menace to what is represented (Kertzer 1992), which explains why stepping on or burning a national flag is an act that is morally condemned and even illegal in some legislations. Much like symbols such as flags can embody the strength of nations, so too can symbols turn weak when the nations they represent falter. In those cases, the weakness of the principal can be illustrated by the way we deal with their symbolic representations. An example can be found in the statues of Saddam Hussein the coalition troops destroyed in the Iraq War. They were not destroyed because they obstructed military action; they represented a system that was to be fought and destroyed, and the person, likeness, and statues of Saddam Hussein were its symbols. As Manow (2010, 92) underlines in this context: ‘Unpunished destruction of his image means his time is up.’

Symbols, then, have a meaning beyond themselves. Or rather, symbols only have a meaning beyond themselves. It is not the piece of cloth that counts. It is the meaning attached to the piece of cloth that turns it into a flag representing a country or nation (or part of it, as many feminists would argue), so that the piece of cloth demands the same degree of respect as the country does. The same goes for a national anthem. The music and lyrics together have a particular meaning that makes us stand up (or consciously stay seated as an act of rebellion). The representative power of the symbol resides not in what it is, but in what it is able to evoke. Its strength lies in the fact that it manages to evoke the same principal everywhere within the context in which it is employed. We might not all agree on what to think of the EU, but we all think of the EU when we see those golden stars against a blue background, they need not even be arranged in a circle. When we see a book cover with golden stars on a blue background, we assume it is about a topic related to the EU without even having read the title.

This evocation that symbolic representation is able to generate is not immediate. Symbolic representation implies a construction; the agent is made to stand for the principal. As Mitchell (1962, 123; cited in Thomas 1979, 244) states: ‘Symbolic objects derive their meaning from the actions and beliefs of persons, not from the objects themselves’. Even where symbolic representation relies on pre-existing figures or images, it is never just simply a given. Symbols refer to the principals through a process of building up associations by convention, deliberate design, and consistent use (Parkinson 2009). This process implies a construction of meaning, and although Pitkin herself was not concerned about the constructed nature of symbols, we think it is crucial to see this constructed dimension so as to understand why it is important to engage with symbolic representation.
The (re)presentation of the principal

Constructed is the fact that a particular symbol stands for a particular principal – it manages to evoke that principal – because this evocation is not a naturally given one. However, through that evocation the symbol also constructs the principal in a particular way. Figures, persons, images, lyrics, objects more generally speaking, or colours are chosen to serve as symbols. They have or can have a meaning that is shaped and translated so as to serve for symbolic representation purposes (Smith 2009) – and that is the reason why they have been chosen or – in a less intentional process – became that symbol. Let us return to the example of Marianne. This figure stands for the French Republic. By standing for the French Republic she not only represents the latter, she also presents it in a particular way. Symbols do not only stand for a principal and evoke that principal. Associated to these symbols are beliefs, feelings, norms, and values. Baron, in her analysis of the representations of the Egypt nation in the period 1870–1930, suggests that depicting Egypt as a woman corresponded with the efforts of the nationalist movement of that time to broaden their movement to include women and with the attempts to make the wearing of veils non-mandatory. At first sight, then, the representative value of agents in symbolic representation should not be overrated, because symbols, in these examples, ‘present’ principals in specific ways rather than ‘represent’ principals by being responsive to them.

Still, symbols transmit or – more loosely – relate their value to the principal by being its agent. In that respect symbols can be seen as a medium. What virtues does Marianne evoke in standing for the French Republic? What do the different colours and figures used on flags stand for? Land, water, richness, fertility, strength, bloodshed in the past, for instance. The symbol is the agent because of what it is or can be in standing for the principal. This means, first, that there is some relation between agent and principals, though not so direct, and, second, that the constructed dimension in symbolic representation is double. Constructed is the type of relation established between symbols and principals, the fact that symbols stand for a principal, because of what they are – or of what they can be made. The French Republic could be (re)presented by other symbols than the Marianne. In turn, symbols also construct the principal, by transmitting or relating their meaning to it. Marianne, once chosen as a symbol, constructs the French Republic in a particular way. Therefore, symbols not only represent a principal, they also present the latter in a particular way.

