# ◀ INTERVIEW ▶

# The Politics of Presence Revisited

## Anne Phillips and Hans Asenbaum

**Abstract:** Almost three decades after its first publication, Anne Phillips reflects on the *Politics of Presence* in the context of contemporary developments from #MeToo to Black Lives Matter. Granting the importance of a contingent and intersectional understanding of presence, she reemphasizes the necessity of descriptive representation. Phillips reflects on questions of anonymity, essentialism, the multiple self, unconditional equality, and the current role of feminist research in democratic theory. She also opens perspectives toward mending the divide between a politics of recognition and a politics of distribution.

**Keywords:** politics of presence, identity politics, descriptive representation, equality, feminist democratic theory

**Hans Asenbaum:** Your work, and in particular your concept of the politics of presence, has a profound and lasting impact on democratic theory. For marginalized bodies, the simple act of being there, of being perceptible by others "matters because of … what it conveys to us about who does and who does not count as a full member of society" (Phillips 2012: 517). This concept emerged out of feminist debates in the 1990s, focusing, in particular, on female experiences of being excluded and undermined in the public sphere. Today, new movements such as Black Lives Matter claim presence in the public sphere. To what extent do you see your original concept of the politics of presence reflected in current political action? Has the practice of the politics of presence changed since you developed this concept?

**Anne Phillips:** My initial arguments about the politics of presence came, as you note, out of feminist politics. Feminists were challenging the stark

overrepresentation of men in politics, and pursuing versions of quota systems that would begin to even things up. They were being resisted in these efforts by those who either thought it *should* not matter whether our political representatives were male or female (that is, thought it *did* not matter that they were overwhelmingly male) or who took the focus on embodied experience as anti-political, as meaning that "any woman would do." I wanted both to provide a strong defense of the politics of presence, and to counter the suggestion that adopting this meant abandoning the politics of competing ideas. These two are not exclusive alternatives.

It was clear to me at the time that if the arguments I was making worked as regards to gender, they must also apply to other forms of underrepresentation; and when I published *The Politics of Presence* in 1995, I included chapters on quotas for women, race-conscious districting in the [United States] (my arguments there very much influenced by the work of Lani Guinier), and the inclusion of minority cultural or linguistic groups in Canada. I also tried, though not in my view very successfully, to address the underrepresentation of people from working-class backgrounds. I treated these as parallel concerns, but also as separate, and that's one big change since then. Theoretically, we are now far more alert to the intersection between different forms of disadvantage, oppression, and exclusion, as well as to the tensions between these, and if I were writing *The Politics of Presence* today, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't put gender in one chapter, race in another, multiculturalism in yet another, and so on.

Politically, moreover, we now see questions of embodied presence featuring across multiple political domains, far broader than the questions about representation in national legislatures that were the starting point for my own work. It is hard to organize a conference or workshop or seminar series these days, for example, without at least thinking about the diversity of voices represented, and thinking of this not only in terms of competing views but contrasting experiences. Leadership roles outside politics, in corporations, on public bodies, but also in campaign organizations, are increasingly interrogated for their (mostly under)representation as regards gender or race; and while a lot of this feels like box ticking, it does still contribute to change. What remains depressingly the same is that we are still having to deal with people who say it shouldn't matter whether you are male or female, Black or white, even when it so patently does. And we are still having to deal with people who think the preoccupation with the harms of gender or race is a distraction from the "real" issues of the day.

**Asenbaum:** The politics of presence, as you and other feminist democratic theorists have extensively discussed, is accompanied by what Iris

Marion Young called the "dilemma of difference" (1989: 268). The active expression of marginalized identities entails essentializing tendencies. In your words: "The irony, as many feminists and critical race theorists acknowledge, is that movements to combat the hierarchical structures that generate and sustain these stereotypes often invoke a collectivity that itself seems to presume a unified, perhaps essentialised, group" (Phillips 2010: 54–55). How can the politics of presence grapple with this conundrum? When you think about movements such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter, how have they navigated the line between essentialism and agentic self-expression?

