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To cite this article: Michael Saward (2011) Slow theory: taking time over transnational democratic representation, *Ethics & Global Politics*, 4:1, 1-18, DOI: [10.3402/egp.v4i1.6416](https://doi.org/10.3402/egp.v4i1.6416)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.3402/egp.v4i1.6416>



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Published online: 20 Feb 2011.



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# Slow theory: taking time over transnational democratic representation

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## Abstract

The possibility for transnational democratic representation is a huge topic. This article is restricted to exploring two unconventional aspects. The first concerns ‘the representative claim’, extending one critical part of previous analysis of the assessment of such claims, especially by largely unelected transnational actors. The second, which strongly conditions the account of the first, concerns ‘slow theory’ as the way to approach building democratic models and, in particular, to approach transnational democratic representation.

**Keywords:** *slow politics; slow theory; transnational representation; democracy and representation; slow movement*

## INTRODUCTION

Where any political dispute, confrontation, process, or issue is engaged, one unavoidable and often conflicted question is ‘who speaks for whom here, and why?’ Arguably, the question has special pertinence today for ‘global’ or transnational disputes, with their relative absence of familiar institutions of representative democracy and their anchoring effect on the dynamic play of representative claims and practices.<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, the myriad claims at play at the UN Climate Change Conference 2009 in Copenhagen—from national governments, transnational governance bodies, pressure groups, business and scientific organisations, activists, and so on—asserting their right or capability to speak for people, animals, flora, and planet.

The possibility for transnational democratic representation is a huge topic. This article is restricted to exploring two unconventional aspects.<sup>2</sup> The first concerns ‘the representative claim’, extending one critical part of previous analysis of the assessment of such claims,<sup>3</sup> especially by largely unelected transnational actors.

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The second, which strongly conditions the account of the first, concerns ‘slow theory’ as the way to approach building democratic models and, in particular, to approach transnational democratic representation. I start by explaining the idea of slow theory and what motivates its deployment given the topic at hand.

As an entry point, consider briefly the thinking behind two recent works of art. The first is by Ann-Sofi Siden called *My Country (Somewhere in Sweden)*, part of the *Moderna Exhibition* at Stockholm’s Modern Museum in 2010. Using moving images, stills, and sound on a number of adjacent screens, the work depicts a slow ride on horseback over several weeks, heading south through Sweden. The second work is an offsite project from Milton Keynes Gallery (UK) by Andrew Cross called *VIA*, described by the gallery as a work that ‘contradicts the high-speed reality of contemporary road travel by reducing the experience, quite literally, to walking pace. A single-take video of the journey from London to Milton Keynes slowed down to 12 hours, *VIA* converts the rapid glances and everyday repetition of the road into extended moments of speculation and perceptual dislocation’.<sup>4</sup>

These two works convey varied ideas, one of which is that the speed at which we move through a space alters our perceptions of it. We may be accustomed to perceiving spaces in a certain way from, for example, driving on a motorway, but Cross shows us that there are a great many details and features of the natural and built environment that, for example, motorway speeds and the perceptual needs and habits they induce act to obscure or hide. Slowing down changes what we (can) see and what we think we see, along with its significance. Siden, similarly, shows us that moving slowly through town and country may prompt an unusual, perhaps unsettling, sense of unfamiliarity with otherwise familiar features of life and landscape. Both works suggest that dislocating visual and interpretive effects may accompany unaccustomed changes of speed and that new modes of reflection may be induced by slowing down. The slow view of the passing country is less flattened or homogenised than our common perceptions fostered by motorised ‘social acceleration’ might suggest.<sup>5</sup>

Different speeds facilitate different levels and intensities of perception. There is in principle no ‘better’ or ‘normal’ speed—better and normal are relational (better for what? normal to whom?). But there is little doubt that habituation to speed-induced perceptions can normalise and naturalise an otherwise absent spatial featurelessness. Speed may induce ways of not seeing, knowingly or otherwise. The artworks suggest the importance of particular contextual features, overlooked details, and the distinctiveness of place and space.

## **SPEED AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY**

There is an analogy to be drawn with speed and perception in the construction and application of political theory—especially democratic theory, which is my focus here.<sup>6</sup> My argument is that, sometimes, democratic theory needs to be *slow* theory. ‘Fast’ and ‘slow’ theory are unfamiliar ideas. Sometimes I use these terms literally, at

others metaphorically. Fast and slow theory are relational notions; there can be many instances of both and they are located on a spectrum of possibilities. There is considerable overlap between slow theory and other approaches that stress particularity and difference; I hope to show that the idea of slow theory helps to draw together a range of distinct and important reasons for theorists to pause over political particularity.

Theory may be understood as being slow in different ways, and I would emphasise three: first, that it is done slowly; second, that its conclusions recommend slow action or implementation; and third, that it makes explicit its own implied arguments about speed as they bear on the reach or breadth of its applicability. By contrast, theory may also be understood as fast in each of these ways. The following sections briefly take up these points.