Saward’s (2006) distinction between objects and referents in processes of representation is very helpful in understanding this presentation of the principal through a symbolic agent. Based on the assumption that political representation is about making claims on behalf of oneself and/or others, he broadens the scope of actors involved, distinguishing between a maker, a subject, an object, a referent, and an audience: ‘A maker of representations (‘M’) puts forward a subject (‘S’) which stands for an object (‘O’) that is related to a referent (‘R’) and is offered to an audience (‘A’)’
As his understanding of the subject comes close to what tends to be called the agent, and his understanding of the referent basically correlates to that of the principal, we will stick to those concepts and the tradition they represent in political theory. Saward's sentence, put in the agent-principal language, would read as follows: a *maker of representations* puts forward an *agent* which stands for an *idea* that is related to a *principal*. The object is not the principal as such but the agent’s (or the claim maker’s) *idea* about the principal. In Saward’s (2006, 36) words: ‘the thing represented is an idea of it, not the thing itself’. This distinction between the principal and the idea of the principal is a useful element we can draw from Saward’s work to better understand symbolic representation. It underlines the fact that the agent provides the principal with meaning, that symbolic representation is a specific presentation rather than a true mirroring of the principal.

By standing for a principal the agent does something to the principal, and to a greater degree than in the case of descriptive representation, where the resemblance is purely physical. In the case of symbolic representation, ‘standing for’ evokes meaning. Through the meanings that the symbol embodies and evokes, it not only represents but also presents the principal in a particular way. Pitkin (1967: 8-9) underlined that ‘(...)representation, taken generally, means the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact’. When it comes to symbolic representation, the issue is not so much one of making present but of presenting. This presenting or evocation of meaning, we argue, makes symbolic representation fulfil three functions. The first is that of identity construction, a key function generally referred to in the literature on symbolic representation (Bondi 1997; Parel 1969). The other two functions, legitimacy and political control, derive from the first one, in that the construction of identities also provides legitimacy to these identities and delegitimation to others, which allows for political control.

**Presentation and identity construction**

The presentation of a principal through an object in symbolic representation creates – intentionally or not – identity. Social identity is a constructed structure made of the cultural codes and values that individuals interiorise during socialization processes, and which defines fields of possibilities for action (Parsons 1968; Berger and Luckmann 1966). By presenting or evocating meanings that are attached to a principal, the symbol or agent contributes to the construction of identity. For instance, a flag is a symbol of national identity that is constructed by evocating meanings of belonging to a particular nation, the principal. Pitkin argued that symbolic representation is not an issue of resemblance: symbols do not resemble the principal they represent, unlike descriptive representation, in which the composition of parliament mirrors that of society. In her view, while there might be some resemblance – as in the case of the United States’ flag, where the different stars represent the different states of the federation – we cannot speak of any real resemblance
(Pitkin 1972, 94). However, this argument can be questioned if one argues that what is evoked through symbols is meaning. People tend to assume the existence of some resemblance—though not physical—between the meanings that are constructed and ascribed to symbols and the meanings that are constructed and ascribed to principals. In the case of the Marianne representing France, for example, all the values that are associated to Marianne as a woman are also assigned to France (though they are not the only ones). This issue of assumed resemblance between the symbol and the principal it stands for will become more clear later on in this section, in the discussion of women and men’s roles in nations and states.

One of the main identity markers is the national. In symbolic representation the principal is often the nation or state. While nations were long conceived of as natural givens, scholars especially from the 1980s onwards argued that nations and states are constructed (Smith 2009, 13; also see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). As Anderson (1991, 6) wrote, the nation is an ‘imagined political community’. The literature has extensively discussed how symbols in politics construct identity and thereby create bonds (Bondi 1997; Cummings 2010; Edensor 2002; Parel 1969; Sfez 1988). It is thereby important to conceive of nations as ‘real’ sociological communities. Whatever the elements of imagination that go into the making of nations, the result is much more than a construct, because once created, national communities have lives of their own. As Smith (2009, 13) claims: ‘One has only to try to imagine a world without nations to grasp the profound consequences of their emergence and predominance for society and politics.’

