Political representation in practice
Sameness and difference in the Hungarian Parliament

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This presentation is about politics. Not about the politics of innovation and imitation, but about different ways of making sameness and difference in politics. Why is this interesting? Because in many STS works there seems to be a disconnect between two understandings of politics. One understanding is about specific interventions in well-defined locations, such as, labs, hospitals, farms, high-tech innovation centres, and so on – after Annemarie Mol this could be called *ontological politics*.[1] The other understanding is more common in social theory – it is concerned with *high politics*, that is, symbolic centres of decision-making, such as the UN summit, G8, the European Parliament, or national assemblies.[2]

As a point of departure I argue that there is a growing need to extend the STS gaze to sites and practices of conventional high politics, for at least two reasons. First, most cases in STS studies are always already caught up in processes that can be considered

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[1] See Mol 1999; 2002; Mol and Mesman 1996.
[2] The term 'high politics' comes from Law 2002. On the differences between the two understandings of politics see also Barad 2007: 28; Gomart & Hajer 2003.

'high political' (think, for instance, of introduction of new regulations, policies, budget cuts, and so on), and naïvely accepting smooth stories about the workings of such processes would go against the logic of ontological politics. Second, there's a growing need for self-defence – as recent debates around what counts as proper scientific evidence for climate change show, many STS arguments get taken out of context and travel to unexpected places, to support untenable political positions.[3] It is, of course, easy to be cynical in such cases and say that taking things out of context is the *modus operandi* of any politics that appears big and important. But to say this is not very helpful, not to mention that such reactions actively undermine the prospects of making any difference in specific practices.

So, to learn more about the disconnect between ontological politics and high politics, I decided to follow the tradition of laboratory studies.[4] Instead of bringing political theory in, I was more interested in taking the STS toolkit with me to examine how political representation works in practice in a symbolic site, namely the Hungarian Parliament.

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The Hungarian Parliament by the Danube is one of the most often used images associated with both Hungary and Budapest. It appears on the pages of various guide books, tourist websites and such official documents as the Hungarian passport. Every Hungarian knows what the Parliament looks like. Similarly, every tourist who spends

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[3] On the use of STS arguments by Republican politicians and strategists in the US to debunk the global warming thesis see Demeritt 2006; Latour 2004.
[4] There is a small but growing literature that advocates this position – see, for example, Asdal et al. 2007; Barry 2001; Gomart & Hajer 2003; Moser 2007

some time in Budapest will instantly recognise the grand building with its white walls and tall cupola.

Arguably, for a country with a population of 10 million the Hungarian Parliament is rather oversized: it is the third largest parliament in the world (after Argentina and Romania). However, when it was originally commissioned in 1882, Hungary was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The so-called Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 granted equal legal status to the governments of Vienna and Pest (later Budapest). As a result, Hungarians gained the right to elect their own Prime Minister and have their separate parliament.

Not surprisingly, the committee responsible for establishing a permanent building for the Hungarian legislature was looking for designs that reflected the restored strength and confidence of the nation. Some influential members of the committee considered the Palace of Westminster in London the only appropriate point of reference and were most impressed when architect Imre Steindl presented his plans for a Gothic Revival style parliament on the banks of the Danube.[5]

From this description it may seem that there exists a singular building, both in architectural and political senses. But the Hungarian Parliament does not exist in isolation from its environments: other sites, streets, buildings, institutions, the city and its inhabitants. It is caught up in many stories at once. And these stories are very

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[5] Gerő 2008: 26. On the development of Budapest in the second half of the 19th century see Gyáni 2008.

different in kind: they are distinct ways of making connections; to use John Law's words, they perform different cultural tasks.[6]

My aim in the rest of this presentation is to outline three ways of making similarities and differences in High Politics in Hungary, and see what versions of the Parliament get enacted along the way.

I.

The first is an origin story. The Hungarian Parliament is literally in the middle of Budapest, in a square named after Lajos Kossuth, former Governor of Hungary and one of the leading figures of the 1848-49 revolution and (failed) war for independence. Kossuth's statue is to the right of the main entrance and faces the statue of another national hero, Ferenc II Rákóczi, at the opposite end of the square. Rákóczi was Prince of Transylvania and leader of the 1703-1711 (failed) war for independence against the Habsburgs. The two statues are separated by two memorials of another (failed) attempt to (re)establish the independence of Hungary: the eternal flame and the symbolic tombstone that commemorate the 1956 revolution against the Soviet-type regime in the country.

