

Oratory and Representation – Parliamentary Discourses and Practices in the 19th century

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Bericht von: Josephine Hoegaerts, Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki

The workshop aimed to address the cultural and political importance of various practices of representation in 19th century parliaments. With its focus on oratory and performance, practices of speech-making and listening took a central but by no means exclusive role. In his opening remarks, LUDOVIC MARIONNEAU (Helsinki) urged scholars to think beyond the often normatively thought idea of „eloquence“ and to also attend to vocal and performative failure. „Doing“ representation requires a range of culturally specific skills in order to be politically effective. The aim of *Oratory and Representation* was to examine the nature of those skills needed in representative chambers across Europe in the 19th century, how individual actors acquired and displayed those skills, and how collectives could sanction and uphold their normative value. It also wanted to create room for an analysis of failure or refusal to „play by the rules“, and of attempts to mobilize alternative skills for oratorical and political impact. Moreover, in including papers analyzing different geopolitical contexts, the workshop also had an ambition to grapple with the fluid and diverse nature of parliamentary representative practices.

Documenting – and reporting on – an event so explicitly concerned with oratory, its imperfect transcripts, the difficulty of listening to speech and a whole range of other „sonic skills“ (Bijsterveld 2018) necessarily draws attention to the practice of the conference format itself as well. As William Clark (2006) has noted, the „ineluctability of the voice and the oral“ applies to the research university as well, and oratory and debate continue to play an important role in scholarly practices. Shaped largely as a conversation between experts gathered around a fairly specific theme,

the workshop’s goals and central issues were constantly renegotiated and reformulated in the ongoing discussion within and between presented papers. What follows is therefore not a report detailing the methods, results and conclusions of each paper, but rather an attempt to account for the polyphonic performances carried out throughout the workshop, as heard by an interested party.¹ Such a report must, necessarily, rely on a number of assumptions and beliefs about the relation between the spoken and written word, and on the particular skills of listening, notation and understanding to the listener.

Or, as DANIEL MORAT (Berlin) demonstrated in his paper, the transcription of speeches and debates can be approached as a process in which face-to-face political interaction is mediatized for a large audience, thereby re-defining the concept of representation as making the experience of listening to political speech available outside the representative chamber. Morat discussed the particular role of stenographers in this process. Reporting on the Reichstag debates became, around the turn of the 20th century, a specialized and professional activity, carried out by expert listeners who prided themselves on being able to offer a higher quality re-presentation of speech than recording technology due to their superior understanding of the speaker’s intent and effect on the assembly.

The links and tensions between orators’ intent and the effect of their speeches on their audience also came into view in CLARICE BLAND’s (Dublin) case study of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s performances and oratory failures in the British House of Commons. Bland’s analysis of Bulwer-Lytton’s embodied and gendered performances as a classically trained oratory, a dandy, and an aristocrat showed how the norms and rules for parliamentary behavior change over time, in conjunction with more general changes in, e.g., hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, as Bulwer-Lytton’s failure to impress his audience showed, different models for oratory also had a different effect depending on who

¹In this case the PI of the organizing project. The report therefore presents a reflection on work in progress rather than a review.

was employing them and how.

THEO JUNG's (Freiburg) contribution on the mobilization of silence as a communicative device by Benjamin Disraeli made this latter point even more poignantly. The „political sphinx“, as Disraeli was often described, deftly employed strategies of silence (alongside speech) to build an image of authority and inscrutability. This latter quality proved treacherous, however, as it also invited criticism of his lack of transparency and even led to orientalist and anti-semitic depictions of a non-Christian „sphinx“ unwilling to be held accountable through what had become conventionally rational and emotionally transparent speech.

As HENK TE VELDE (Leiden) stressed in his keynote address, this tension between expectations of rationality and emotional authenticity was not particular to Disraeli, or even to Britain. Drawing on the histories of both Westminster and Paris, he noted that „parliament was always a place of both rational discussion and passionate oratory“. The art of moving and convincing the audience were closely intertwined, particularly in the 19th century when the primary audience of oratory shifted. Having consisted mainly of an elite group of „connoisseurs“, by the end of the 19th century political speech would increasingly address a mass audience and thus require different oratorical skills. Insisting on both the diverse and historically contingent nature of the Chamber of Representatives as a place of political practice, te Velde suggested approaching parliaments „as flexible cultures, rather than as rigid institutions“.

A number of papers seemed to, unconsciously perhaps, already engage with the history of parliament in a manner that underscores its flexible nature and its connection to cultural „work“. This was most obvious in those contributions that explicitly engaged with the issue of „performance“ as part of representatives' behavior. LUDOVIC MARIONNEAU, in his paper on risk-faunting and chaos in the French *Assemblée Nationale*, drew attention to the contextualized fluidity of performances of parliamentary vocality and speech. Establishing the *couloir* (the space between the benches and the proscenium) as a permeable border be-

tween different performances of representation, and between different engagements with the (un)written rules of parliamentary behavior, he showed how both speaking and listening occupied the cultural soundscape of the hemicycle alongside other sounds, and particularly coexisted with disruptive noises.