Symbols of national identities such as flags, anthems, or statues are chosen in order to shape social forms (Denison 2010; Douglas 2000; Edelman 1971; Kertzer 1988; Morelli 1995). Banknotes, for instance, play an important role in constructing a state-sponsored vision of social identity, as Hawkins (2010) demonstrates for the Tunisian case, wherein banknotes are part of a larger discourse about national identity that frames Tunisia as a cosmopolitan nation that is open to the modern world but rooted in its history. National or other political symbols thus not only reflect social forms and define the identity of the nation, but they also reflect a communication strategy. Rituals, traditions, and symbols such as flags and anthems constitute ‘a nation’s identity, the image of the nation projected by national leaders both to their constituents and to the world at large’ (Cerulo 1993, 243, italics in original). Put otherwise, identity constitution is also a matter of ‘nation branding’, as Marat (2010) illustrates through the images Central Asian states are using to present themselves since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Cerulo (1993, 250) takes this argument a step further, arguing that ‘in essence leaders are attempting to link symbolic forms to social forms, choosing symbols that are most appropriate to the state of their target audience’. The careful selection and construction of the agent is meant to lead to particular evocations of the principal, and this is how the symbolic agent provides the principal with an identity.
Feminist scholars exploring the symbolic construction of nations and states underline how, next to particular colours and other objects, (particular groups of) women and men or (assumed) characteristics of women and men are selected to serve as a symbolic agent. Studies discuss how the modern national state tends to be constructed as a masculine institution and the culture of nationalism tends to emphasise and resonate with masculine themes (Nagel 1998; referring to Connell 1987), while some scholars underline that the nation’s land is often visualised in a female form (Parker et al. 1992; Nash 1994; Yuval Davis 1997). While results of studies on gender and nation ought not to be oversimplified by stating that all states are ‘male’ – studies on Nordic welfare states actually disprove that (Hernes 1987) – these studies do show that women and men are differently used in the symbolic construction of the nation or state and tend to symbolise different aspects of the state or nation. The roles that men and women have historically been assigned with respect to nations have been those of defenders of the country for men, due to their physical strength and the higher value culturally attached to it, and those of nurturing and supporting the country for women (Mosse 1985; Nagel 1998). As Puwar (2004, 6; see also Warner 1996) states: ‘Women’s inclusion into the nation has been quite specific. Certainly, ample quantities of stone have been utilised to carve female statues of the nation. In these, though, women predominantly feature as symbols of virtue, beauty, nurture and justice’.

Similar particular usages can be found in the organisation of international relations, colonial and post-colonial ones, whereby different ‘types’ of women are played out against each other. Being a symbol of imperialist civilisation, women were held to the (symbolic) standards of ladylike behaviour. This incarnation of civilisation can be found on the French colonial banknotes that juxtapose neatly dressed Western women with unclothed native women amidst ‘tropical fruits and lush vegetation’ (Puwar 2004, 27). In postcolonial processes of nation building, women were part of the construction of national identity but were the guardians of tradition responsible for transmitting traditional culture and values to children of the postcolonial state (Rai 2008) – sometimes also because feminist or emancipation movements were labelled as emanating from the former coloniser. Yet women have also been constructed as the agents of change, reflecting progress and modernity. Such framings could be found in communist states, which during the Cold War prided themselves on the emancipated position of ‘their’ women as opposed to the subordinated ‘Western’ housewives. Liberals use a similar argument turning women into symbols of modernity and progress. This can be found in the persistent conviction among those active in the field of conflict and peace studies or development cooperation that raising the social status of women and enhancing gender equality will elevate these countries over the backwards nations that still confined women to the role of housewives and have a beneficial effect on the evolution of society (Hudson et al. 2012).
All of this literature sheds new light on Pitkin’s assumption that symbols do not resemble the principal they represent. As mentioned before, according to Pitkin (1972), symbols are merely proxies for what they represent. This argument, however, can be challenged, as it depends on how resemblance is understood, and on what we understand the inherent evocative or suggestive capacity of symbols to be based. What we actually see, hear, or feel when confronted with symbolic representation is meaning. To what extent do not specific values and norms ascribed to women and men imply a relationship of (assumed) resemblance between the symbol as an agent and the principal it stands for? Gender and nation studies have shown that particular characteristics constructed as specific of women and men as symbols of the nation have been selected and ascribed to the nation itself.

