Politics beyond words
Ethnography of political institutions

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The politics of words

Democratic politics is envisioned primarily as a politics of words. Nothing illustrates this better than the etymology of the term ‘parliament’, which comes from the Old French ‘parlement’ and refers to speaking or talk. Yet, as the imposing parliament buildings all over the world show, the politics of words is highly dependent upon a complex, well-aligned infrastructure that involves bodies, texts, symbolic objects and many other entities. Using the Hungarian parliament as a specific case, this chapter shows how ethnography might help in tracing and describing such alignments in practice, pointing at what could be called a ‘politics beyond words’. Before doing that, however, a short historical detour is necessary. Ethnography as a research method comes from anthropology, and its development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was strongly intertwined with the internal and external colonisation projects of Europe and North America. Knowing indigenous people, their languages, rituals and relations was a way of managing difference between ‘their’ culture and ‘ours’ – using the latter as a constant point of reference. Words played an important role in this undertaking in at least two ways: they were used to record cultural differences (see Malinowski 1922 on participant-observation), and they helped to make sense of cultures as if they were texts waiting to be read, compared and analysed by a competent reader (see Geertz 1977 on the interpretation of cultures).

After the Second World War, with many colonial territories becoming independent states, the artificial distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ was becoming untenable. While many indigenous groups were eager to develop understandings of their own cultures, a number of social and cultural anthropologists in Europe and North America – strongly influenced by poststructuralist theories concerned with the complex relationship between knowledge and power – began to argue for a radical reconceptualisation of ethnography as a mode of carrying out research. Possibly the most important attempt to do so was the Writing Culture workshop, held in Santa Fe in 1984. In his introduction to the edited volume that grew out of the workshop, James Clifford argued that the reconceptualisation of ethnography needed to begin ‘not with participant-observation or with cultural texts (suitable for interpretation), but with writing, the making of texts’ (Clifford & Marcus 1986, p. 2). This required the
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problematisation of such taken-for-granted notions as ‘the object of research’, ‘the fieldsite’, ‘the natives’, ‘the fieldworker’, and ‘the author’.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Writing Culture within cultural anthropology and its impact on several neighbouring disciplines and interdisciplinary fields (Rabinow et al. 2008; Starn 2012). Over recent decades, ethnography has become a popular mode of carrying out research, from medicine through organisation studies and human geography to cultural history. When it comes to the empirical study of politics, ethnographic works have made significant contributions in at least three ways. First, treating politics as a distinct domain of modern life, several scholars have focused on the ethnographic analysis of various political institutions. From a sociological and political scientific point of view, this approach is based on the recognition that certain aspects of the workings of those institutions cannot be fully captured by formal descriptions of political systems – aspects that could collectively be referred to as a political culture (Almond & Verba 1989; see also Auyero et al. 2007; Schatz 2009). The importance of political culture has been elegantly demonstrated, for example, in detailed analyses of the architecture and infrastructure of local councils and national parliaments (Abélès 1991; Crewe 2005, 2015; Gardey 2015), the complex ways in which bureaucracies organise themselves and the world around them (Farrelly 2015; Hull 2012; Riles 2006; Scheffer 2010), the embodied practices of ‘doing politics’ as activists (Graeber 2009) and elected politicians (Muntigl et al. 2000; Wodak 2000, 2011), and the discursive and material tinkering that goes into the constitution of such supranational entities as the European Union (Abélès 1992; Barry 2001; Krzyżanowski & Oberhuber 2007; Wodak 2011; Wodak et al. 2012). What these and other ethnographic analyses of politics as a domain show is that political culture is not simply an ‘add-on’ to political systems. Quite the contrary: our ways of thinking about systems and system-ness should be seen as the result of historically and culturally specific developments.

The second way in which ethnographic works have contributed to ongoing debates in political science and political sociology is concerned less with politics as a domain than with political processes – or, to put it differently, processes through which things become political. The main sources of inspiration in this regard are Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Foucauldian governmentality studies, which have both been concerned with the political effects of such seemingly apolitical practices as technological innovation (Suchman 2006), scientific knowledge production (Knorr-Cetina 1981, 1999; Latour 1987; Latour & Woolgar 1986; Law 1994; Lynch 1997), the performance of market economies (Callon et al. 2007; Mackenzie et al. 2007), the running of evaluations and audits (Power 1997; Strathern 2000), the organisation of healthcare (Mol 2002; Mol et al. 2010) and education (Sørensen 2011; Verran 2001), and the conduct of social and personal life (Rose 2007; Rose & Miller 2008). These and similar practices participate in politics precisely by denying their being political. Studying them ethnographically does not only show how sciences, technologies, economies, and so on work, but also provides new possibilities to articulate how they could work differently.