### Speed and the practice of theory

Slow thinking generally—for example, that associated with the Slow Food and Cittaslow (Slow Cities) movements<sup>7</sup>—highlights questions of the appropriateness of how things are produced, by whom, where, why, and in what time frame. Here, the questions are turned onto the production of democratic theory itself.<sup>8</sup> What might it mean for theory to be produced slowly—in terms of its methods, character, collaborative processes, and recommendations? Slow theory stresses close consideration and mindfulness of the particularities of locality and culture, pausing over situated and customary values, and taking account of a range of opinions and judgements. It may involve, for example, immersive study of the meanings of ‘democracy’ in a distinctive non-Western context.<sup>9</sup> It acknowledges that the speed of theory production may alter the very perceptibility of politics, peoples, and problems. Questions of who creates democratic theory are raised; individual authors may produce it, but it may also be regarded as a co-production with professional and community collaborators including the subjects of research.<sup>10</sup> In the doing of slow theory, process can modify content; a theory is pieced together in conjunction with a context including but not limited to other groups and actors in that context, rather than hatched independently of and subsequently applied to that context.<sup>11</sup>

Slow approaches to theory, then, embrace their own engagement with and production of *situated* knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Situatedness is normally taken to be an issue of place or placement; it is, I suggest, equally an issue about time and speed; the situated producer of democratic models will recognise the need to survey political terrain slowly (deliberately, mindfully) in order to understand the distinctiveness of locality. Slow theorists, for example, would likely endorse Walzer’s defence of ‘thick’ or maximalist conceptions of justice, or of democracy, whose content reflects a patient attentiveness to particularities of culture and place.<sup>13</sup> Producing slow democratic theory is an immersive process, recognising and embracing the impact of situatedness on perception.

By way of contrast, towards the fast theory end of the spectrum the production of democratic theory is interpreted more as an independent process of detached model production. Fast theory minimises acknowledgment of the impact of the situatedness of observers. In this view, the theorist's situatedness—of language, culture, training, and so on—can and ought to be transcended. For example, the appropriate assumptions about essential human characteristics can give rise to more or less universal conceptions of democracy—consider Downs's 'economic model' or even the singular assumptions characterising human motivations in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>14</sup> A contemplative detachment from specific subjects or sites is, in the domain of fast theory, both necessary and feasible.

For fast theory, spatial and temporal specificity matters less than a model's internal consistency. In a democratic theory, is the conception of democracy's value followed through clearly and convincingly in its account of democratic institutions, for example? Questions of who can and who should carry out theoretical work also arise. Fast theory's conception of the agency of the theorist often mirrors that of the classic singular and somewhat heroic 'great thinker', downplaying theory as co-creation. Further, fast theory's ready characterisation of theory production as 'normative' is revealing. What does it mean to produce democratic theory in a *normative* frame? Among other things, I suggest, it carries an (often under examined) assumption that we can have access to sufficiently acontextual normative grounds for the work of theory. The notion that there is—if we are smart enough to discover and defend it—a single best normative argument for democracy is closely linked to such an assumption.

In short, democratic theory production in fast theory mode sees no significant external constraint on speedy production. Time is merely a natural constraint on the independent or comparatively detached work of the lone theorist. The principles and norms that form theory's building blocks are more-or-less timeless and immediately accessible. Producing theory that is conceived as the work of a strongly situated creator, working with as well as for a context, necessarily means taking the time for appropriate immersion and negotiation—doing slow theory. But theory work conceived as comparatively detached and acontextual facilitates the view that there are no strong or serious time constraints on the tasks involved.

### Theory's recommended speeds

Slow theory's approach to theory production feeds through into its content, which tends to consist of recommendations focused on political *processes*. Outcomes of democratic processes need to be considered as radically open and processes need to be attuned and attentive to context. Process-oriented accounts see democratic procedures as enacting norms that may produce democratic legitimacy—a view that builds in strong recognition that time must be taken, and allowed, for democratic procedures to do their complex and often meandering work. It is widely perceived

that democracy—sometimes frustratingly—takes time. Several observers have noted that trends towards social and technological acceleration may pose a threat to democracy, constricting or truncating of time-taking democratic procedures in the name decisiveness or efficiency.<sup>15</sup> In this context, it is reasonable to presume that democratic models that emphasise participative and deliberative procedures reflect assumptions characteristic of slow theory.

Although questions of time and speed have not featured in debates around deliberation and democracy, there is clearly a connection. Deliberation—whether through specially designed forums or through more diffuse processes of debate, information, and solution-seeking<sup>16</sup>—requires a quite open-ended approach to taking time in order that deliberation may bolster the democratic legitimacy of outcomes. Deliberative conceptions of democracy are obliged to value time-taking because they emphasise the legitimacy-conferring properties of democratic procedures.

From the perspective of fast theory, by contrast, the content of the products of theory consist primarily of recommendations in terms of political *outcomes*. These outcomes reflect an argument from independently accessible democratic norms. An example can be found in David Held's emphasis on constitutionalised rights for cosmopolitan democracy—rights that demand respect and protection quite separately from the procedural vicissitudes of democratic majorities in different countries or regions.<sup>17</sup> Such rights are constantly present in that they do not need to be revisited, deliberated over (except by judges), or filtered through popular institutions.

The outcome-oriented content of fast democratic theory is exemplified also by Young's working from an independent philosophical conception of justice to deduce key features of a model of global democracy. The nature of a global democracy is specifiable, as deduced through the 'vision' of the lone theorist and her foundational norm of justice: 'As part of such a vision I propose a global system of regulatory regimes to which locales and regions related in a federated system'.<sup>18</sup> To put the point bluntly, fast theory is able to deliver a more-or-less complete artefact or model (such as a model of global democracy), often built around a small set of core, independently derived normative assumptions or concepts.