Gender and nation studies have raised scholarly attention for the ways women and men serve as symbols of nations and states, and for what these symbols stand for. These studies have shown that men and women symbolise different aspects of states and nations. This implies a certain selection, which has already been referred to in the previous section in that figures, persons, images, lyrics, objects more generally speaking, or colours are chosen to serve as symbols because of the meaning they (can) have. This selectivity of symbolic agents and that is pointed at by feminist scholars can also be found with respect to other social markers. Parkinson, analysing capital cities as important sites of symbolic representation, argues that ‘representation in public space is often highly selective in subject matter and approach’ (Parkinson 2009, 2). Disabled people, pregnant women, and many other large groups of the population are not commonly represented in public space and art. Symbolic representation is not necessarily more inclusive than descriptive or substantive representation. The selective character of agents of symbolic representation is well illustrated through the controversy around Quinn’s marble statue of the disabled artist Allison Lapper that was temporarily placed on the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square, London (Parkinson 2009). The presentation of her disabled body, its naked representation in a pregnant state, and the fact that it was to complete a series of statesmen on the other plinths led to much commotion. This was not the way the nation was to be represented. Such representation was to be reserved for warriors, politicians, poets, or other heroes, commonly understood to be of a male sex and white race.

At stake therefore are not only that and how some actors are used to serve as symbolic agents, but also that others are not relied upon for such representative purposes. This matters because the selectivity of representations defines the contours of the nation, state, demos or principal to be represented and thereby sets boundaries to it. This is exemplified in Parkinson’s (2009, 10; italics in the original) statement that: ‘Capital cities are, by design, by usage or both, symbols of national institutions, values, myths and norms—they contain such symbols and they are, in their own right, such symbols. But they are also symbols of who constitutes the nation, who is recognised as
being a part of the *demos* and who is not’. Therefore, in constructing social identities symbolic representation sets boundaries by defining who is included – and in what way – and who is not. Such boundaries are central to defining collective identities (Gamson 1997; Morelli 1995). As Smith (2009, 25) states: ‘[Symbols] have endowed each community with a distinctive symbolic repertoire […], which helps to differentiate it from analogous communities in the eyes of both its members and outsiders, and they have raised the profile of the community and sharpened its social boundary and its opposition to outsiders, as much as the boundary has continued to define the community and divide ‘us’ from ‘them’.’

Phillips (1996), similar to many feminist scholars, underlines that the boundaries constructed around a national community are therefore located at two levels, both inter-nationally and intra-nationally. In constructing social identities, symbolic representation generally only includes some – not all – social groups of a given territory – and does so in particular ways. By choosing the agent for what it generates, symbolic representation has an important function in constructing social identities, because this leads to a particular presentation of that principal. Symbolic representation therefore does more than depict a nation or other principal; it contributes to its construction. How is that nation or principal constructed? What agents are used? How does it – amongst others – include particular social identities or traits of such groups and not others?

While focusing on the social identity of a collective such as a nation state, this social identity-constructing function also has implications for the individual. Collective identities also – at least partly – construct and shape individuals and their options. National symbols thus not only define the social identity or identities of the nation or collective, but also that of individuals belonging to that group – or not. Taking the example of gender, the construction of an identity through the agent of symbolic representation has implications for women and men. The specific constructions of the agent also suggest what role men and women are expected to perform. The agent of symbolic representation thereby confines individuals to particular roles. The who is constructed and how leads us to the discussion on the implications of this construction for people’s lives. This brings us to the function of legitimacy.

**Legitimacy**

In political science, legitimacy is a crucial dimension through which political power tries to integrate itself into the dominant value system of a given society. According to the Weberian tradition, legitimacy is important for the authorisation and maintenance of political power (Lipset 1960). Political power is thus in continuous search of legitimacy. It tries to make people believe that the current political and social system is the most appropriate for their society, which in turn makes it possible for that system’s actions to be authorised by the members of the political community. The
generation of legitimacy is strongly related to processes of symbol-making through which political power seeks – explicitly or not – to make certain rules, norms, and practices accepted or legitimate among its subjects, while at the same time discouraging or delegitimitizing others. Legitimacy is thus an important function of symbolic representation but it tends to be limited to those efforts to establish and maintain the legitimacy of a political system, including that of the political elite. The question we would like to tackle is the function of legitimacy in relation to the construction of the agent of symbolic representation, thereby legitimizing some groups of people as citizens -full members of a political community- and delegitimizing others, at the same time shaping the political system and the existing social order. The point at stake is that the construction of identity as discussed in the previous section legitimizes some (groups of) individuals over others.