Likewise, ANNA RAJAVUORI (Helsinki) focused on the co-existence of convention and rule breaking in parliamentary performances, particularly among socialist members of the Finnish parliament in its early years. Showing how the use of language, dress, and practices connected to political agitation were mobilized by different Members of Parliament (MP), her contribution, too, stressed how such practices could serve as the articulation of very particular identities – and are thus socially as well as historically contingent. It mattered, in other words, who performed representation, socialism or class, as particular bodies and identities gave MPs access to different sets of behavior, or loaded their behavior with different meanings.

This was equally true beyond Europe, as IVAN SABLIN's (Heidelberg) paper on the Duma showed. Ethnicized members of the Russian State Duma were „heard“ and depicted differently and therefore felt more pressure to perform an identity and role as „imperial democrats“. As the Duma became „a forum where wider ideas of self-organization of empire could be articulated“, the status of the peasant as a key performer of core national identity shifted as well, in conjunction with changing performances of socialism in an imperial context.

Whilst all three contributions discussed above focused on performance, their approach to performance was a theatrical one, and it would have been interesting to see more engagement with notions of „performativity“ as defined by scholars like J. Butler. Shedding light on „doing representation“ in this manner within the context of the representative assembly, this theatrical approach largely leaves aside the performative aspects of classed, gendered, (dis)abled, ethnic, identities that are formed and given meaning in a much wider political and cultural context.

KAREN LAUWERS (Helsinki), in her presentation on the importance of extra-

parliamentary sources for the history of representation, pointed out this incessant interaction between performative and political practices in the chamber of representatives and those outside. She particularly demonstrated the ongoing interaction between representatives and members of society who – despite their lack of access to suffrage – still managed to shape political decision-making – like French women and Algerian (Arab and Kabyle) agitators.

This tension between the role of the MP as an expert and authority surrounded by peers, and his or her role as representative speaking for and to the people (including non-voters) was also present in TAMÁS NYRKOS' (Budapest) analysis of the representative work of Louis de Bonald and François-René de Chateaubriand in Restoration France. Comparing the published work of both to their oratory practices in, respectively, the Chamber of Deputies and the Chamber of Peers, Nyrkos laid bare the inner contradictions in the discourse of both, thus showing that conceptual understandings of democracy, representation and conservatism were profoundly fluid, and co-constructed by the practices of articulation and media through which they were communicated in different settings, and for different audiences.

ORIOLO LUJAN's (Madrid) analysis of the diversity in meanings, usages, and political weight of concepts like citizenship, community, or nation, showed that the multiplicity of these meanings was not only due to differences in identity and status (i.e. who used them) but also differences in context (i.e. who they were speaking to). In other words, understandings of a sense of mutual accountability between MPs and the electorate were constantly under negotiation and created different contexts for concepts attached to representation to be mobilized.

In fact, notions of accountability and transparency loomed large throughout the workshop. Studies of parliamentary eloquence and rhetoric tend to focus on issues of persuasion as a measure of success and political effectiveness. Drawing attention to the vocal, oratorical and performative aspects of representative practice, as these contributions have shown, can shift our scholarly perspec-

tive, not in the least because it attends to the diverse audiences of these performances in new ways. By focusing on the fragile connection between MPs' intentions and their effects, by attending to the sonic skills of both speakers and listener, by examining the identity consequences of performances aimed to re-present particular ideas of belonging, and so on, these approaches create room to re-investigate the relationship between representatives and the practice of representation as cultural work. Or, as suggested by keynote speaker Henk te Velde, to re-imagine parliament „as a culture“. That includes, but should not be limited to, examining expressions and modes of accountability toward electorates, citizens, peers, the press, and also those without suffrage or a clear political voice.

Conference overview:

Session I

Theo Jung (University of Freiburg): Performing Silence in the House of Speech. Benjamin Disraeli and the Parliamentary Sphinx

Clarice Bland (University College Dublin): Emotion, Not Eloquence. Bulwer-Lytton in the House of Commons

Tamás Nyirkos (Pázmány Péter Catholic University): Conservative Orators in Restoration France. Bonald vs. Chateaubriand

Ludovic Marionneau (University of Helsinki): „The President Shakes the Bell to No Avail“. Performance in the French Parliamentary Debates Leading to Jacques-Antoine Manuel's Exclusion, 1823

Session II

Carlo Bovolo (University of Eastern Piedmont): Images from the Parlamento Subalpino. Political and Cultural Representations of the Parliament in the Kingdom of Sardinia (1848–1861) – talk did not take place due to travel restrictions related to Covid-19

Daniel Morat (Free University of Berlin): Parliamentary Speech and Stenographic Practice in the German Reichstag, 1871–1914

Oriol Luján (Complutense University of Madrid): Political Representation in 19th Century Spain. A Conceptual Perspective

Session III

Anna Rajavuori (University of Helsinki): Performing Socialist in the Parliament. Class and Authority in the Early 20th Century Finland's Representative Politics

Ivan Sablin (University of Heidelberg): When Subalterns Speak: Performing Class and Ethnicity in the Russian State Duma, 1906–1917

Karen Lauwers (University of Helsinki): The Relevance of Histories of Extra-Parliamentary Representation and Informal Political Communication (France, 19th–20th Centuries)

Keynote

Henk Te Velde (Leiden University): Parliament is a Culture. Debating, Rhetoric, and Audiences in 19th Century Britain and France

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