There are seven other important statues and memorials in the close vicinity of the Parliament that at different times throughout the year serve as important sites of remembering. In this space, this landscape so rich in historical references the

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[6] Law 2002: 65

Parliament appears not simply as the permanent home of the National Assembly, but also as part of a narrative about revolutions and reforms; a series of struggles for independence and Western-style democracy. This narrative follows a unilinear chronology that arrives at present time by highlighting that Hungary joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. Together with other symbolic objects, this version of the Parliament tells and re-tells the origin story of democracy in Hungary.

II.

When this origin story of democracy gets to the discussion of 'now', the narration style changes. Here's a quote from a brochure, published in 2002 by the Office of the Hungarian Parliament to commemorate the 100th anniversary of its opening:

> Since the amendment of the Constitution of the 23rd October 1989, Hungary's state form is parliamentary republic. The Republic of Hungary is an independent democratic state. Its supreme state power and popular representative body is the unicameral National Assembly, which has 386 members.[7]

This, then, is the second story, written in the language of constitutional law. The chronological narrative is replaced by the description of a timeless present – a present that exists since the 23rd October 1989, and is here to stay until the next change in/of the regime.

The Parliament in this context is neither the home of all Hungarians, nor the symbol of democracy. Here it becomes part of a large and complex system – a political

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[7] *The Hungarian National Assembly* 2002: 27

regime – in which each organisational unit has its well-defined role. The Parliament's general functions are stated in the Constitution, while the more specific rules of operation and order of proceedings are laid down in the Standing Orders. These two documents do two things at once: they clearly mark out the place of the Parliament in the morass of boxes and arrows that constitute the regime and turn the Parliament itself into sets of boxes and arrows, that can remain the same while MPs, parties, governments come and go.

III.

But there is yet another way of thinking about the Parliament. Here is a short excerpt from my field notes from April 2008:

> It's Monday, the important day in Hungarian parliamentary politics. The House of Representatives is full. Most MPs are in their seats. The balconies are packed with groups of citizens, journalists and advisers working for the Government. The Speaker opens the plenary session. Before the votes on bills some MPs give speeches in which they criticise certain policies of the Government. (Applause from the opposition benches.) Other MPs defend the policies. (Applause from the government benches.) A minister is interpellated. (Applause from the opposition.) The minster responds. (Applause from the government.) The MP who interpellated the minister does not accept the response. (Applause from the opposition.) As a result, all MPs have to vote. The National Assembly accepts the response (yes: 162 votes, no: 109 votes; abstain: 1).

What is going on?

If we invoke the regime narrative and look up the relevant parts of the Constitution and the Standing Order, different ongoing processes become easily identifiable:

questions and interpellations are important means for the supervision of the Government; debates and votes on bills are stages in the legislative process, etc. The National Assembly operates like a fine-tuned *machine*, with MPs dutifully criticising or defending policies, proposing new laws and voting according to their position in their party. But another metaphor would be equally appropriate. Look at that MP, how vehemently he is trying to convince everyone that the Government has lost the plot! And here comes the fierce response from the minister. Just how can the she argue with a straight face that her reforms are absolutely necessary when two months ago she said there was no need for radical changes? This is a *theatre*!

Indeed, as political scientist Yaron Ezrahi argues in his original article on the machine and the theatre as political metaphors, theatrical impersonation has been a central concept in High Politics since at least Machiavelli and Hobbes.[8] Unlike the machine metaphor, used to describe a neutral and amoral political system, the theatre metaphor places individuals and their performances into the foreground. The narrative, in which plenary sessions and public committee meetings become discrete theatrical acts of political representation, transforms High Politics into a spectacle. On Mondays and Tuesdays the House of Representatives, in the middle of the Parliament, in the middle of Budapest, in the middle of Hungary, is enacted as the centre of political power – the place where politicians have many big and important decisions to make.

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[8] Ezrahi 1995

To learn more about political representation in practice, in April 2008 I shadowed a Member of the Hungarian Parliament. For three weeks, wherever the MP went as a politician I went with him and took notes (and, when possible, photos) of his activities. I was primarily interested not in specific political events or issues per se, but the ways in which these issues and the MP as the 'human apparatus' of political representation co-constitute each other in various locations, for example, in the Parliament, in the party, in demonstrations and other public situations.

The argument I would like to conclude with is that political representation is done differently in different places. But what does this mean? How can we think about *difference* in politics this way?

The way I like to think about it – but this is for discussion – is that this approach opens up a new space between the concept of *subpolitics*, which implies that conventional political institutions are outdated and real politics happens elsewhere, and certain uses of the term *cosmopolitics* that are interested in parliaments only as metaphors when outlining a non-humanist version of democracy.

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