

Reflective Realism: Does Unwillingness to Participate Legitimize Non-Participatory Democracy?

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Abstract: In this article, we argue that reflective realism offers a plausible methodology that takes non-participatory attitudes and beliefs seriously as candidates for legitimacy while simultaneously offering tools through which a critical distance on these attitudes and beliefs can be obtained. Against unmediated realism, according to which non-participatory attitudes warrant the conclusion that democracy ought to be non-participatory, we emphasize that they cannot serve as inputs for bottom-up legitimacy reconstructions when they are conditional upon detrimental features of the political system. In this context, we distinguish between two types of conditionality, unknown and known, and show how they necessitate two forms of critical engagement: ideology critique and a method of elicitation. Finally, we argue that Landemore's open democracy paradigm, with some important modifications, offers a solution to the ambiguity (some citizens want to participate, some will be reluctant) that realists may encounter in their bottom-up legitimacy reconstructions since it accommodates participatory and non-participatory attitudes alike.

Abstract: Der Artikel stellt die Methodologie des reflexiven Realismus vor. Sie erlaubt es, nicht-partizipatorische Präferenzen und Glaubenssätze als Kandidaten für Legitimitätsrekonstruktionen ernst zu nehmen und bietet zugleich Instrumente, durch welche eine kritische Distanz zu diesen erreicht werden kann. Dabei grenzt sich der reflexive Realismus von einem nicht-reflexiven Realismus ab. Nicht-reflexive Realisten sehen die faktische Zurückhaltung der Bevölkerung in demokratischen Entscheidungsprozessen als Grund dafür an, dass Demokratien das Erfordernis zur Bürgerpartizipation reduzieren sollten. Dagegen betont der reflexive Realismus, dass nicht-partizipative Präferenzen keine Grundlage für internalistische Legitimierungsrekonstruktionen bieten können, wenn deren Genese von problematischen Merkmalen des infrage stehenden politischen Systems abhängig ist. In diesem Kontext wird zwischen verdeckter und unverdeckter Abhängigkeit unterschieden. Als jeweils passendes Werkzeug zur kritischen Reflexion diskutiert der Artikel Ideologiekritik und die Methode der Elizitation. Abschließend wird aufgezeigt, dass eine modifizierte Version von Landemores Open Democracy Paradigma eine Lösung für die normative Ambiguität (differierende Bereitschaft der Bürger zur Partizipation) in internalistischen Legitimitätsrekonstruktionen darstellen kann, da sie gleichermaßen Raum für partizipative und nicht-partizipative Präferenzen bietet.

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1. Introduction

On the Danish broadcast *Deadline*, host Niels Krause Kjær tellingly delivered the following opening remarks on the recent regional elections in France: “The winner was, once again, the sofa” (our translation, 27.06.2021: 00:01:10). This sentiment was echoed in an opinion piece by James McAuley (2021) in *The Washington Post*: “There were no real winners in France’s regional elections, only losers. If anything, the main force that prevailed in the vote, which concluded its second round on Sunday, was apathy.” The elections saw a first round with a 39 percent turnout followed by a second one where turnout was a staggeringly low 33 percent. Generally, political apathy is on the rise in many democracies. Citizens *en masse* express a disinterest towards politics, and many do not even bother to cast their votes. In response to this reality, democratic theorizing appears stuck between two opposing theoretical impulses that we refer to as participatory approaches and unmediated realism. On the one hand, some democratic theorists continue to posit public mass participation as a requirement for legitimate governance without paying due regard to the fact that many citizens seemingly would prefer to not participate. On the other hand, some political scientists argue that widespread non-participatory attitudes warrant the conclusion that legitimacy is to be realized in a non-participatory (so-called ‘stealth’) form of democracy without incorporating intermediate reflection on the potentially problematic reasons upon which these attitudes are based.¹

In this article, we argue that reflective realism offers a different and more plausible methodological path that takes non-participatory attitudes and beliefs seriously as *potential* candidates for legitimacy while simultaneously offering tools through which a critical distance on these beliefs and attitudes can be obtained.² Whereas the former pillar (taking non-participatory attitudes seriously) derives from a commitment to a bottom-up conception of legitimacy, the latter (offering tools) points to the critical impetus that informs the reflective realism we propose. Specifically, we single out two scenarios in which non-participatory attitudes and their associated beliefs should be questioned as reliable indicators of legitimacy – namely when they are conditional on either a lack of participatory avenues or corruption in the political system. In this context, we distinguish between cases in which this conditionality is known to subjects and cases in which it is unknown and show how they call for two distinct types of critical engagement, both of which underpin the reflective realist methodology as defining features. Whereas the latter scenario (unknown conditionality) calls for a form of ideology critique that has received much attention in the literature on political realism, the former (known conditionality) necessitates a more modest and less theorized reflective approach that we refer to as a method of elicitation.

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