**Phillips:** I think one grapples with this by recognizing it and not being intimidated by it. I have always particularly liked Joan Wallach Scott's (1996) formulation of the problem. She describes it as the "constitutive paradox" of feminism that we must simultaneously refuse and accept sexual difference, that we campaign for an end to exclusions and regulations by gender but in doing so seem to call back into existence the very difference we are rejecting. Feminism seeks to disrupt the power of categories like male and female, men and women; it looks to a world in which people are no longer defined and confined by these, a world in which these notions lose much of their current meaning; but feminism mobilizes – and to my mind *has to* mobilize – through notions of "women" and "men" in order to identify and name the power structures. It helps, in this instance, that neither of these notions has much stability as a general or essentialized category. We can all of us indulge on occasion in grand generalizations about "women" and "men" – the men who can never perform two tasks at once, the women who always bring the conversation back to gossip – but in truth we know so many different kinds of women and men that the generalization fails almost as soon as it is uttered.

Or if it doesn't, it should. I have said that feminism cannot but mobilize through notions of "women" and "men" in order to name and challenge the power structures, but that doesn't mean endorsing either the generalizations about how "women" and "men" behave, or the biologically based notions of what it is to be a woman and what it is to be a man. I find it deeply troubling that in the current arguments about the rights of those transitioning from one gender identity to another, some feminists seem to be repudiating all that we have learned about the construction of gendered identities, reasserting anatomical sex as the only significant marker, and not something we can change. Whatever happened to Simone de Beauvoir's ([1949] 1953) famous assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"? It used to be something endorsed by feminists of all persuasions.

That said, I do still think the risks of essentialism are overplayed, including for #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. I worry sometimes that #MeToo can encourage an overly generalized image of predatory, never-to-be-trusted, men, and vulnerable, always-to-be-trusted, women, but I take that as a somewhat different issue. It's less about the essentializing risks in mobilizing marginalized identities, and more about the difficulties in recognizing and dealing with complexity, and what I see — you may differ! — as the further heightening of those difficulties when we relate through anonymous online exchanges.

With Black Lives Matter, there *was* an attempt to represent the movement as claiming something special about black lives: the meretricious All Lives Matter, which sought to rebuke the seeming favoritism of caring exclusively for Black lives by insisting that *all* lives ought to matter, regardless of race. That rebuke, of course, only makes sense if one imagines that Black and white are already treated equally by the police and legal system, which was so evidently not the case. I take it as the point of Black Lives Matter that all lives *should* matter but that at the moment they do not. It is not a claim about Black people being essentially different, but about the differential treatment of Black and white Americans by police departments and law courts, and the need to mobilize through racialized categories in order to challenge that.

**Asenbaum:** The contributions to this special issue conceptualize the democratic subject as contingent, inherently multiple, and fluid and explore identity change in democratic participation. In my recent book, I refer to such self-transformative strategies as *The Politics of Becoming* (Asenbaum 2023). My core argument is that current conceptions of democracy confine us. They limit our freedom of self-expression by requiring us to represent others and express only one aspect of who we are. Since our identities are intersectional and internally diverse, a more radical democratic politics should afford the freedom to express this inner multiplicity. This argument, of course, also poses a problem to democracy, which relies on accountability. If we perform different versions of our self, we can hardly be held to account or represent others. In your opinion, what role should becoming and identity change play in democracy? How can we express our inner multiplicity without giving up on democratic accountability?

**Phillips:** I agree that we need to think of the democratic subject in ways that can express rather than deny multiplicity. I also agree — though you are too polite to say it so bluntly — that my early writings on the politics of presence inclined toward somewhat more stable understandings of identity and didn't sufficiently engage with what we now theorize as

intersectionality, nor in any depth with identity change. But as regards representation in the specific sense of representation in national and local decision-making bodies, then we are, I think, talking about a requirement "to represent others," including quite possibly a requirement to restrict some of our freedoms of self-expression so as to get on with the job.

This may sound as if I am backtracking on the very argument for a politics of presence, which invokes, among other things, the many positive ways in which representatives contribute through their embodied knowledge and experience, and rejects a narrower understanding of representation that would limit them to expressing and defending only ideas already endorsed by their political party or group. I see it as positive that representatives do so often take on the task of speaking from their own experience for currently overlooked constituencies, and are not paralyzed by the accusation that no one elected them to do this. But if they *are* representatives — and I don't think you are imagining a democracy that eliminates all forms of representation? — then whatever else they may bring to the discussion, they do still have a responsibility to develop and defend (some) of the party political ideas on the basis of which they were elected. They can't, that is, be totally fluid, for there may well be a point at which accountability to those who trusted them with the role of representative means holding back on concerns that have since become all-important to them. I don't have anything very specific in mind here. I just want to defend the principle that representation *is* representation of others, and that this sets certain limits.