For this purpose we would like to return to the example used in the previous section, the way women and men are used to construct symbolic agents of nations, states or other political entities. This use reflects differentiated and hierarchical social roles and positions for women and men, which is not only a key element in the creation and perpetuation of social inequalities, but it also contributes to the legitimisation of certain social groups or individuals over others. Feminist literature has extensively studied the different constructions of an unequal gender order; the values, practices, and institutions that contribute to creating and maintaining inequalities in societies; the assignment to women and men of roles set in a power hierarchy in which men have normally enjoyed a privileged position; and the variations that occur depending on how gender intersects with other inequalities. Tying it to symbolic representation shows that specific constructions of the idea of gender have consequences for the legitimacy of women and men and of particular groups of women and men; it shapes (the confines of) their legitimacy.

The attribution of differentiated gendered social roles and identities in the public and private spheres has generated processes of exclusion and privilege (Elshtain 1981). By attributing specific qualities to both sexes and by locating women mainly in the private, domestic sphere connected to reproductive work, and men in the public, political sphere – and through the overvaluation of the latter and devaluation of the former – an unequal social system was constructed. Political theory has offered theoretical arguments that legitimated this inequality – think of Aristotle’s defence of the separation between oikos (the private area of needs attributed to women) and polis (the public area in which public speeches and the political action of free male citizens took place) in his Politics (Shanley and Pateman 1991). Social practices, routines, and norms that have been consolidated in ‘gender regimes’ have reinforced the gendered separation between the public and the private (Walby 2009). The construction of gendered social identities along the lines of the public/private dichotomy has thus set boundaries between citizens, enabling the full inclusion of – heterosexual, white – men in the political community and the partial inclusion of women (Walby 1994). These
constructions suggest a specific understanding of gender: women have predominantly played a private and men a public role.

In symbolic representation such constructions are used and thereby reproduce women as symbols of the private/reproductive sphere and men as symbols of the public/productive sphere. This symbolic construction of gender, rehearsed through discourses, routines, and daily practices, can then have an impact on what people expect from female and male subjects. Constructing particular social identities and passing over others, or even rejecting them, helps legitimise certain social roles and identities and delegitimizing others either implicitly, by silencing them, or explicitly, by rejecting them. This construction shapes particular social roles for women and men that contribute to legitimize some citizens and to delegitimise others. In this respect symbolic representation contributes to shaping the (existing) social order and eventually also the political system.

As indicated in the previous section, this dynamic does not only go for the social marker of gender. The selective use of for instance heterosexuality and homosexuality or of race in the construction of agents of symbolic representation has similar effects. It contributes to constructing some subjects as legitimate and normal and others as illegitimate and deviant – ‘straight’ vs ‘gay’, ‘male-headed households’ vs ‘female-headed’ ones, ‘whites’ vs ‘blacks’ (Fraser 2000: 8). The construction of symbolic agents suggests that in the value system of a given society some people are represented as symbols of normality, and thus socially accepted, while others are represented as symbols of deviancy from the norm, and therefore not accepted within that society to a similar extent. This symbolic representation constructs a particular social – gendered, sexualized, racialized – order that affects the legitimacy of citizens as full members – or their lack of such legitimacy – in a political community, with consequences in terms of people’s rights, benefits, and opportunities.

The classical concept of citizenship defined by Marshall (1950) is that of ‘full membership’ in a political community, and this membership is then specified in a series of ‘rights’. While (some) – British – men were full members of the political community in that they were granted their first civil, political, and social rights in the 18th, 19th, and 20th century, respectively, women were granted these rights much later and often in a different order than men, since they were generally granted social rights as mothers before they obtained their political and civil rights (Lister 1997; Siim 2000; Walby 1994). The concept of citizenship appears to be, as Vogel (1991) argues, ‘gender specific’, as if it only belonged to the male sex. Gender’s intersections with sexual orientation further reveal the exclusionary character of citizenship definitions. As Kuhar states: ‘The concept of citizenship is not only gendered, it is also sexualised: it is not any man that is inscribed into the Western concept of citizenship, but rather a heterosexual (white) man. This means that the historical genesis of
citizenship rights for non-heterosexual women and men is different’ (Kuhar 2012, 170; italics in original).