Fast theory also tends to be relaxed about recommending more or less complete answers to complex problems. This does not mean, of course, that its democratic models can be thrown together rapidly and applied instantly. Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* is by any measure an extraordinary work that took shape over years if not decades of focused and dedicated labour. But independently of the theorist's human powers, there is no necessary temporal constraint on theory production or application. Perhaps fast theory represents the type of thinking that Peter Sloterdijk had in mind by creating the 'pneumatic parliament', a 'global instant object' that self-inflates for immediate use by grateful citizens when dropped from a military plane.<sup>19</sup> Fast theory produces something analogous to global instant objects. It offers more-or-less complete democratic models, which are more-or-less instantly available.

### Theory's implied speeds

A third factor characterising the slow–fast spectrum is the sense of breadth of applicability of democratic models and theories or their presumed degree of ready mobility across culture and context.

In terms of slow theory's understanding of reach of application of democratic models, theory has a variable, more-or-less impeded capacity for travel from one geographical or cultural context to another and requires careful and reflexive translation in new contexts. Slow theory resists assumptions of unproblematic or immediate translation of its core procedural principles into practice across diverse contexts; it does not assume the direct cultural availability of its core principles to any (given) audience.

Slow theory is suspicious of, for example, normative recommendations that assume a timeless applicability across diverse contexts. It takes responsibility for theory's tendency to construct selectively worlds that fit its demands and seeks to minimise its impact. In the hope of insight, it recommends slow, careful, patient looking, and learning. It does not assume that its norms or recommendations can 'travel' untrammelled across political–cultural particularities or that its implied speed of application is virtually instantaneous.

Fast theory can be seen as theory that is reluctant to concede that time may alter its conclusions or premises or that context may alter the breadth of its applicability. It assumes a more-or-less unimpeded capacity to travel and to be readily translatable across varied political, cultural, linguistic, and other contexts. From this perspective, the world resembles sufficiently a single repeating type of political space in the form of nation-states.<sup>20</sup> Fast theory generalises from assumptions about universal properties of its own methods and prescriptions to the enabling homogeneity of the world it seeks both to reflect and to change.<sup>21</sup>

Fast theory largely sets aside concern about the consequences of its own situatedness for the reach and applicability of its prescriptions. It is theory 'unfiltered' by time and space in terms of both its origins and where it may apply. The 'stickiness', plurality, and particularity of countries, localities, regions, cultures, linguistic communities, situated histories, and so on are factors to step back from, to be perceived in a facilitatively blurred fashion, rather than factors conditioning the scope of a model's applicability.

A further key issue is recognising that political theories in part construct the worlds that they are deemed to be applicable to. Liberal theories of justice or democracy tend to construct the objects of the theory as more-or-less autonomous individuals who are separable for relevant normative and political purposes from the cultural, linguistic, or historical context in which they live—think, for example, of the individualism and implied universality of the assumptions underlying, and providing the conditions of possibility for, the analysis in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Fast theory, to put the point in general terms, assumes a relatively timeless position of authority and a speedy, cross-contextual applicability. It takes a view of the nature of



its product—a normative theory of democracy, for example—which links its general applicability to its relatively timeless, acontextual derivation.

Fast theory constructs a world tailored to maximising the breadth of its own salience. Consider for example a little-acknowledged pitfall of debates on ‘global democracy’. The very phrase implies a constitutable single polity, which according to our standard assumptions requires a unified system of formal representation. But it was Hobbes who first made clear that it is the ‘Unity of the Representer’ that makes a ‘people’ a unity out of radical difference or diversity. Global democracy as an idea bears an implicit claim about a global polity; it thereby conveys a sense of a more-or-less achieved state of affairs (a ‘global polity’) along with a characteristic way in which it might best be organised (‘global democracy’). It gives shape, performatively, to its object.<sup>22</sup> Further, naming the global involves ‘implicitly reinscribing a particular spatial and disciplinary framing’.<sup>23</sup> Paley shows that an anthropological view can lead to questioning of what the standards are for ‘global democracy’.<sup>24</sup> Could academic and political pointing out/to ‘the global’ constitute rather than reflect its object?<sup>25</sup>

### **SLOW AND FAST THEORY—AN INTERIM ASSESSMENT**

The case for a slow theory approach to transnational political representation is built on the conviction that there is a strong, thick particularity haunting theorising on ‘global democracy’. This is the case especially in respect of the local, contested character and significance of the objects of the theorising—individual and group identities, issues, debates, confrontations, competing bodies of expertise and evidence, political space, cultural and linguistic frames of reference—and the politics of simplifying and systematising it. Further, as noted above, slow theory may also be especially pertinent in a transnational context in that national boundaries and familiar forms of national governing structures—which may foster national-level fast theory democratic solutions because the contours of culture and choice are better established—are largely absent or inapplicable.

There are several reasons to be sceptical of fast theory when addressing transnational politics. First, there is no settled or prescribed unit for democracy in transnational spaces, no clear geographical or functional gap or vacuum to be filled; plurality and diversity in political conceptions of spaces and peoples are rife. Second, how ‘democracy’ is invoked varies enormously across transnational spaces and is contested in highly diverse ways (see the perspective of Arundhati Roy regarding Indian debates, for example<sup>26</sup>). Generalising about democratic possibilities in such contexts should be treated with great care (democratic designs are situated designs, even if they show promise of transfer or adaption). Third, whatever the theorists say or do, practitioners and activists will do the bulk of the democratic designing (whether they know they are doing it or not).