**Asenbaum:** In *The Politics of Becoming* I explore anonymity, both online and offline, as a potential practical strategy that allows us to express our inner multiplicity. You have rightly expressed reservations about anonymity, since it may undermine a politics of presence. In reference to the example of the blind selection of musicians by auditioning behind a curtain, you argue: "Women should *not* have to present themselves as disembodied abstractions — from behind a curtain that conceals their bodily peculiarities — in order to claim their equal status in the world. Those with dark skins should *not* have to insist on us all being the same 'under the skin'" (Phillips 2015: 36). I agree with and cherish this argument. What role, then, can and should anonymity play in democracy? Does it have a place in radical democratic politics?

**Phillips:** Anonymity certainly has an important democratic role as regards voting. I know there are republican theorists who would query even this, arguing that we should be willing to stand up for our ideas in public, not hide behind a secret ballot, but this strikes me as a rather

reckless denial of current power structures. It is frustrating when people who failed to speak out in public then silently vote down one's favored ideas, but the failure to speak out is itself often an anticipatory response to bullying and intimidation, and anonymity can help here. The fact that we *shouldn't* have to speak or vote from behind a curtain, *shouldn't* have to conceal either our identities or our views, doesn't mean that we can simply eliminate the protective curtain in all circumstances.

So the question, as I see it, is not for or against anonymity, but when can anonymity contribute to radical democratic politics and when is it a problem? I don't have very well worked-out answers to this, but online, as we know, anonymity has enabled a kind of personal viciousness people would (one hopes!) be less likely to engage in face-to-face, and relieves them from the responsibility to provide evidence for their claims. Both these have serious political downsides: they help promote an anti-politics that reduces debate to threats of violence and personal insult, and they contribute to the fact-free polemics that are a particularly troubling feature of the contemporary world.

I do take the more positive points you have made in your own writing about anonymity also enabling people to explore aspects of their identities they are currently unsure about, or access information they hardly dare admit to wanting (Asenbaum 2018); and in so far as these strengthen people's confidence about acting in the world, they play a positive role in strengthening democratic politics. It is also clear that in conditions of state repression, the anonymity of online interaction plays a crucial organizing role. But ultimately, democracy needs people to act (I'm using this in a somewhat Arendtian sense), so there is a point where the anonymity has to come to an end.

**Asenbaum:** Today, we are living in an increasingly digitized world where democratic participation takes place in hybrid online and offline spaces. Digital technologies and social media also affect how presence is articulated. By offering unprecedented possibilities for exploring different versions of ourselves, they enable us to appear differently in different spaces and to actively curate the way we want to appear. Social media scholars now use presence as a verb, and speak about "presencing" as a means to construct oneself in online worlds (Couldry 2012). How does this possibility of multiple, simultaneous versions of the self, or the notion of the self as a project, relate to the politics of presence? In what sense may digital presence renew, alter, or augment the politics of presence?

**Phillips:** I'm the worst possible person to answer this question! My expertise with digital technologies is limited and my experience of social media

virtually nonexistent, and despite all the talk of presence, I mainly work within the paradigm of the written word. So just a few banal thoughts.

We now have the capacity to "meet" with people across continents, seeing them as well as hearing them; and the huge explosion in Zoom meetings and hybrid interactions will, I think, be one of the lasting legacies of the COVID years. This has to be good for politics. It enables us to link up with people across the globe, without the high resource cost of flying to multiple conferences (though incurring other costs through the carbon emissions of data storage), and the immediacy of it helps dissolve more parochial boundaries.

But the relentless exposure to one's own face has been a highly distracting feature of these interactions, and it is notable how many people now choose to switch off their videos during a Zoom meeting, leaving only their voice and name. This isn't so much curating how we want to appear as choosing to disappear. There *is* a lot of curation going on, not so much on Zoom but on platforms like Instagram, but how positive is this? Is it enabling people to explore different aspects of themselves, as in your more positive reading of developments, or is it closing down difference in the pursuit of a homogenized standard of beauty, and unrealistic representations of having a wonderful time? There is some evidence that this is not exactly helping as regards mental health, and that it can limit, not expand, the capacity of particularly younger women to be themselves, rather than pursue some illusory notion of who they ought to be.