While symbols fix meanings and norms that are difficult to change – think of the perpetuation of traditional gender roles – symbols are also contested by a variety of actors (Ferree et al. 2002) who attempt to propose new symbols to change traditional constructions. All around the world, (mainly) women have taken the initiative to rename streets, public buildings, and spaces after women in order to gain (co)ownership of the public space and become an integral part of the symbolic representation of the state and nation. To return to the issue of banknotes, in June 2013 a petition circulated on the web to reverse the announced decision of the Governor of the Bank of England to replace social reformer Elizabeth Fry, whose face adorns the £5 note, with Winston Churchill. This decision might leave no other woman on English banknotes than the Queen, who appears on them – argues the petition – because she was born into her position, not because of what she has achieved, as is the case for the men pictured on the other British banknotes, such as Charles Darwin, James Watt, Adam Smith, and Matthew Boulton. The petition criticises the message conveyed by an all-male appearance on English banknotes that ‘no woman has done anything important enough to appear’. First because it undervalues what women have achieved, even in the face of the historic denial of women’s public voice and their relegation to the private sphere. Second, it also criticises the announced decision because of the consequences that the daily circulation of such banknotes from hand to hand might have for women and men in terms of the meaning of gender that it suggests: ‘women do not belong in public life – they never have, and they never will’, as the text of the petition states. As a result of the campaign to promote the symbolic representation of women on English banknotes, the Bank of England finally agreed that women and the diversity of society need to be represented on its banknotes. The picture of Jane Austen will appear in the new ten-pound note from 2017 onwards.

The dispute about who is and who should be represented on the British banknotes and what meaning of gender is being suggested is indeed one about symbolic representation. The possibly all-male cast of faces on the British banknotes – with the exception of the Queen – being contested in the aforementioned petition would thus be a symbol of a state legitimately occupied and represented by men, not women. The symbolic representation of nations and states has implications for the recognition of – amongst others – women and men’s status as full citizens (Meier and Lombardo 2008). It show that symbolic representation contributes to shaping norms that legitimise

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2 See the change.org petition on ‘Bank of England: keep a woman on English banknotes’ (accessed October 24, 2013)
particular social positions and relationships that then have consequences for women and men’s lives, legitimizing different citizens with respect to certain social roles and spheres and delegitimizing other dimensions of their lives – or not legitimizing certain subjects at all, think of denizens, those denied any rights to be part of a collective political entity. It is an issue of who is included as a member of a community and to what extent. Such issues go beyond the struggle about who is to represent a country, nation, state or other political entity on banknotes. Symbolic representation, by constructing social identities, has consequences for the legitimacy of those included in and excluded from that principal. It shapes the roles and positions of women and men, as well as the access they have to rights and benefits, and for the legitimacy of the claims that they are allowed to make within a particular social system of beliefs and cultural values.

The dynamic, then, is bidirectional. The content of citizenship rights thus crucially defines the character of a political community, in Marshall’s (1950) terms, defining who is legitimated to enjoy rights and full membership in that political community. The construction of which categories of people have access to citizenship not only legitimises particular citizens, but it also, precisely by defining a political community’s criteria of inclusion, reflects what type of political and social system these citizenship rights are legitimating.

**Political control**

Citizens can exercise political control – interpreted in a bottom-up way – by making governments accountable for their actions and challenging their capacity to respond to people’s needs and demands, but political control can also be interpreted in a top-down way. Political control, in that case, refers to the state’s means to make the members of a political community respect the state norms and discourage any actions that deviate from those norms (Garelli 1990). This kind of control works both externally, through the enforcement of sanctions and the criminalisation of illegal acts, and internally, through the internalisation of social norms and values that occurs during the process of socialisation (Berger and Luckman 1966; Garelli 1990). Symbolic representation contributes to these processes. Through the symbols used and the identity constructed in symbolic representation, some (groups of) actors are legitimized and others not, or legitimized within certain confines, supporting specific roles and positions. Through the extent to which symbolic representation legitimises or delegitimizes particular social roles and positions, it affects the authority and legitimacy of individuals to act. The state’s capacity to make the members of a political community respect its norms matters here as it allows for the control of the respect of dominant roles and positions by sanctioning inappropriate ones.