This points at the third way in which ethnographic works have engaged with politics, which – following the German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin (1969) – could be called the politics of storytelling. As several ethnographers working with Benjamin’s concepts and style of thought have convincingly argued, ethnographic accounts are difficult to locate on a single plane, being defined by both facts and fictions (Raffles 2010; Shelton 2007, 2013; Stewart 2007; Stone 2012; Taussig 2006). As stories, their main
aim is not necessarily to offer explanations of various phenomena (which would contribute to the disenchantment of the world), but to highlight the cracks on the apparently smooth glass and steel surfaces of modern life (and thereby engage in an act of re-enchantment). Benjamin himself tried to put this understanding of storytelling to use in the realm of consumer capitalism (see Benjamin 1999). What would such an approach look like in the realm of democratic politics?

Taking inspiration from the three above-mentioned sets of sources, the main aim of this chapter is to make ethnography more visible and accessible for social scientists interested in politics – not by offering a how-to manual, but by indicating in what ways an ethnographic approach can transform our understanding of what politics is. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Budapest between 2008 and 2010, I will use the Hungarian parliament building as a methodological device to analyse what could be called ‘politics beyond words’. The fieldwork itself consisted of several research visits, which could also be seen as distinct stages of my ethnography (see Krzyżanowski 2011, p. 287). The first visit involved a recontextualisation of my research object, which I had known well as a Hungarian citizen, but which I had to learn to see anew in light of my research interest and the available literature. The second, third and fourth visits were dedicated to the collection of a wide range of empirical materials, a selection of which will appear in this chapter, either as fieldnotes (indented) or as vignettes. These will be used, not as illustrations of politics in general, but as empirical arguments that reflect the situated and inherently material character of political practices. The fifth and final visit was an attempt to relate my findings to a constantly changing scientific and political discourse about the crisis of democracy in Hungary – I return to this problem in the last section of this chapter.

The text is structured as follows. After a brief introduction of the parliament building as the main stage of Hungarian democracy, I will first discuss the role of politicians (and their bodies) in ever-changing staging processes. I will then switch focus to the roles different kinds of texts and text-producing devices play in the delineation of political activities from other, largely technical procedures. While this delineation is supposed to secure the ongoing operation of the parliament as a legislative machine, in the subsequent section, I will use the example of the Holy Crown of Hungary to show how the parliament as a place and an institution is caught up in politics that works as much on the level of symbols as on the level of laws. Finally, I will reflect on the politics of ethnographic stories, that is, their potential to perform critique within a democratic setting.

**Staging politics**

The Hungarian parliament building is a large neo-Gothic palace in the centre of Budapest, on the east bank of the Danube, just below Margaret Island. Its construction began in the early 1880s and when completed in 1902, it was the largest – and arguably the most impressive – parliament building in the world. Back then, Hungary was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which means that by today’s standards, the legislature played a rather restricted role in the political system. Still, between the signing of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the focus of politics had gradually shifted from the Royal Palace to the parliament, turning the latter into the iconic site of Hungarian politics (Dányi 2015; Gábor & Verő 2000).

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the main task of the architect of the new parliament building, Imre Steindl, was nothing less than to design a structure that would convey a sense of political stability for many centuries to come. Steindl took the task...
seriously, but the political system fell apart sooner than anyone could imagine, and throughout the twentieth century, there were hardly any periods when the grandiose parliament building in Budapest could function as the true centre of Hungarian politics. As cultural historian András Gerő (2010) has pointed out, in the inter-war period, everyone knew that most decisions were made by Admiral Miklós Horthy, Governor of Hungary, who lived and worked in the Royal Palace, while in the communist period, everyone knew that most decisions were made in the headquarters of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, a few hundred metres north of the parliament.