Slow theory seeks to immerse itself in the distinctiveness of the objects of its concern, for example, claims and disputes about transnational democratic



possibilities. It sees models of democracy as emerging from highly varied efforts to interpret and to practice an open-ended set of principles (equality, freedom, rights, participation, accountability . . .), and new ideas of democracy as co-productions over time between practitioners, activists, and theorists. Advocating slow theory does not mean advocating the simple (versus complex), the local (versus global), the concrete (versus abstract), or the essential (versus the dynamic), for example. A non-detached, in-depth, process-oriented approach to the work of democratic design produces its own abstractions, complexities, and sense of dynamic change in a complexly interconnected world.

## **CHARACTERISING TRANSNATIONAL REPRESENTATION**

Conventionally, political representation is viewed as an institutional arrangement, resulting from election. But it is more productively regarded as a process of claim-making and claim-reception that is relatively unconfined by national borders or electoral structures.<sup>27</sup> Certain characteristics of the claim-based approach to representation are helpful when investigating democratic practice in transnational politics, where election and formal office are more diffuse or less frequently available, along with the anchoring effect of a recognised constitutional system.

Crucially, even in transnational spaces we find representative claims that are reasonably described as democratic. Substantiating that claim and the role of slow approaches in so doing is a key task. Because familiar institutions of formal representative democracy are rare at a transnational level with the significant and partial exception of the European Union, we need to be attentive to unfamiliar forms of representative claim and their reception. I make no assumptions about how much transnational democratic representation exists; how we might approach that question is precisely the point. Nor do I focus on any one type of transnational actor (or style of action or interaction). Governmental and intergovernmental bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), corporations, and individuals operating more or less autonomously or through networks<sup>28</sup> are all, in principle, included.

Representative practices in transnational spaces are likely to be characterised by the following features in comparison to conventional statal representative democracy.

1. Highly diverse forms of institutional presence: the form representative claims take will vary widely. Their longevity and the extent to which they are linked to or implicate persisting institutions (such as the UN) will also vary widely. For example, an indigenous activist group in country X may emerge on the world scene as claiming to represent indigenous rights with respect to mining and land use, achieve some profile and impact, and become politically invisible a few months later. Or a persistent claim over many years might be made by a group claiming to represent peoples subject to the deprivations of poverty across a number of countries, such as Oxfam.
2. The operation of multiple modes of exit and voice. This means that the extent to which, and the ways in which, those invoked in a representative claim are able to

express their assent or dissent will vary widely. For example, implicated peoples may have had a chance to accept or reject Bono's now-famous claim to 'represent a lot of people in Africa', but not via conventional voting. It may be that—for example, for transnational NGOs—one might advocate an adapted use of more conventional electoral machinery,<sup>29</sup> but that particular set of modes of 'exit' is at best likely to operate alongside other, often less formal, ones.

3. Variable degrees, styles, and claims with regard to authority. Representative claimants at the World Bank, for example, may be able to claim some formal authority from their support from national governments. Others may claim informal authority; Subcommandante Marcos of the Zapatista Army, for example, may be able to claim some degree of moral authority in terms of international representative claims.<sup>30</sup> Some will claim to be 'in' authority, others to be 'an' authority.
4. Variability in the extent to which representative claims invoke specific bounded geographical territory. Transnational claims to represent indigenous rights, for example, may invoke the issues of cultural oppression, or they may invoke rights to control or sovereignty with regard to territory.
5. A great fluidity in number, frequency, and type from one month or year to the next. For example, claims to represent 'Islam' and the interests of a 'Muslim community' across as well as within nation-states and regions have been prominent in recent years. A few decades ago such claims would have been different in character and prominence. But in the 1950s, for instance, claims on transnational stages to represent the interests of workers across many countries would have had more prominence than today.
6. Highly varied degrees of political visibility with respect, for example, to which would-be representative voices are seen or heard where, framed how, and with what degree of consistency and intensity. Of course, political visibility is a complex issue in itself, encompassing various forms of media and their ownerships and cultures, along with other facts making up what we might call an 'opportunity structure' for the effective voicing of political concerns or interests in transnational politics.
7. Claims are also likely to make distinctive use of 'types' of representation as resources backing up representative claims. The head of the corporate citizenship arm of a major international oil company or the executive director of an international human rights organisation cannot easily—at least openly or rhetorically—makes claims to be a 'representative'. Such terms are too closely tied, generally speaking, to formal election. This is the main reason why other terms are often used such as stakeholders, champions, spokespersons, or advocates.
8. These claims are likely to display also a clearer tendency to be constitutive of the constituencies that they aim to represent. Elected members of national parliaments can claim that their constituencies are formal, given, pre-formed (though they are not, in many ways). The relatively open-ended, informal, and potential character of 'constituencies' for (especially non-elective) representative

claims in transnational contexts means that those constituencies are more fully brought into being as an effect of the representative claim itself. Of course, all representative claims are constitutive claims—a claim to speak for is also a claim to speak about—but some claims are more fully and more successfully constitutive than others.

9. Less anchored in specific or formal modes or practices of accountability to a given constituency. A number of recent observers have discussed the vexed issue of accountability of transnational non-governmental organisations, among other transnational actors. Such accounts add, for example, the potential of financial, moral, professional, and other modes of accountability to electoral or hierarchical accountability.<sup>31</sup>

So, beyond representative democracy in nation-states, we enter a dynamic and changeable domain of representative claim-making.<sup>32</sup> But some claims in this wider domain can make a reasonable case to be regarded as examples of democratic representation, despite common assumptions that transnational representation will not be democratic representation.<sup>33</sup> I turn now to the question of how these assessments might be made and to the importance of slow theory to their making.

