

Are We Represented?

An Interview with Loïc Blondiaux

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The *Indignados* movement signals people’s current dissatisfaction as regards political representation. Though pessimistic as to the political outlets of that mobilization, French political scientist Loïc Blondiaux calls for a democratization of democracy and offers to combine experimental democratic forms to complement elections.

Books and Ideas: Why is democracy in such bad shape?

Loïc Blondiaux: I think that the distinctiveness of our period lies in the fact that it marks the end of what I would call democratic self-evidence. Very paradoxically, we came to believe that we were living in a democracy. A regime based on delegating the capacity for real action to a group of representatives, which was invented in the late eighteenth century *in opposition* to democracy, came to be *identified with* democracy. Now the charade is over and we are discovering that we are less and less in a democracy. Why? Because we are witnessing a dispossession of political power, which has been transferred to agencies and authorities that are not only opaque and difficult to understand, but also ungraspable and upon which citizens have no hold. Politics seems to control nothing but a few sectors of public life, where the government continues to display its power, but only by grappling with problems that it has helped to create. I have in mind immigration policy and security policy, where we see political will deployed on issues that are far from being the most fundamental. The fact that we are no longer really represented is, it seems to me, apparent in several other ways as well. We increasingly sense that, when it comes to representation, we are no longer equal, that we are not all represented in the same way. The idea of “the 1% vs. the 99%” and the notion of oligarchy, which is quietly infiltrating our political discourse, are expressions of this sense of political inequality. I also think that the interests of ordinary people and the young, who vote less than other groups, are taken far less into consideration than those of other groups. The

growing awareness of this fact strikes me as an important turning point. The radical critique of representation undertaken by the *indignados*, who in France of course are not yet particularly strong, seems to participate in a political moment that is leading us to take a new look at representation, an issue that we had ceased to regard as problematic.

Books and Ideas: How can democracy be democratized?

Loïc Blondiaux: At present, the issue is to democratize representation. It is to achieve something that would resemble a genuine process of democratic representation. We are living a fiction—the fiction that by participating every five years in the election of a great individual, we can influence government. Yet this impoverishment of the very idea of representation strikes me as problematic. The representation process cannot be confined to elections. In other words, legitimacy tests between elections must proliferate. Citizens must be given the chance to interpolate power. Power must be obliged to render account of itself. The idea of representation implies a rendering of accounts. English-speakers talk of “accountability,” a concept that has no equivalent in French. It refers to the imperative that representation must be democratically enriched. Then there is the essential issue of democratic participation. In the current crisis, citizens may react in extremely different ways that cannot be easily controlled. One reaction is stupefaction, an intellectual paralysis that is reminiscent of magical thought. The market, after all, is a form of government that resembles a transcendental power that no one can master. The other possible reaction is protest. I believe that this crisis will unquestionably result in a strong protest vote favoring the far right. The *indignados* have shown us that capacities for self-organization exist amidst the population and it is clear that the political process must now learn from these experiments in self-organization. Consequently, it seems to me that we need both a more deliberative form of democracy, in the sense that the representative process must consist of collective deliberation including as many citizens as possible, and a more participatory democracy, even if in France, until now, participatory democracy has been more a slogan than a reality.

Books and Ideas: What kinds of democratic experiments might we imagine?

Loïc Blondiaux: Given the scale of the problem, there is not *one* single measure to be pursued, but rather *a combination* of measures, *a combination* of strategies. I believe that institutional reform must not be neglected, particularly restricting, and even eliminating, the

right to hold multiple electoral offices concurrently (*le cumul des mandats*), which must be accompanied by greater reflection on the professionalization of politics. I believe that the malaise of representation is tied to the extreme professionalization of politics, which creates a number of problems. The key is to limit the distance between citizens and their representatives. I also think it is possible to combine the procedures of direct democracy with those of participatory democracy. We have not paid enough attention to—and in France, we totally scorn—what happened in Iceland. True, it is a small country. And it is a homogeneous country, with only 300,000 inhabitants. But what did Iceland do when the crisis struck? It conceived of a constituent procedure, in which an assembly of randomly selected citizens defined a list of principles and perspectives, which were then taken up by a group of ordinary citizens elected independently of political parties. These citizens organized an online consultation of the entire population on a wiki-constitution, which it could comment on and enrich. This constitution will next be submitted to the population via a referendum. This blend of participatory democracy, in-depth public debate, and direct democracy, which allows everyone to weigh in on the process, seems to me to be headed in the right direction. There are other experiments at the global level that are overlooked but which strike me as equally interesting.

Books and Ideas: Would it then be possible to dispense with competitive elections?

Loïc Blondiaux: In a situation in which legitimacy tests are proliferating and representative procedures are growing more complex, in the name of more democracy and more deliberative and participatory democratic processes, I believe that elections alone do not suffice. We have very clear proof of the fact that elections no longer suffice to define a regime as democratic; it no longer suffices that a decision be taken by an elected authority for it to be considered legitimate. What matters is multiplying the procedures that enrich representative processes between elections. Elections are not sufficient, yet they are absolutely necessary. The power of elections in a democracy consists in the fact that they allow all those who are not included in the participatory procedures—who are not, in other words, consulted—to have a certain amount of retrospective control over what transpires. The value of elections is far more retrospective than prospective. Elections do not always determine new directions, but they allow retroactive democratic oversight. So, in my opinion, there can be no democracy without elections, but a democracy in which, in addition to elections, random selection is practiced

along with other forms of consultation and public debate, would start to resemble a real democracy.

Books and Ideas: What is the significance of the *indignados*?

Loïc Blondiaux: From the standpoint of the past twenty years, the revolt of the *indignados* marks the beginning of something new. The *indignados* movement represents, in the first place, a site or a laboratory of democratic experimentation. In other words, because they are critical of representation, the *indignados* have created discussion procedures based on consensus, on respect for disagreement, on the consideration of anyone and everyone's opinion—procedures that can be very useful for representative democracies. Yet even so, the fact remains the *indignados* movement faces a very obvious problem, that of political outlets and institutionalization. When a movement rejects representation yet claims to represent the 99% against the 1%, while bracketing the 99%'s internal contradictions, it is denying a number of conflicts of interests. I think the movement is of enormous experimental value, but at the same time, I am relatively pessimistic about its capacity to result in an organized collective movement. I believe that, even in a democracy, political parties and the identification of an adversary or an enemy are absolutely essential to the formation of a political project.

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