It is difficult to tell when exactly the bad spell of the twentieth century broke in Hungary. One possible answer is that it happened on 23 October 1989, when – commemorating the outbreak of the 1956 revolution – interim President Mátyás Szűrös used one of the balconies above the main entrance of the parliament building to declare the Third Republic. By then, the communist National Assembly had already modified the Constitution, which clearly stated that in the new republic, all power belonged to the people, who exercised their sovereign rights primarily through elected representatives. Subsequently, the first free general election was held in the spring of 1990, and by the time the first post-communist National Assembly was set up, the parliament building was refigured as the grand theatre of democratic politics.

The theatre metaphor, introduced to sociological analysis by Erving Goffman (1959), is neither accidental nor surprising. As political theorist Yaron Ezrahi (2012) argues, democratic politics has often been described in theatrical terms – as a spectacle where the public is allowed to see and hear all the debates, but it is not supposed to directly participate in them. In fact, one of the hardest challenges for the architects of modern parliament buildings – including Steindl – was to find a good way of accommodating ‘the public’ in the legislature. The visual and acoustic logic dictated that plenary halls – with the exception of the Palace of Westminster in London – take the shape of a semi-circle or a horseshoe, creating a theatrical setting in which political speeches could come across as individual performances on the frontstage of democratic politics (Friedland 2002; Manow 2010).

While the conceptualisation of the parliament as the Goffmanian frontstage of democratic politics, where official performances are put on public display, is certainly not wrong, it suggests that speeches in the legislature are ‘mere performances’ while real politics happens elsewhere, behind the scenes, somewhere in the proverbial smoke-filled rooms that collectively constitute the backstage of democracy. Although it is tempting to portray ethnography as a method that could be used to explain how politics really works, its main contribution to empirical analyses of democracy lies more in its capacity to shift the attention from an ongoing oscillation between front- and backstages to various staging processes (Disch 2008; Latour 1999). Let me illustrate what this might mean by sharing excerpts from my fieldnotes about a series of events I observed in Budapest in April 2008. Incidentally, this was the time that the Alliance of Free Democrats (AFD) decided to quit the governing coalition with the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) once they found out the socialist Prime Minister had decided to sack the liberal Minister of Health for her failed attempt to reform the healthcare system.

**Monday, 7 April 2008**

It is nine o’clock in the morning, and the AFD faction is holding its weekly meeting in the faction office in the Parliament. Members of the faction are preparing for the upcoming plenary sitting. Péter Gusztos, deputy faction leader and party whip, has a
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double role to play. On the one hand, he has to make sure everyone understands and follows the party line; on the other hand, he needs to pursue his own agenda. At some point he asks the faction whether they should make anything of the attack against a ticket office, which happened in Hollán Street in Budapest a few days earlier. According to a conservative newspaper, the employees of the ticket office refused to sell tickets to a concert of a ‘patriotic rock band’. In turn, someone threw a Molotov cocktail at the shop. Péter thinks it would be important to publicly condemn the event, but others in the faction argue the party should focus on the coalition crisis instead. As a compromise, they decide to connect the attack to a larger issue, namely the regulation of hate speech, which has for a very long time been a source of controversy between socialist and liberal politicians. Péter volunteers to give a short speech in the parliament.

Tuesday, 8 April 2008

At nine o’clock in the morning, the debating chamber of the House of Representatives is almost completely empty. Only a handful of MPs are present when the Deputy Speaker opens the sitting, and even they look like they would prefer to be somewhere else. Before the National Assembly begins the general debate of a bill that aims to modify an existing law on financial service provision, each faction has a chance to present an early day motion in five minutes. Péter is the third in line – the title of his speech is ‘On the responsibility of public figures’. In the beginning of his speech, Péter briefly presents two cases, which in his opinion relate to a debate Hungarian politicians have been having for almost two decades about hate speech and political extremism. One of the cases is an implicitly antisemitic opinion piece published in a conservative newspaper, while the other is the arson attack against the ticket office in Hollán Street. Péter was happy to see that, irrespective of party affiliation, several politicians condemned the two events, but strongly disagrees with those who think the solution to the growing problem of political extremism lies in the stricter regulation of hate speech. He shares the view of those who argue that further regulation could only be introduced at the expense of the freedom of speech, which would be unacceptable. He continues:

we, liberals, have said it countless times in this debate that we find it imperative that politicians discuss not only what can and cannot be done in terms of legislation, but also what the responsibility of public figures is in such situations; what room there is for social action for politicians, journalists, intellectuals when they encounter such phenomena.1