The function of political control inherent to symbolic representation allows for sanctioning deviant behaviour. Policies to address gender violence, for example, show the extent to which a state
is capable of protecting women’s personal integrity and life by effectively sanctioning violent behaviour and exercising political control over their own territory. Walby (2009) argues that until a given state effectively criminalises gender-based violence in its multiple forms (domestic violence, rape, sexual assault), it cannot be considered ‘modern’ in Weberian terms, since only then does the state monopolise control over the legitimate use of violence in its own territory. It is not just a matter of having a law that criminalises gender-based violence (though that is also certainly a requirement, since not all types of interpersonal violence are criminalised in countries otherwise classified as democratic); it is a matter of a state effectively intervening (through its police, judges, lawyers, or courts) in the prevention and criminal punishment of perpetrators so that gender-based violence does not go unpunished or treated as if legitimate. Walby gives the example of rape, which, ‘is rarely effectively criminalized’ – as is clear from the fact that: ‘Over 90 per cent of cases in which a woman reports rape to the police do not lead to a criminal conviction’ (Walby 2009, 201). The state de facto ends up legitimising these violent acts. The legitimation or sanctioning of gender violent behaviours symbolically presents the state in a particular way, as able or not to control violence in its territory, and which has consequences for the women and men involved, and for the type of social system that the state is contributing to construct.

The discussion about what subjects, norms, and behaviours are legitimated or sanctioned relates political control to the function of identity in symbolic representation. Identity construction, as we argued before, is not only a matter of constituting and reproducing national identities, it is also an issue of constructing social groups and the roles, functions, and norms that accompany them and boundaries to them. To return to the example used in the previous sections: The roles that men and women have historically been assigned with respect to nations have been those of defenders of the country for men, due to their physical strength and the higher value culturally attached to it, and those of nurturing and supporting the country for women (Mosse 1985; Nagel 1998). The male role in the construction and protection of nations and states is – as argued before – metonymic in the sense that ‘men are contiguous with each other and with the national whole’, whereas women are usually given a ‘metaphoric or symbolic role’ (McCintock 1995, 355; see also Iveković and Mostov 2004; Puwar 2004, 6).

Yuval Davis et al. (1989) distinguish five major ways in which women have been implicated in the construction and maintenance of nations and states: as the biological reproducers of the members of national collectives; as active transmitters and producers of national culture, being the main educators of children, thus supporting and strengthening nations and states; as the reproducers of the symbolic boundaries of national groups through restrictions on sexual or marital relations, exemplified in the virginity or inter-group marriage norms, or the punishment of adultery; as symbolic signifiers of national difference, for instance through the control of their clothing; and as
active participants in national struggles, although often to a lesser extent (see also Anderson 1998; Blom, Hagemann and Hall 2000; McClintock 1993; Yuval-Davis 1997).

While constituting the identity of the nation, the use of men and women, or of particular (assumed) traits of (particular groups of) men and women – or of other social markers – confines these actors to specific roles, functions, and norms. The issue therefore is not only one of the inclusion and exclusion of groups, but also of the way social groups are included and what they are confined or limited to, in what sense and to what extent they are legitimate and what is supported or to be sanctioned. A couple of examples can illustrate this point. The images of women socialist states put forward in their communication and propaganda, which were often symbolizing strong women working in the fields or in the factories, was not only meant to represent a certain state but also indicated how the state represented itself as a working nation and what the state expected from women. In a different vein, wherever women are symbols for a motherly state, the women of that state must act within the – narrow – range of behaviour that symbol implies. Women, then, cannot be warriors; their main goal is procreation and supporting the family. Turning women into symbols of nationhood giving birth and transmitting culture, allows for the need of a strict control of these women. As symbols of nationhood, women must remain ‘pure’; like we see in ‘honour’ cultures, women going out of their assigned (symbolic) bounds not only shame themselves, but also their family and the entire group (Nagel 1998). Symptomatic of this effect of the symbolic on the real is the way in which the numerous women victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence in armed intra- or interstate conflict are rejected by their society. For the same reason, when women are a symbol of a nation, conquering a nation means ‘conquering’ its women, making rape one of the most powerful weapons of massive destruction used at a large scale in contemporary intra- and interstate conflicts (Mookherjee 2003).

Women and men are differently used in the symbolic construction of the nation or state because, according to McClintock (1995, 354), ‘gender difference between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between them’. The issue is therefore not only one of using men and women to construct nations’ or states’ identities, but also one of defining the social position of men and women and the power hierarchy between them within society. The entire construction and legitimisation of the nation and state also serves to construct, maintain, and legitimate the gender order. ‘All nations depend on powerful constructions of gender’ (McClintock 1995, 353). This makes it twice as difficult for women to fight the prevailing order, since it entails an attack on and corrosion of the nation or state itself. Changing the existing gender order becomes all the more complex for women whenever their iconisation as symbols of the nation and its values implies the need to defend them just as one would defend one’s country. This risks conceiving of women as passive objects to protect, rather than as acting subjects.
Again, such a dynamic can not only be found for the social marker of gender, but also goes for issues of sexuality, race and other social markers. Important is the fact that – in this case – women and men are used to construct particular meanings, norms, and values associated with states and nations, and that this leads not only to a particular symbolic (re)presentation of that state or nation, but also to particular representations of gender that then have consequences for people’s lives. Processes of symbolic representation (re)produce a social order – in this case a gender order – making symbolic representation contribute to the legitimization of particular social groups or characteristics ascribed to these groups, and to the political control of such groups.