### **SLOW THEORY: THE POLITICS OF (TAKING) TIME**

Some prominent commentators do not think there is a major issue regarding the democratic character of actors in ‘global civil society’. Castells, for example, sees an emerging network state—offering political representation that is ‘much more obscure and removed from political control’—confronted by transnational global movements and NGOs that make up a ‘democratic movement that calls for new forms of political representation of peoples’ will and interests in the process of global governance’.<sup>34</sup> But we would be wrong to take this view for granted. By the same token, it is also important to be sceptical of approaches that border on rejecting any link between democracy and representation in transnational politics, as in Hardt and Negri’s comment that ‘We need to invent different forms of representation or perhaps new forms of democracy that go beyond representation’.<sup>35</sup>

Not closing down the very possibility of forms of democratic representation in transnational spaces raises a challenge: we need, for any given case, to do a lot of interpretive work to assess the democratic character of representative claims on their merits. The principle for such assessments is, I suggest, that provisionally acceptable claims to democratic legitimacy are those for which there is evidence of sufficient acceptance by appropriate constituencies over time under reasonable conditions of judgment.<sup>36</sup> So, for example, a claim by Oxfam to speak for specific groups of people in developing countries can only properly be assessed by those groups themselves. Contained within this position are arguments that: judgements of democratic legitimacy of representative claims are properly made by the people subject to the claim and not, for example, by the claimant or by democratic theorists or other observers; it is actual, rather than hypothetical, acceptance or rejection of

representative claims that matters; at best, representative claims can only be provisionally regarded as democratic; conditions under which judgements are made by the people subject to the claims also matter (for example, were people coerced into accepting a claim? Could they have chosen otherwise?); and acceptance acts may come in a variety of forms—silence, for example, in certain contexts may be taken as assent or consent.<sup>37</sup>

Observing the dynamics of a representative claim like Oxfam's, for example, or by an indigenous people's advocacy group such as Survival International or even an international government body such as the World Bank, is a complex matter and critically takes time. Interpretation of who may make up the appropriate constituency for such claims is not straightforward and can only be done effectively through careful interpretive (as opposed to stipulative) work over time. Crucially, listening to the voices or watching for signs of a claim's acceptance will be challenging and require patient exploration. The democratic theorist will need to do slow theory: to see the normative content of their projects as emergent, provisional, cumulative, and co-produced—perhaps haphazardly—rather than as acontextual, potentially complete, fully justified, or accurately captured by their favoured models and concepts. Over-time, slow assessments allow for alternative readings of claims to surface—meanings of claim, representation, leadership, and accountability may play through and play out in context. A slow, open-ended 'time-lapse' view may capture shifting manifestations of representative claims and potential constituencies better than a fast 'snapshot', e.g. through the parachuting into a given context pre-formulated accountability roles.

Observers of specific sets of claims will need to allow time, for example, for the ingredients that enable assessment to become sufficiently manifest. This will involve, importantly, denying an immediate, stipulative assumption of illegitimacy of representative claims (an assumption that is often made for non-elective claims, for example). This is democratic theory as methodical, patient detective work. In a great many cases—especially in the fluid circumstances of transnational politics—clues regarding the democratic acceptability of specific claims will need to be pieced together. The observer will need the fruits of detailed interpretive work to find out if the acceptance of claims (or a reasonable process of non-objection) is evident in a given case. We can't know if a representative claim has been accepted unless we are prepared to explore the meanings of that claim for those citizens subject to it or invoked and addressed by it. It follows also that notions of provisional acceptability are important. That point becomes stronger the more we stress the importance of the constituency standpoint for these assessments.

There are circumstances, then, in which representative claims can reasonably be regarded as provisionally democratic, even if they are not based on an elective or even a formal relationship. There are, of course, degrees of formality and degrees of election involved in many claims and relationships—this is not a black-and-white issue. Surrogate representation, as discussed by Mansbridge,<sup>38</sup> is one variant of more-or-less non-elective representation, tied to national contexts in discussions to date but translatable into transnational spheres. It is true that the comparative

absence of an electoral base for representative claims can make assessment of their democratic character more difficult. But in a way that is just the point: that difficulty demands time, a slow theory approach attuned to evidence of actual acceptance by appropriate constituencies.

A range of factors will be part of such assessments. The Transnational Governmental Organisations (TGOs), International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs), or networks through which both operate may claim or be claimed to be representative. Whether representative claims by INGOs or transnational corporations in ‘corporate citizenship’ mode are constant or ongoing; whether they originate from within or without the organisation; whether these claims are many and common or isolated and rare; and the extent to which they are disputed by observers who are not necessarily part of the appropriate constituency are all factors that are subordinate to acceptance or rejection by members of appropriate constituencies over time but still may provide important evidence for the investigator.

How long is long enough to know if a given claim has earned a degree of democratic legitimacy, taking the relevant factors into account? There can be no single answer. It may depend in part on the character and scope of particular claims, along with the quality of the information available. The best broad answer is: long enough for most if not all the members of the appropriate constituency to have registered objections to it in a context that enables those objections to be raised at no significant cost to the actors concerned. That, at least, is a reasonable regulative principle.