Péter finishes his speech by claiming that taking a common stance against the extreme-right in public would be much more productive than any debate in the legislature. The speech ends with weak applause, and a member of the Government stands up to give a short response. He speaks on behalf the Ministry of Education and Culture, but his position is exactly the same as that of the Hungarian Socialist Party: it is the moral duty of the state to protect all victims of hate speech, and he believes the best way to do it is through strict legal regulation. Of course, he adds, no regulation can be successful without the support of civil society, so in that sense, he says he shares Péter’s concern. Once again, there is weak applause in the chamber, and the Deputy Speaker calls on the next MP on the list.
Friday, 11 April 2008

Péter’s speech on Tuesday morning went largely unnoticed, and he would have certainly forgotten about it, had a journalist not called him this morning to ask if he’s planning to attend an anti-fascist demonstration in Hollán Street. Allegedly, it is organised by a civil organisation, and the Prime Minister has already announced that he is going to be there, along with former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who happens to be in Budapest. Péter has not yet heard about the demonstration, but after his speech in the parliament it is clear that he, too, has to be there.

Hollán Street is just ten minutes’ walk from the parliament. Early in the afternoon, the otherwise quiet area is getting visibly tense. Several far-right groups, including Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary), had announced they would hold a counter-demonstration just a few blocks down the road, and given the heated political situation, I would not be surprised if there were clashes between them and the heavily armed police. In the narrow streets around the ticket office, there are a couple of vans belonging to large television channels.

By the time we arrive, there are already two or three thousand people gathered together in the street. Some of them are holding ‘Say no to neo-Nazis’ signs; others are distributing small Hungarian flags. The event is organised by a civil group, so there are no political speeches in the programme, but quite a few socialist and liberal politicians can be spotted in the crowd, along with Gerhard Schröder. Showing up is already a political act, Péter tells me. All of a sudden, a group of counter-demonstrators appears at the far end of the street, but the police successfully block their way to the ticket office. The far-right groups are clearly outnumbered, but this does not prevent them from making a lot of noise to disturb the programme. Apart from this incident, however, everything goes as planned, and around 6pm, the demonstration comes to an end. In the evening, the event is leading news on all television channels.

Monday, 14 April 2008

In the afternoon, the corridors leading to the debating chamber in the House of Representatives are full of people. The lounge near the Secretariat of the Office of the National Assembly is surrounded by television cameras, spotlights and microphone stands. In accordance with the faction’s decision, today, Péter is going to make another speech in the parliament related to hate-speech regulation. He enters the debating chamber, occupies his seat in the middle of the horseshoe and waits for his turn. When the Speaker announces the title of his speech – ‘Hungarians against neo-Nazis’ – Péter stands up and begins to address the plenum. In the introduction, he briefly summarises what had happened at the ticket office in Hollán Street, and calls last week’s demonstration the victory of freedom and democracy. He then says:

we, liberals, have argued countless times that no hate speech regulation can be as effective as what we saw on last Friday. […]

Extremist groups exist everywhere, neo-Nazis appear in almost all European countries, and let me tell you, antisemitic articles are published outside the borders of Hungary, too – this is not the question. The question is how a country responds to such phenomena. […]
Last week Hungary, this tolerant, inclusive, freedom-loving and freedom-protecting country, knew what needed to be done. What needed to be done and how it needed to be done. […]

In the future, in similar situations – and let us not have any illusions, unfortunately, there will be many similar situations – we have to demonstrate ourselves in a similar way (The Speaker indicates that time is up.), we have to demonstrate the strength of a courageous and inclusive Hungary.2

Parts of Péter’s speech sound very similar to the one he gave in parliament on last Tuesday, except then, the debating chamber was practically empty. Once again, he connects the arson attack to the larger issue of hate-speech regulation and emphasises the importance of social action in the face of political extremism. However, there is a subtle, but all-the-more-important difference between the two speeches: whereas last week by ‘liberals’ Péter meant a small group of invisible politicians who had some disagreement with their socialist partners, now he uses the term to denote those freedom-loving and freedom-protecting Hungarians who had the courage to attend the Hollán Street demonstration. To be sure, they might not have all been liberal voters, but Péter implies they were liberal people, whose interests in the National Assembly are best represented by the Alliance of Free Democrats.

