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## Making Claims with No Subjects: A Reply to Lasse Thomassen

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### ABSTRACT

In my reply to Lasse Thomassen's paper, 'All Claims Are Representative Claims: Response to Thomás Zicman de Barros', I try to address two points – one theoretical and one normative – where I think Thomassen ends up misrepresenting my argument. By clarifying these misunderstandings, I hope to find some common ground with Thomassen's position.

### KEYWORDS

Post-representation;  
representative claim;  
subaltern studies;  
constructivist turn; Michael  
Saward

Let me start this reply to Lasse Thomassen's comments on my article 'Not All Claims Are Representative Claims': Constructing 'The People' in Post-Representative Movements' by saying how pleased I am to engage in a debate with him. Thomassen has been an important reference in my reflections on representation and post-representation and I was, therefore, surprised that some disagreement appears between us in his paper 'All Claims Are Representative Claims: Response to Thomás Zicman de Barros'. In my reply, I try to address two points – one theoretical and one normative – where I think Thomassen ends up misrepresenting my argument. By clarifying these misunderstandings, I hope to find some common ground with Thomassen's position.

### Theoretical Clarification

As Thomassen indicates, although my article is a critical assessment of Michael Saward's representative claim, his response to my paper does not focus on this framework. By bypassing Saward, however, I believe that Thomassen ends up inadvertently ignoring an important context in which I develop my argument. Given the constraints of space, I will not go over my entire thread of thought and the discussions of the various dimensions of representation again. Let me simply summarise my main conclusion: I believe there can be political claims that performatively represent and construct the 'people' as an object, but which do not assign a subject – that is, a representative – to it. The words subject and object are explicitly used here as these notions were developed by Saward. To sustain my point, I use what I have called post-representative claims as an example of this kind of claim, but I also specify that it is only one kind among many 'non-representative' (in the sense of 'acting for') political claims.

Now, let us recap Thomassen's criticism of my paper. He asserts that every claim has a subject and understands that my reasoning cannot hold. He interprets my position as

implying that, once the 'people' is constructed as an object, this 'people' can act and speak by itself, almost as an immanent force. If that were the case, Thomassen would be totally correct in pointing to an inconsistency in my argument, as this immanentism would ultimately contradict the constructed character of every identity. Nevertheless, I do not believe that this was my position. There is always someone talking about the object. The 'people' does not exist as such. It is always a discursive construction.

Do I agree then with Thomassen's claim that 'as a minimum, there is here a subject that represents the people and the citizens as acting and speaking by themselves'? With due respect, I do not. This is where we see why Seward's framework was important to my position. I believe that my disagreement with Thomassen comes from the fact that he inadvertently disregards the necessary differentiation between maker and subject, stressed by Seward (Seward, 2010, p. 36).

By definition, every claim has a maker. A claim must be spoken, written, or at least physically expressed by someone. When I say that the 'people' does not exist as such, and that it is always a discursive construction, it means that this 'people' is a product of a maker (or makers). Still, one can make a claim without being the subject of this claim, and some claims may not have subjects at all. The frontier between maker and subject can be blurred, and in some cases, a maker may involuntarily find himself playing the role of subject, but this is not necessarily the case. There are various ways of making a claim, and I believe that discourses circulate and constitute objects beyond the strict relationship between a subject and an object, beyond representation, understood as 'stepping in someone's place, [...] to tread in someone's shoes' (Spivak, 1990, p. 108).

The whole debate may be clarified if we consider other cases of 'non-representative' political claims. Let us start with a case that I discuss in my article: claims about the people made by the media. When a journalist claims that 'the people are angry', he is not necessarily presenting himself as a subject of a representative claim and claiming that his voice is the voice of the people but simply making a claim which may have performative effects on an object, constituting this object by giving it a name. To avoid any misunderstanding, let us remove any reminiscence of someone 'acting for' another and consider a hypothetical situation in which it was an anonymous Banksy-style demonstrator rather than a journalist who wrote the words 'the people are angry' on a wall. Furthermore, let us suppose that for its artistic or political merits this message strikes a chord with people. Although the object of the claim is clear – the signifier 'the people' – we must ask where its subject is. My answer would be that it is nowhere. Finally, let us think of a third situation in which the message on the wall states that 'the people are angry with the greedy elites'. Now, there is a second object in the claim – 'the elites' – which is discursively constructed as greedy, but that in this context is not associated with anything that could resemble a subject.

Actually, although representative claim analysis often focuses on claims of specific players, these reflections lead me to consider whether it would be interesting to broaden our scope. We should investigate how discourses and collective identities are indeed a product of a complex interaction between various makers constituting objects, both in representative claims and 'non-representative' political claims. As a matter of fact, I believe that Thomassen himself has done this in his persuasive work on the 'scene' of multiculturalism in Britain. This included the speeches of a number

of elected officials during the time, but also the study of discursive constructions by lawyers, journalists and even novelists that in most cases go beyond the strict relationship between subjects and objects (Thomassen, 2017, pp. 5–10).