There may be reason to ask: do such assessments matter, especially if they are so difficult? One perspective from which they might be argued not to matter may arise from the analysis of Goodin, who argues that it makes little sense for us to think that global democracy will arrive quickly: compared to the development of liberal democracy in nation-states, global democracy is in its infancy.<sup>39</sup> But there is plentiful evidence that, slowly and haltingly, it is and will continue to evolve. One might argue that there is little point seeking ways to assess the democratic character of representative claims for transnational actors—we would not expect to find much democracy in that context, yet (Goodin does not himself make this argument).

However, we do make such assessments, and they matter to the practical capacities of organisations as diverse as the World Bank, Oxfam, and Survival International. Seen from another angle, Goodin’s arguments might put assessments of claims in the vanguard of the gradual development towards *some* form of global democracy. If the latter may emerge by small, slow, uneven steps, then a slow theory-driven approach that identifies detailed and situated increments in democratic practice in transnational spaces may be welcomed. Indeed, oddly enough, it may tell us more about the emergent character of something called ‘global democracy’—the end point of which we ought not to assume will take the familiar form of statal representative democracy. There may well be a ‘one-way ratcheting up’ process towards ‘global democracy’,<sup>40</sup> but I would argue that just *what* is being ratcheted up in specific claims and disputes is a more open question than we may commonly think.<sup>41</sup>

Sometimes—perhaps more often than it is realised—the tasks of democratic theory require adoption of key features of slow theory, such as immersion in the context of

material political worlds and the frames through which participants interpret those worlds.

## CONTRASTS

I have suggested that in the fluidity and variability of transnational politics, representative claims may be made by and about a variety of actors. Some of these claims may involve democratic representation and some not. Resisting the attractions—and they are real attractions—of what I have called ‘fast theory’, I have suggested an interpretive way to assess the extent to which appropriate constituencies of representative claims accept those claims. And I have emphasised that doing slow theory means keeping a sense of provisionality over time of the outcomes of these assessments.

My position differs from others taken in debates about global democracy and transnational democratic representation. I will comment briefly on the work of Held, Dryzek and Niemeyer, Castiglione and Warren, and Bohman.<sup>42</sup> There is, of course, more to these works than my brief comments will suggest. But by way of conclusion, I simply note some key points of distinction.

First, the myriad practices of democratic representation in transnational spaces are more significant than a too-rapid, too-complete, pre-fabricated model of ‘global representative democracy’. Both Held and Dryzek and Niemeyer, for example, prioritise the institutional form that transnational representation might take (e.g. global parliaments or Chambers of Discourses). To give it this priority is to go too far too soon; the shapes of democracy in transnational spaces will emerge, unevenly and over time, in complex ways. A key task of political theory is to adapt its tools to the analysis of its emergence, to attend to the fate of a range of representative claims. Held’s cosmopolitan model of democracy envisages transnational representation as occurring in layered or nested levels of formal representative institutions from the global to the local. For Dryzek and Niemeyer, representing discourses is a more promising route to democratising transnational spaces than more conventional representation of interests or opinions: and ‘discursive representation is especially appropriate where a well-bounded demos is hard to locate’.<sup>43</sup> But although they recognise that discourses ‘can evolve with time’, and are constitutive of interests and identities, a good deal of their discussion is devoted to bold advocacy of Chambers of Discourses—more or less formal representative bodies—‘It is possible to imagine a Chamber of Discourses corresponding to more familiar assemblies based on the representation of individuals’.<sup>44</sup>

Secondly, the focus on formality, in Bohman’s<sup>45</sup> and Held’s work for example, often runs in tandem with a continuing and restrictive focus on the narrower domain of representative democracy-style institutions, rather than on the broader and less structured domains of democratic and political representation. The willingness to step back and to model or design more or less ideal institutions for transnational democratic representation is a familiar political theorist’s impulse. It is an impulse



worth resisting. We need to do immersive theory—theory that pays close and detailed attention to a range of emergent practices—formal and informal, institutional and non-institutional—such as claims and their reception by different constituencies and audiences.

Thirdly, we need to keep an open mind about the extent of conceptual innovation needed to understand practices and possibilities in the difficult wider domains of democratic representation. For example, Castiglione and Warren are concerned that we need to emphasise new forms of accountability where conventional electoral authorisation is relatively absent.<sup>46</sup> This is fine, as far as it goes. But my recommendation to look at the relatively unfamiliar notion of *acceptance* by constituencies is, I would maintain, a necessary innovation. Using acceptance rather than accountability allows more for the rapid and unpredictable changes in who may be invoked as part of representative claims (accountability implies a more persistent and readily identifiable group of constituents).<sup>47</sup> Of course, the performance of representative claims may involve invoking a *sense* of authorisation or accountability. Relatedly, it is better to emphasise practices over institutions, and trace potentially emergent properties of institutionalisation rather than positing ‘this is democracy’ end points. For one thing, as Rosenau has made clear, we do not know which if any of the emergent institutional configurations in transnational spaces will crystallise into widely accepted and lasting forms of democratic practice.<sup>48</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In any process of theory-building, there is a judgement to be made about the character and extent of the gap or gaps between the systematising theory, on the one hand, and the cultural and material states of the world that our theories simplify. Go to one extreme and our theories (as representations of external states) are almost as complex and variable as the states of affairs they claim to model. That is the paradox that Borges often explored in his short stories (‘The Congress’ especially). But there is also the other extreme, where theoretical models and principles are so spare or parsimonious that they look over-simplified, over-optimistic, and unconvincing in the face of their objects’ changeability and complexity.