(Dányi fieldnotes 2008)

There is nothing particular about this series of events, recorded in my fieldnotes – Péter Gusztos’s speeches in parliament had no important implications in the midst of the coalition crisis, and the demonstration after the arson attack certainly did not stop the far right from gaining more ground in Hungary. My purpose for recounting this series of events, however, was neither to evaluate politicians’ frontstage performances, nor to provide glimpses into the backstage of parliamentary politics. Rather, my aim was to show how politicians are constantly involved in staging processes that connect party meetings, plenary sessions, street demonstrations, media studios and other locations in inventive ways. What such a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) allows us to see is how diverse locations collectively constitute a political market of parties and their programmes, the value of which are determined at regularly held elections.

The political and the technical in the legislative process

Regularly held elections indicate that, in some sense, parliamentary democracy is an inherently unstable system: governments change, politicians come and go, parties appear and disappear all the time. What grants this political system its stability? In this section, drawing on the insights of institutional ethnography (Holmes 2013; Hull 2012; Latour 2010; Riles 2006; Scheffer 2010; Suchman 2006), I argue that texts play a crucial stabilising role in at least three distinct ways.

First, it is possible to think of the legislation process as a complex collective work on texts. Proposals for creating new laws or for modifying existing ones – so-called bills – are typically documents that need to be formatted in a particular way to be recognised by parliament’s bureaucratic machinery (see the chapter by Ilie in this book, p. 309). In Hungary, bills can only come from four specific entities: the President, the government, standing committees and individual MPs. They need to be addressed to the Speaker, and
have to contain the title and the text of the proposed law, a justification for its submission, and a brief description of its anticipated economic effects and social implications. The Department of File Registry checks whether the nearly two-hundred bills that are submitted each year meet the formal criteria. All proposals begin their parliamentary life in this department, where – if everything goes well – they get a sticker with a bar code, and within half an hour, their scanned version appears on the legislature’s intranet. A copy of the paper version is then forwarded to the Speaker, whose responsibility is to decide whether bills are, indeed, suitable for debate. If they are, the Speaker adds them to the National Assembly’s tentative schedule, which is in effect a detailed timetable that determines when each bill should be debated by the National Assembly, for how long and in what order.

The debates typically take place in the debating chamber of the parliament, and are organised into two rounds. The first round is about the general principles of a bill and the text of the proposed law. The core of the debate consists of speeches by principal speakers from each party faction. It is then the individual MPs’ turn to comment on the bill, alternating between the government and the opposition. All participants have a second chance to speak, and in the end, the sponsor is allowed to respond to the debate as a whole. Once the first round is over, the National Assembly decides whether the bill is ready for the second round, which focuses exclusively on various amendments submitted by the MPs and the relevant standing committees. This often appears to be an endless process, but at some point, even the longest disputes come to an end, and then the speaker convenes the National Assembly to decide the fate of the proposed law.

Most decisions need a simple majority, but the modification of some laws, for example, the amendment of the Constitution, requires a qualified majority. Similar to the debate, the vote on a bill happens in two rounds, but in a reverse order: first the National Assembly decides upon all amendments, and then upon the proposed law as a whole. Once the National Assembly passes a law, the final version of the text is sent to the Speaker, who signs to certify that everything during the legislative process went according to the rules and procedures established in the Standing Orders, and forwards it to the President, who in turn examines the content of the new law and decides whether it is in harmony with the general principles of the Constitution. If it is, the new law is promulgated in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Hungary.

The Speaker’s and President’s signatures on all laws passed by the National Assembly indicate a second way in which texts play a stabilising role in a parliamentary democracy. The two signatures point at two meta-documents – the Standing Orders and the Constitution – that together determine the rules of parliament’s operation, down to such minute details as the length of speeches, and by doing so perform an important distinction between the political and the technical. The former is figured as a series of debates about well-defined objects between the government and the opposition, which end with clear decisions made by the National Assembly, while the latter denotes all the bureaucratic work that is required to ensure that all bills that enter parliament are treated equally, efficiently and transparently.

