Parliaments and the Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

Parliaments in Europe are the place where the representatives of citizens debate. They express the collective will through delegation and mandate. According to the origin of the word, used in England since the thirteenth century, parliaments are places for speaking, as well as the space for communication organized as much for internal use as for external interaction. The introduction of technologies (from the press to the radio and television) transformed the interaction between members of parliament and their constituents.

Lieutenant colonel Tejero on the rostrum at the Congress of Deputies, during the attempted coup d'État of February 23, 1981. Manuel Pérez Barriopedro, World Press Photo of the year 1981.

Parliaments in Europe are the place for debate among members of parliament who represent the governed, which since the establishment of parliamentary democracy includes all citizens.   With the gradual establishment of parliamentary systems, the function of these assemblies changed, transitioning from one of aristocrats and the occasional bourgeois counselling the Sovereign until the end of the eighteenth century, to an expression of the collective will by way of delegation and mandate. During the nineteenth century, parliaments asserted themselves as centres of power in Europe, with disparities according to region or state. A parliamentary culture formed within this common experience. From a long process of transfer, with the British or French system as starting point, emerged a unified model of practice that became common to modern-day European states.

According to the origin of the word, used in England since the thirteenth century, parliaments are in essence places for speaking, spaces for communication organized as much for internal use as for external interaction. The successive introduction of technologies, such as stenography, the typewriter, photography, television and later digital technology, has transformed how elected representatives and those they represent interact. Nevertheless, the critical view of citizens toward their representatives is not as recent a phenomenon as current critiques suggest.

Since the nineteenth century, the parliaments—or more precisely the lower chambers—of European states have been the physical and institutional space for communicating with the nation. Far from amounting simply to a message from a sender to a recipient, communication is a dynamic process. Neither simply formal nor ornamental, it is an interaction that creates a social reality. Parliaments, in this regard, are the place of institutionalized political debate. They draw their legitimacy from those they represent, and ensure the symbolic presence of those absent. Thus parliament has both an instrumental function (it must obtain a result), and a symbolic one (it gives meaning to politics), by acting in the name of the society whose concerns and needs it is supposed to reflect.

Aside from law-making, parliamentary work includes interaction among representatives, who are equals in the assembly room. Their disagreement was institutionalized by the first rules of the English Parliament around 1530, in the Standing Orders of 1678, and then with the Constituent Assembly during the French Revolution. After having opposed parliament and government during the nineteenth century, the confrontation today is between the majority and the opposition within parliament. The two main parties of the nation sit opposite one another in the British House of Commons.

The conflict takes the form of deliberation and eloquence. Since the nineteenth century, orators have served as the voice and face of parliament, a place governed by conventions and rituals, in other words by series of formalized acts. This ritualized staging establishes internal community as much as it does an external one with society.

The nature of parliament involves representation, in both senses of the word. It includes both speaking "in the name of" through delegation of power, as well as the dramatization of a function within an institutional system (voting on the budget, voting on laws, and, depending on the constitution, having more or less real control over government). Beginning with the nineteenth century, the system of representation combined with the principle of democracy. Elections held by way of parties made it an increasingly open space, allowing for questioning and disagreement between elected representatives and their constituents. This fundamental situation of conflict involved prerogatives: the freedom of the Member of Parliament in the exercise of his or her office, and the right to demonstrate and protest for those represented.

The distinctive nature of the space for public debate was materialized throughout Europe in the form of a building. The architectural style and the organization in different sub-spaces (plenary room, speaker's platform, public gallery) are symbolic, as is the semi-circular shape. Certain old democracies such as France or England took up monarchical codes, and then created their own—sometimes republican—narrative codes, such as the symbolism of the session opening by the President of the French National Assembly. Conversely, federal Germany opted for modesty after 1945 and for transparency and openness. This approach can also be found in the parliamentary architecture of the European Union (European Council, European Parliament in Strasbourg and in Brussels).

Among the conventions protecting the political space from recourse to physical violence is eloquence, the art of mastering language, illustrated under the Third Republic in France. In the parliaments of multilingual states, language was a major power issue before the First World War. As in the example of Czech in Bohemia and Moravia, as well as other languages of the Hapsburg Empire, the struggle against the dominant language imposed on parliament expressed refusal of the repression of distinctive characteristics, and the affirmation of minorities.

It was in France, beginning with the revolution, that the presence of the public as a controlling authority over

parliament was established. Public sessions increased the number of those involved, and brought the parliamentary elite out of its self-referential system by promoting the career of orators combining gesture and rhetoric. Contrary to this evolution, England and the German states kept proceedings behind closed doors until the Revolution of 1848, before gradually turning away from the tradition of confidential debates, while preserving the notion of a protected zone prohibiting intrusions.

Despite the increasing public presence within the assembly room, the parliaments of Europe adopted an indirect form of communication, one that was symbolic and theatrical, and that received media attention in particular. In two centuries, the role of the media has become essential in their external communication. Long before television made it possible to view the discussions from a distance, the publication of debate reports, press articles and caricatures (such as those by Honoré Daumier in *Le Charivari* in 1848-1850) provided second-hand information. Seeing themselves as intermediaries, even as advocates for the collective will, the media encouraged interactions between members of parliament and journalists, linked by reciprocal observation. These exchanges with media, and not public, opinion created a distinctive triangular relation between parliament, opinion and the media. Several countries resisted the entry of the media in parliament: in Great Britain, press access to the Commons was refused until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and television was forbidden until 1989. Since the mid-twentieth century, as spaces for communication outside of parliament multiplied (interviews, Federal press conferences in Germany, talk shows), media has taken on a hypertrophic role in parliaments.

Yet well before twenty-first century media existed, diverse forms of protest or blockage took the stage in parliaments. The same was true for the practice of obstruction, notably that of the Irish at Parliament in London, or of minorities in Vienna around 1900. The parliamentary history of a number of European countries was interrupted during the twentieth century by the establishment of authoritarian or communist regimes. It was precisely within parliament that the enemies of parliamentarianism chose to take centre stage, as was the case when 107 members of parliament from the Nazi party NSDAP entered the Reichstag in uniform on October 13, 1930, or during the failed military coup by Colonel Tejero in the Cortes in Madrid on February 23, 1981.

The history of parliaments in Europe is characterized by the continuing wish to communicate, with the appearance of new technologies only changing the prism through which politics were viewed. The most recent critiques of parliaments, as going above the heads of their constituents in decision-making, or reducing themselves to a theatre with no real decision-making power, go hand in hand with this history since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

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