Fast theory—especially theory that posits independently constructed institutional models or designs—can move quickly to its conclusions partly because it flies fast and high above the earth’s political topography. The world looks flat and uniform from a great height, and the extent to which one is speeding over difference and complexity is obscured. Better, I argue, to go ‘slow and low’. Better, in other words, to appreciate topographical complexities; to embrace an attentive and responsive pragmatism rather than rush to offer comparatively timeless solutions.

Democratic theory’s new global canvas has prompted global democratic ambitions. Focusing on representation, I have sketched reasons to embrace slow theory—attentive, modest, and interpretive—rather than forms of fast theory that tend to reach for neater and more conventional institutional responses. I have argued that we



need to pause and reflect on the messiness of transnational representation, and that this very need has an impact on the character of the work of democratic theory. Above all, I invite reflection on the slow-burn power of in-time and timely ideas and the surprising lack of purchase or relevance of would-be timeless, fast theory.

## NOTES

1. J. Dryzek, A. Bachtiger, and K. Milewicz. 'Toward a Deliberative Global Citizens' Assembly', *Global Policy* 2, no. 1 (2011), 33–42.
2. Note in particular that I do not try to make this sketch fit into anything so grand as a theory of 'global democracy' that, like any such theory, would require at a minimum an account of rights and their constitutionalisation, a conception of citizenship, an account of justification and of institutions that follow from that justification. R. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) remains, arguably, the all-round best offering of a theory of democracy in this full respect.
3. M. Saward, *The Representative Claim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
4. See [http://www.mkgallery.org/exhibitions/andrew\\_cross/](http://www.mkgallery.org/exhibitions/andrew_cross/). *VIA* has no accompanying publication but for a comparable work, see A. Cross, *An English Journey* (London: Film and Video Umbrella and the John Hansard Gallery; accompanied by DVD '3 Hours from Here', accessed 10 February 2011).
5. H. Rosa and W.E. Scheuerman, eds., *High-Speed Society* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).
6. Democratic theory is clearly one area of work within the larger category of political theory. A number of the following comments may apply to the broader category, but since my immediate concern is to develop theoretical tools to illuminate issues of democracy in transnational spaces I confine my claims to that area.
7. See G. Andrews, *The Slow Food Story* (London: Pluto Press, 2008).
8. Compare N. Gane, 'Speed Up or Slow Down: Social Theory in the Information Age', *Information, Communication and Society* 9, no. 1 (2006), 20–38.
9. F. Schaffer, *Democracy in Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); J. Paley, 'Toward an Anthropology of Democracy', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, (2002), 469–496.
10. Research subjects may be regarded as co-creators in two broad senses: (1) their influence on theoretical perspectives can be acknowledged, and (2) they can be brought into the research processes as collaborators.
11. Latour reminds us that it is not only human actors but other living creatures and 'things' that may form a part of politically considerable 'assemblages'. See B. Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public', in *Making Things Public*, eds. B. Latour and P. Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 4–31.
12. D. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988), 575–599.
13. M. Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).
14. A. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956); J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).
15. D. McIvor, 'The Politics of Speed: Connolly, Wolin, and the Prospects for Democratic Citizenship in an Accelerated Polity', *Polity* 43, no. 1 (2011), 58–83; H. Rosa, 'Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society', in *High-Speed Society*, eds. 77–122. Rosa and Scheuerman; W. Scheuerman, 'Citizenship and Speed', in *High-Speed Society*, eds. Rosa and Scheuerman, 287–306.

16. J.S. Fishkin and R.C. Luskin, 'The Quest for Deliberative Democracy', in *Democratic Innovation*, ed. M. Saward (London: Routledge, 2000), 17–28; A. Gutmann and D. Thompson, 'Democratic Disagreement', in *Deliberative Politics*, ed. S. Macedo (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 243–280.
17. D. Held, *Democracy and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).
18. I.M. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 267.
19. P. Sloterdijk and G. Mueller von der Haegen, 'Instant Democracy: The Pneumatic Parliament<sup>®</sup>', in *Making Things Public*, eds. B. Latour and P. Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 952–957.
20. See C. Geertz, *Available Light* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
21. The implied speeds of fast theory can be gleaned, for example, in the way that Held's *Democracy and the Global Order* has no index entries for Brazil, China, or India. There is no discussion of language or indigeneity as crucial facilitators or exemplars of difference. It is reasonable to ask what assumptions about (what we might call) sufficient global sameness underpin such work. Who—what type of person, speaking what kinds of language, with what sorts of values—can be said to be (sufficiently) part already of a 'global order'?
22. N.S. Mauthner and A. Doucet, "'Knowledge Once Divided Can Be Hard to Put Together Again': An Epistemological Critique of Collaborative and Team-based Research Practices'. *Sociology* 42, no. 5 (2008), 971–985; Q. Skinner, 'The Empirical Theorists of Democracy and Their Critics', *Political Theory* 1, no. 3 (1973), 287–306.
23. K. Shaw, 'Whose Knowledge for What Politics?' in *Review of International Studies* (2003), 119–221, at 210.
24. Paley, 'Towards an Anthropology of Democracy', 471–74.
25. This perspective provides a further reason to prefer the term 'transnational', which refers not to global or even international, but is a more flexible notion referring to practice or action 'across nations'.
26. A. Roy, *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009).
27. Saward, *The Representative Claim*.
28. M.E. Keck, 'Governance Regimes and the Politics of Discursive Representation,' in *Transnational Activism in Asia*, eds. N. Piper and A. Uhlin (London: Routledge, 2004), 43–60.
29. C. Gould, 'Structuring Global Democracy: Political Communities, Universal Human Rights, and Transnational Representation', *Metaphilosophy* 40, no. 1 (2009), 24–41.
30. S. Tormey, 'Not in My Name': Deleuze, Zapatismo and the Critique of Representation', *Parliamentary Affairs* 59, no. 1 (2006), 138–154.
31. Recent analyses of accountability in global or transnational politics feature: R.W. Grant and R.O. Keohane, 'Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics', *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005), 29–43; J. Rubenstein, 'Accountability in an Unequal World', *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (2007), 616–632; and L. Montanaro, 'The Democratic Potential of Self-Authorized Representatives', American Political Science Association Annual Conference (2008). Each offers a valuable discussion of potential new approaches to the issue. However, the focus is on organizations or groups with distinct memberships or constituencies, downgrading questions of constituency-creation by representative claimants or their supporters (though Montanaro is a partial exception). Issues of representation as selective portrayal and struggles over visibility—crucial both to claims and identifying possible new constituencies (see Saward, *The Representative Claim*) are largely set aside, leading, for example, to a lack of attention to crucial claims around religion and indigeneity. This work seeks to model dilemmas and sketch taxonomic answers rather than explore the dynamics over time of the fate of representative claims. Even asking, for example, 'who is the