Transparency indicates a third way in which texts play a central role in the legislative process. In the previous section (p. 294) I could quote excerpts by Péter Gusztos only because his speeches, along with all the other speeches made by all the other MPs in the Hungarian legislature, are publicly accessible. The transcripts of parliamentary speeches are prepared by the National Assembly’s stenographers, who – as specified by Imre Steindl back in the early 1880s – sit right in the centre of the debating chamber, between the rostrum and the desks of the members of the government. Working in ten-minute shifts, their task is to produce faithful records of parliamentary debates. To be able to do so, they need to take
minutes, not only of the speeches (which is difficult enough, since their hands have to move as fast as the politicians’ mouths – see also Gardey 2015), but also every declaration and interruption, as well as any loud expression of approval or disapproval. Once their shift is over, stenographers leave the debating chamber through a door under the rostrum and rush into their office in the mezzanine to turn their notes into typewritten text. After several rounds of corrections and revisions, their texts are certified by the notaries and within three days, the official transcript is uploaded to the parliament’s website. Within a week, the formatted transcript appears in print in the *Official Journal of the House of Representatives.* This, however, is not the end of the texts’ journey: on the internet, in the archives, and in the parliament’s library, the traces of previous debates constitute the parliament’s institutional memory (Bowker 2008) that reaches back to the mid nineteenth century, forming and informing future debates and inquiries.

**The problem of dis/continuity**

The composition of the parliament might constantly change, but thanks to an artificial distinction between the technical and the political the legislature can operate in an eternal present, in which all issues concerning the political community can be dealt with through a standardised legislative procedure. But what about issues that concern the composition of a political community itself? Drawing on the works of Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida, in political theory, this question is usually referred to as ‘the problem of founding a republic’ (Honig 1991). In a constitutional sense, the Third Republic of Hungary was born on 23 October 1989, but it was the last communist parliament that had modified the Constitution so that a new, democratically elected parliament could be set up in 1990. In what sense is the Third Republic the continuation of the People’s Republic of Hungary? How do both regimes relate to earlier ones, such as the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Kingdom of Hungary? And what role does the parliament play in managing such dis/continuities? In order to address these questions, it is important to switch attention from politicians and texts to symbolic objects.

Consider, for example, the Holy Crown of Hungary (see also Dányi 2013). On 1 January 2000, the royal jewels of Hungary – the crown, the orb, the sceptre and the royal sword – were carried from the National Museum to parliament in an armoured vehicle, accompanied by a police motorcade. It took about quarter of an hour for the bullet-proof car to reach the parliament building, where it was received by a joyous crowd and the Corporation of the Holy Crown – a special committee that consisted of the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the National Assembly, the President of the Constitutional Court and the President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. After saluting the national flag and listening to the national anthem, four members of the Republican Guard carried the special earthquake-proof glass cabinet containing the regalia up the main stairs, and put it on permanent display in the centre of the Cupola Hall.

The idea of the royal jewels’ transfer came up in 1999, when the Hungarian government proposed a bill to commemorate the thousandth anniversary of the coronation of St Stephen, Hungary’s first Christian king. The preamble of the draft law acknowledged St Stephen’s role in integrating the Hungarian people into Europe and recounted the development of his realm in the Carpathian Basin. It emphasised the importance of the Christian faith during times of occupation and dictatorship, and, without any further explanation, declared the Holy Crown of Hungary the relic that, in the consciousness of the nation, ‘live[d] as the embodiment of the continuity and independence of the Hungarian state.’ Finally, it proposed that:
On the occasion of the thousandth anniversary of the foundation of the state, Hungary elevates the Holy Crown to its appropriate place, and from the museum of the nation lays it under the protection of the representative of the nation, the National Assembly.

(Hungarian Government draft bill 1999)

The text of the draft law did not clarify how St Stephen and the Holy Crown related to each other, but the preamble reiterated a well-known myth, popularised by Bishop Hartvic in the twelfth century, according to which, the crown currently on display in the Cupola Hall of the parliament is the same object used to crown St Stephen on 1 January 1000. It was supposedly given by Pope Sylvester II as a formal acknowledgement of Hungary becoming a Christian country, and as a guarantee of her independence from the Holy Roman Empire and the Byzantine Empire. In the period of growing tension between Rome and Constantinople, this account was clearly an important reference point and strengthened the cult of St Stephen, whom Bishop Hartvic portrayed, not only as the founder of the Hungarian state, but also as a strong defender of the Christian faith.