Conclusion

We argued at the outset that we need to study symbolic representation – as defined by Pitkin – in itself so as to better grasp its full scope, and that this is the aim of the present article. We started by underlining that the evocative power of the agent implies a constructed nature. Constructed is the fact that a particular symbol stands for a particular principal, that it manages to evoke or suggest meanings attached to that principal, because this evocation is not a naturally given one. We argued that through that evocation the symbol also constructs the principal, or –in Saward’s terms- the idea of the principal, and presents it in a particular way, through the fact that the symbol has been chosen for what it is able to evoke. This article then moved on to develop how through the presenting or evocation of meaning, symbolic representation fulfils three functions. It contributes to the construction of collective identities, often of nations or states. The construction of such identities sets boundaries, defining what constitutes a group, and thereby who is included and who is excluded. Such processes set the door open to two further functions of symbolic representation, which mainly derive from the first one. Through the construction of identities we also provide legitimacy to these identities and delegitimation to others, which allows for the political control of deviant norms and behaviour.

Needless to underline that not only symbolic representation fulfils such functions in a political system. Needless, also, to underline that the extent to which these functions of symbolic representation affect particular social groups is context related. Nonetheless, the aim of this article was that of showing that symbolic representation is more than political symbolism, because of the processes triggered by the fact that an agent by standing for a principal not only makes it present but presents it in a particular way. By pointing at this issue of representativity (or rather the lack thereof) we hope to have shown that symbolic representation is an important complement to descriptive and substantive representation. It is a full dimension of political representation that deserves more attention than it has so far received, and it cannot simply be reduced to the effects of descriptive representation. Moreover, contrary to Pitkin’s argument about the absence of resemblance in
symbolic representation, we have argued that, if we take that symbols are constructed and that they evoke meanings about a particular principal, this leads us to also argue that there is also some resemblance between the features constructed and ascribed to a particular symbol (e.g., Marianne as a woman), and the features ascribed to a particular principal (e.g., France). In symbolic representation there is, therefore, a resemblance of meanings, rather than a physical resemblance as in descriptive representation.

Coming to the end of this article we realize that we have not tackled every aspect of symbolic representation. This partly depends on the nature of the issue under discussion, because, as Pitkin (1967: 97) states: ‘We can never exhaust, never quite capture in words, the totality of what a symbol symbolizes: suggests, evokes, implies’. According to us at least four issues still need to be explored, both of which are related to the constructed nature of the agent. A first issue to be explored is who that actor – or maker, if we rely on Saward’s definition used earlier on – is. Symbolic representation always involves an actor constructing the agent in symbolic representation. Tying this presence of a maker constructing the agent in symbolic representation to the functions discussed in this article makes them all the more relevant. Who gives shape to identity, thereby legitimizing and delegitimizing particular groups and putting into place means of political control? What power relations are at play in this process? How does all of this contribute to existing power relations?

Secondly, the constructed nature of symbols implies that they need not be static. They can be contested. This, then, allows for revising constructed ‘traditional’ social identities, for legitimising other groups than those already legitimised, and for questioning existing mechanisms that contribute to maintaining existing power relations. This actually relates back to the maker, the question being how different makers act, what their motivations are, and how they interact. And under what conditions and in which contexts can such power relations change. Thirdly, while we have conceptualised identity construction, legitimacy, and political control, we realise that we need empirical evidence is needed on how this construction of identities spills over into the legitimacy of different subjects and their political control. How does it work in concrete cases and different settings? Who is mainly affected by it? Also, while this article focussed on gender, also race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, class, ability, and their intersections are concerned. Finally, there is room for exploring more broadly how this conceptualisation of symbolic representation affects authority, accountability, legitimacy, and other matters related to the concept of representative democracy.

References