- accountability-holder?’ is to look to an ordered snap-shot world of conceptually clear roles in order to proceed with taxonomic analysis—rather than asking what claims may give rise to demands for accountability and how do these change over time?
32. This is not to deny that the dynamics of representative claim-making are also evident outside the state within nation-states (in civil society).
  33. See, for example, R. Dahl, ‘Can International Organizations be Democratic? A Sceptic’s View’, in *Democracy’s Edges*, eds. I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19–36; and A. Rehfeld, ‘Towards a General Theory of Political Representation’, *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 1 (2006), 1–21.
  34. M. Castells, ‘Global Governance and Global Politics’, *PS*, January (2005): 11, 13.
  35. M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), 255.
  36. The appropriate constituency consists of those people who are spoken to and spoken about by the claimant, plus those who recognize their interests as being invoked in the claim. The membership of these two groups may be distinct or it may overlap.
  37. There may be a case for arguing that a bias on the observer’s part towards express consent rather than assumed silent or otherwise passive forms is appropriate. This case would be based on the fact that people may be conditioned or socialised into acceptance of, for example, representative claims due to lack of educational opportunity or independent sources of information. This point reinforces the importance of considering the conditions under which members of appropriate constituencies make judgements of claims for and about them.
  38. J.J. Mansbridge, ‘Rethinking Representation’, *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (2003), 515–528.
  39. R.E. Goodin, ‘Global Democracy: In the Beginning’, *International Theory* 2, no. 2 (2010), 175–209.
  40. *Ibid.*, 191.
  41. Gould writes: ‘I think that it is faulty to seek such a global demos and globalized public sphere, and that it is an impoverished view of transnational democracy that would see it as entailing a world government replacing all smaller forms of associations. In fact, I would suggest that the emerging multiplicity of transnational public spheres and their overlapping nature might actually make possible a richer, and potentially more democratic, form of transnational association’. See Gould, ‘Structuring Global Democracy’, 25.
  42. Held, *Democracy and the Global Order*; J.S. Dryzek and S. Niemeyer, ‘Discursive Representation’, *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 4; D. Castiglione and M. Warren, *The New Ecology of Democratic Representation* (University of Exeter, 2009); J. Bohman, ‘Introducing Democracy Across Borders: From Demos to Demoi’, *Ethics and Global Politics* 3, no. 1 (2010).
  43. Dryzek and Niemeyer, ‘Discursive Representation’, 482.
  44. *Ibid.*, 485.
  45. Bohman seeks ‘to redefine democracy so as to make it appropriate to transnational settings’. He seeks to define a new ‘democratic minimum’ that enables a description of a new form of ‘transnational democratic order’ based in part around the idea of multiple demoi rather than a single demos. This is a traditional take on democratic theorising—creating the ideal feasible model and then seeking out its institutional counterparts—with a new transnational twist. Bohman, ‘Introducing Democracy Across Borders’.
  46. Castiglione and Warren note the inadequacy of traditional models of representation in the ‘new ecology of democratic representation’, including the challenges of dealing with non-territorial, transnational, and non-electoral representative claims. They rightly also note that we need ‘ways of judging the democratic credentials of representative claims’ (*The New Ecology of Democratic Representation*, 2009, 14). Focusing on this aspect of their work, they

stress the importance of accountability where more conventional electoral authorisation is lacking.

47. Acceptance also has the advantage of being more clearly temporally continuous rather than episodic and is not wedded to a notion of more or less fully constituted groups.
48. J. Rosenau, 'Governance in a Globalizing World', in *The Global Transformations Reader*, eds. D. Held and A. McGrew (Cambridge: Polity, 2000). The approach to transnational democratic representation that I have outlined has something in common with the efforts of Bray to set out a 'pragmatic cosmopolitan' alternative to the cosmopolitan and deliberative approaches associated with Held and Dryzek respectively. See D. Bray, 'Pragmatic Cosmopolitanism: A Deweyan Approach to Democracy Beyond the Nation-State', *Millennium* 37 (2009), 679–715.