### Normative Clarification

Beyond this theoretical debate, I find it interesting that Thomassen assigns a normative position to me. Throughout my article, I try to keep the normative discussion at bay – although, of course, there is no such a thing as a theory independent from normative considerations. According to Thomassen, though, my normative position is clear: I would follow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s hierarchical oppositions in assuming that post-representation is better than representation and that the former would be more democratic than the latter. Once again, I am presented as an ‘immanentist’ of some kind. However, while this may seem to be Spivak’s position (which we could also debate), it is not mine. I do not subscribe to the arguments of those who criticise representation and defend an idealised ‘real democracy’. On the contrary, I stress the importance of political leadership and its democratic potential.

As Thomassen shows, one of the main concepts in Spivak’s work is that of subalternity. It is worth indicating, though, that her references to the notion of subalternity draw clearly on Antonio Gramsci’s use of this term. Gramsci comes to mind in explaining my normative position. There is no doubt that the fragmentary and incomplete nature of Gramsci’s work leaves it open to different interpretations. Nevertheless, he constantly emphasises in his notebooks the importance of a political leadership in organising the subalterns.

Gramsci’s idea of subaltern echoes Marx’s notion of mass (Marx, 1979, p. 187; Spivak, 1988, p. 283). For Marx, the mass is opposed to the class: while the class is organised, the mass is disorganised. Likewise, Gramsci claims that the subalterns are unable to act (Gramsci, 1983, Q9 [1932], section 67; Spivak, 1992, pp. 45–46). He defines them as those ‘*at the margins of history*’ and explicitly associates them with race, religion and even gender groups whose appearance in the political realm is not even intelligible (Gramsci, 1992, Q25 [1934], section 1, section 4). As Gramsci sees it, this situation is decidedly problematic and this leads him to stress the importance of a political intervention which, by organising the subalterns, allows them to abandon this condition and leave subalternity (Gramsci, 1996, Q3 [1930], section 48).

To put it in Spivak’s terms, if the subaltern cannot speak, it is up to a leadership to speak in its name (Spivak, 1988, pp. 277–278). To get rid of some essentialist leftovers from Gramsci’s thought, I would add that it is up to a leadership to take radically excluded elements out of subalternity and constitute them as a political being by the act of naming them. Although there are risks involved in any case, as Gramsci believes that the subaltern groups are more likely to be led by a reactionary leadership from above (Gramsci, 1996, Q3 [1930], section 48), I also see democratic potential in their mobilisation. I believe that by naming and introducing the radically excluded in the political stage, the leader may indeed challenge the symbolic order that produced subalternity in the first place. I do not think Thomassen are far apart in this point as he has outlined similar reflections on the matter in the past (Thomassen, 2005, p. 114). The issue, of course, is whether this process of challenging the symbolic order can be

reiterated. For this to happen, the very identity of the people must be constructed in an open way, embracing its contingency and allowing its continuous questioning by new claims.

The idea that constructing an open identity demands protecting this openness is linked to another important role I assign to leadership: that of protecting a movement. In my study of the Brazilian *Jornadas de Junho*, I pointed out the perils of a self-denying leadership and indicated how leaderless horizontal movements can be co-opted by other forces. As Claude Lefort would say, a horizontal moment of wild democracy may be endangered and become vulnerable to a tyrant who tries to use its lack of organisation to subvert it from within, destroying horizontality (Lefort, 1999, p. 57). Here, I would like to go back to some of Thomassen's previous works with Marina Prentoulis which I tend to agree with. As they claimed in their analysis of protests in Greece and Spain in 2011, horizontality is not given. It must be constructed and, as such, safeguarded 'against threats from outside as well as against those within the movement who want it to develop in a more hierarchical direction' (Thomassen & Prentoulis, 2014, p. 222).

Paradoxically as it may seem, therefore, Thomassen and Prentoulis claim that it might be necessary to have an organisational frame that is somehow vertical in order to shield horizontality against total verticalization. I totally agree with them, and would only add that this does not necessarily mean establishing a clear leadership by a subject, but at least developing informal identity-building mechanisms that regulate claim-making processes and prevent a movement from being co-opted by its adversaries.

## Conclusion

Once again, I would like to stress how pleased I am to explain my position in this exchange with Lasse Thomassen. By clarifying my theoretical and normative arguments, I hope to have highlighted some points of compatibility between my view and Thomassen's previous writings. At the theoretical dimension, I see a set of 'non-representative' political claims in his empirical work. At the normative dimension, I share his belief in the democratic potential of political leadership and its paradoxical importance in protecting horizontality.

## Notes on contributor

*Thomás Zicman de Barros* is a lecturer at Sciences Po Paris. His research activity focuses on the interdisciplinary articulation between Political Theory and Psychoanalysis, studying populist experiences, movements that criticise mechanisms of political representation and reflecting on the role of political leadership in the construction of collective identities. Email: thomas.zicmandebarros@sciencespo.fr <https://www.linkedin.com/in/thomasdebarros/>

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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