**Asenbaum:** Both the politics of presence and the politics of becoming focus on marginalized identities and how expression in democratic spaces is governed by a highly skewed structure of valuation. These concepts, then, focus on what Nancy Fraser (1997) calls the politics of recognition. The focus on identity has been challenged by those who argue for a politics of redistribution that concentrates on the unequal allocation of material wealth. In your most recent book, *Unconditional Equals* (Phillips 2021), you pick up and deepen your line of thinking developed in your earlier *Which Equality Matters?* (Phillips 1999) and argue that the binary between recognition and redistribution needs to be challenged. We should not think about overcoming inequality in binary and teleological terms, in which equality of recognition is followed by equality of distribution. Yet, it appears to me, you still differentiate between the two, for example, when you argue, "Living in a world of stark economic inequalities erodes our ability to see others as people like ourselves, as human being equally worthy of respect" (2021: 13). Here, unequal distribution leads to unequal recognition. Should we differentiate between inequalities of distribution and recognition? If so, how do the two relate to each other?

**Phillips:** You are right: I do want to challenge the either/or binaries that set up harms of recognition as separable from those of distribution, or try to allocate political movements to either a recognition camp or a redistribution one, either focused on identities or addressing material resources and the "real" world. In fact, it's not just the binaries I want to query, for I have a problem with almost all the terms I myself used in that sentence. I don't much like "recognition," which suggests a preexisting "thing" like human dignity or human worth that has been there all the time and that we finally come to notice; I retain enough of my earlier Marxism to think it a mistake to focus on distribution as separate from production; I don't find the notion of identity politics especially illuminating; and I definitely don't like the suggestion that there is a "real" world of material resources to be contrasted with the supposedly less important "cultural." So yes, challenge the binaries, but also, as you note, I allow myself some differentiation in grappling with why we find it so hard to deliver on the supposed commitment to human equality.

My starting point in *Unconditional Equals* is the entirely misleading claim about the modern world being characterized by a belief in human equality, not, that is, by any commitment to material equality, but at least by a belief that we are all, in some fundamental sense, of equal worth. This fantasy is widely propagated by political philosophers, and frequently deployed by politicians as a way of marking the superiority of modernity or the West. But it is *so* far from reality. Mobilizations against racism, misogyny, or homophobia have helped make the fantasy more real in some dimensions, but these advances are themselves fragile and reversible, and even when successful, they come up against the free market ideologies and escalating inequalities between rich and poor that have been especially marked features of the Anglo world. I don't know how to speak about this without drawing attention to the destruction of a common world, and the way "material" (what other word can I use?) inequalities seem to provoke and validate contempt for the poor.

**Asenbaum:** As I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation, democratic theory has greatly benefitted from feminist interventions in the 1990s. Authors such as yourself, Iris Marion Young, and Jane Mansbridge have changed the landscape of democratic theory. Presence, inclusion, and a sensitivity to identity-based marginalization have become a core concern of democratic thought. In your earlier work, you argued that feminism and democracy "have much in common for both deal in notions of equality and both oppose arbitrary power" (Phillips 1991: 1). Which place do you see for feminist thought in democratic theory today? Is this debate done and dusted or should it be carried forward?

**Phillips:** It seems to me that nothing is ever done and dusted, that every advance is followed by reversal, and that each generation has to refight the battles a previous generation might have thought more or less settled. This is clearly the case as regards sensitivity to identity-based marginalization, the importance of which is much contested in an era of "culture wars" and attacks on so-called wokeness.

But as regards the more theoretical question, the role of feminist thought in contemporary democratic theory, one difference is that feminist interventions are now more likely to be what I would describe as feminist-inspired than focusing exclusively on power relations between women and men. This was in fact always the case in the work of Iris Young and Jane Mansbridge, who always addressed multiple forms of exclusion, never just gender-based ones, but that feature of their work is now more widely shared. However — and here we see the reversals that accompany the advances — the broadening of feminist work sometimes seems to provide an opportunity to nonfeminist theorists to get back to business as usual, and no longer bother too much to address questions of gender power. It still amazes me how little theorists of democracy read of feminist or gender theory, and how little sustained engagement there has been even now that feminist work is more widely accepted as a legitimate area of expertise. I am not in a hugely optimistic mood about the direction of development in contemporary democracies, nor about the successful transformation of democratic theory. I do feel we are at a moment of crisis, and like all crises it could lead to a worsening of the world we currently live in. But it could also usher in a new era, including the repudiation of those decades of neoliberalism that have done so much to block movements for equality, and the acceptance, at last, that marginalization and exclusion are themselves central components of inequality.

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