Despite the fact that most statues and paintings of St Stephen show him with the Holy Crown on his head, archaeologists currently think that the crown is younger than Bishop Hartvic had claimed. The first written document that refers to the crown as St Stephen’s Crown dates back to the end of the thirteenth century, by which time, it was considered to be more than a royal jewel. As Ernst Kantorowicz observes, it was ‘at once the visible holy relic of St. Stephen, Hungary’s first Christian king, and the invisible symbol and lord paramount of the Hungarian monarchy’ (Kantorowicz 1997, p. 339). As Kantorowicz’s classical work on political theology argues, the conceptual separation of the king as a human being from kingship in general was common in medieval Europe. What made Hungary different was that the physical object came to be seen as the sole sovereign of the country. This meant that anyone who wanted to be recognised as a legitimate King of Hungary had to be crowned with the very same object.

Who exactly was the first king crowned with the Holy Crown of Hungary is difficult to tell. What is certain, is that the last king who was crowned with it was Charles IV, Francis Joseph’s grand-nephew, in 1916. A contemporary photo shows that the crown was too big for his head – it almost fell off during the coronation ceremony. Not a good omen; no wonder, then, when, two years later, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy lost the First World War and consequently five states announced their secession from the Empire. In the course of less than twelve months, Hungary witnessed a Bolshevik revolution and a Christian-nationalist counter-revolution, led by Admiral Miklós Horthy. His authoritarian regime was defined in opposition to the peace treaty that ended the First World War, as a result of which, Hungary had lost two-thirds of its pre-war territory and more than half of its population. The Horthy regime claimed the state lived on in the Holy Crown, and when, between 1938 and 1940, parts of Czechoslovakia and Romania were reattached to Hungary, it announced that those territories ‘had returned to the body of the Holy Crown.’

Needless to say, the reattachment of parts of the lost territories to Hungary would not have been possible without the external support of Nazi Germany. In the first years of the Second World War, Hitler regarded Horthy as a strategic ally, but when he learned that the Hungarian government had begun to negotiate armistice with the Western Allies, he ordered the invasion of the country. In October 1944, Ferenc Szálasi, leader of the national-socialist Arrow-Cross Party, was appointed to form a government. Szálasi took his oath on the Holy Crown in the Buda Castle.
As the German forces were losing ground, the regalia were taken to Austria, where they were captured by the US Army. After the war, the Holy Crown was taken to Fort Knox, to the United States Gold Reserve in Kentucky, where it was held as a ‘property of special status’ for more than three decades. It was only in 1977 that President Jimmy Carter announced that the US would return it to Hungary. On 5 January 1978, the regalia once again arrived at Budapest, and after a brief stopover in the parliament’s Cupola Hall, they were put on display in the National Museum as objects devoid of any political significance.

Many Hungarians, especially those who were born after the Second World War, might have thought the National Museum was the natural place for the royal jewels, so when, in 1999, the conservative government announced that for the thousandth anniversary of St Stephen’s coronation it wanted to transfer them to the parliament, the socialist and liberal opposition was outraged. In the parliamentary debate of the bill, members of the opposition objected that the transfer would reinstitute the Holy Crown as a political object, which would go against the logic of parliamentary democracy (see, for example, Péter 2003). In the Third Republic of Hungary, they claimed, it is the President who symbolises the unity of the state, not the crown, or any other object. Unlike kings, the President is elected by the parliament, which in turn is elected by the people – this logic of sovereignty is based on the rejection of the logic the Holy Crown stands for.

On these grounds, the opposition considered the draft law unconstitutional, and asked the Constitutional Court to determine, whether the Holy Crown had any political function in the Third Republic of Hungary. After some deliberation, the Constitutional Court declared that the Holy Crown had no political function and therefore the government could place it wherever it wanted – even in the Cupola Hall of the parliament. This is where it was transferred to on 1 January 2000, and it has been on public display there ever since, configuring parliament into a profane shrine of Hungarian stateness.

The politics of storytelling

It would be possible to tell different stories about democratic politics through the Hungarian parliament building, and it would be equally possible to tell the same stories differently. The possibilities, however, are not endless. The parliament building, and various entities associated with it, make some stories more tell-able than others. One of the purposes of this chapter has precisely been to make such entities and their involvement in storytelling more visible. Drawing on the insights of cultural anthropology after the Writing Culture debate, I wanted to shift attention from a politics of words (e.g. debates, speeches, pamphlets, op-ed pieces in daily newspapers) to what I have called a ‘politics beyond words’, that is, the politics of settings responsible for making words meaningful in a political way.

After briefly introducing the Hungarian parliament building as a culturally and historically specific setting, I have focused on the roles politicians’ bodies, different kinds of texts, and symbolic objects play in the constitution of a political reality called parliamentary democracy. While the material practices associated with regularly held elections, the legislative process and the making of historical dis/continuities might be seen as different aspects or layers of this political reality, what I have tried to show through my ethnographic story fragments is that they do not necessarily add up. Staging processes might be crucial for individual politicians, but from the legislature’s perspective, they are feeble events that hardly ever become visible during the legislative procedure. The trajectory of a bill in the legislative machine might be measured in weeks, but it is shaped by the trajectories of thousands of other bills that had passed through the same machine since the mid nineteenth century. The
past does therefore matter, but the ways in which it matters are constantly being negotiated by a succession of governments and politicians.

These slippages between material practices associated with parliamentary democracy often come across as moments of frustration, as they make politics rather ‘unpindownable’. At the same time, however, they offer possibilities of political engagement that do not necessarily correspond to established forms of political participation. In 2010, the socialists lost the general election and the conservatives got a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. Not long after the start of the new term, the government unilaterally drafted a new Constitution, the preamble of which named the Holy Crown as the single most important symbol of the Hungarian state. At the same time, practising full control of the legislative machine, the governing party undertook a comprehensive reconfiguration of the political system, as a result of which, a whole series of formerly independent institutions – from the Constitutional Court through the Central Bank to Public Service Broadcasting and other media outlets – were either marginalised or made subordinate to the logic of party politics. Many of these moves triggered fierce criticism from a number of scholars and international NGOs, claiming that, a little more than two decades after the collapse of communism, parliamentary democracy in Hungary was once again in danger of falling apart. Although such criticisms have more than a grain of truth in them, they operate along a democracy/non-democracy dichotomy, which tends to reinforce a sense of political apathy. What I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter is that the politics of ethnographic storytelling lies exactly in its capacity to change the frame of critique by opening up new spaces for specific articulations of good and bad democracy.

This, of course, is easier said than done. Like every research strategy, ethnography has its limitations. When it comes to ‘studying up’ (Nader 1972), that is, studying institutions of high political importance, for example, the success of ethnographic research greatly depends on the level of access researchers manage to negotiate, as well as the level of confidentiality they are asked to adhere to. Another limitation is what Marcus and Rabinow refer to as ‘untimeliness’ (Rabinow et al. 2008). While in their ways of collecting data, ethnographers are often indistinguishable from journalists, they also greatly differ in what they consider worthy of writing down. Journalists tend to focus on actual, pressing, newsworthy events, whereas ethnographers often engage with seemingly boring, uninteresting, mundane practices, many of which – as in the case of the Hungarian parliament – may already be out-dated by the time the findings of the research are published. The most complex limitation of ethnography, however, has less to do with restricted access or untimeliness than with the act of writing as such. As Stefan Hirschauer (2007) argues, ethnography is primarily about putting things into words that did not exist in language before. This requires not only constant translation work between linguistic and non-linguistic practices, but also a continuous formation of theoretical concepts, which cannot be detached from the empirical practices that had given birth to them.

Such limitations may come across as weaknesses or shortcomings of ethnography as a method, but they may just as well be seen as the strengths – or at least the potentially transformative capacities – of ethnography as a mode of doing research, insofar as they highlight the contingent and situated character of all forms of knowledge, and thereby help us rethink their implications for democratic politics and its institutions.

Acknowledgements

This chapter is based upon ethnographic research I conducted in Budapest between 2008 and 2010. I am grateful to The Leverhulme Trust for their financial support (award reference...
F/00185/U), to my supervisors and examiners in Lancaster and London – John Law, Lucy Suchman, Andrew Barry and Yoke-Sum Wong – for their careful engagement with my work at various stages, and Thomas Scheffer and the Political Ethnography Working Group in Berlin and Frankfurt for sustained discussions about the limits of democracy.

Notes

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