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# The Ideal Assembly

# The Domestic Economy

# of the French Parliament

Popular emotions led to the outbreak of the 1789 Revolution and produced, at least in France, the emergence of an unprecedented space: an assembly that was sovereign and deliberative first and foremost, before seeking to become truly representative. A collective sense of the Parliament as both the condition and central organ of democracy originates from popular fervor, but must ultimately aim to overcome that fervor and to define an “other,” newly instituted and robust form of sovereignty if it is to endure. What were the ideal and practical dimensions that governed the production of this “counter-space,” this “heterotopia” as Michel Foucault would say?<sup>1</sup> If, given its particularly turbulent nature, we might say that French political history is formed of sound and fury, our central inquiry here is to question the set of legal, material and social processes required in order for a space as fragile as a parliamentary assembly to both emerge, and to become a durable, long-lasting institution.

## A Work in Stone and Paper

Let me stress what it means to assign a building, and a territory, to an ideal. Or, simultaneously, to shape and produce a building and a territory that can host and bring into form a utopia. In the first French revolutionary assemblies, self-proclaimed representatives sat alongside the King; first in Versailles, and then in the Louvre. The transformation of the Estates General, convened by King Louis XVI at Versailles, into the National Constituent Assembly (1789–1791) marked the first stage of an uncertain adventure that would falter on numerous occasions. The revolutionary project of bringing to life a deliberative, representative and sovereign assembly is *utopian*; it is an uncertain project seeking a fragile achievement. The difficulty, then, is in necessarily arresting

1. Foucault’s heterotopia can be understood as a practical or physical utopia; as the materialization of another space. See: Michel Foucault, *Le Corps utopique, Les Hétérotopies* (Paris: Lignes, 2019).

time, in inscribing this movement in a political form—a form which is both its expression and its offspring.

Having principles cast in stone is perhaps one of the most effective methods humans have developed for demonstrating what “instituting” actually signifies. Designing a hall, indeed a palace dedicated to the ideals of the Republic, was the mission the National Convention—the second parliamentary assembly, which sat between 1792 and 1795—had assigned to itself, despite wars and political and financial difficulties: “The National Convention felt it consonant with the French Republic’s majesty to place its Senate in a vast and sumptuous edifice.”<sup>2</sup> During the building’s inauguration (which took place under the Directory<sup>3</sup>), the chief architect welcomed the future accomplishment of “this new sanctuary of laws.” Soon, he said, “an Areopagus forever celebrated will honor this site with its presence and will make the vaults of the organ of justice ring out.”<sup>4</sup> Words do indeed matter. Such design and pronouncement is about establishing a shelter, a protective place (but also a cultic one) for republican ideals. The edifice was erected “to the glory of the French people.” Having pronounced these words, the President of the Assembly sealed a lead box containing a bronze plate recalling the decree creating the building<sup>5</sup> and showing its plan along with two pieces of silver and two medals of the elected representatives. Having made known their “attachment to the Republic,” the construction workers were then invited “to preserve that purity of mores that has always distinguished the useful and laborious class of workers.” They were finally invited to join their voices with their hearts, singing “touching songs of liberty” and shouting: “Vive la République!”<sup>6</sup> The forms of interchange of qualities between text and buildings were thus multiple and were

2. Parliamentary Archives and Historical Research Department (Service des Archives et de la Recherche Historique Parlementaire, or SARHP), 17AN52: Bâtiments.

3. The Directory was the French political regime from October 26, 1795 to November 9, 1799.

4. SARHP 17AN52: Bâtiments.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

frequently repeated. The ceremony surrounding the podium’s foundation stone was intended to magnify the oratorical art, and to enshrine that essential figure of the parliamentarian as a tribune. They were meant to leave their mark in writing; both in stone, and in people’s memories.

The Directory’s edifice—which was finally inaugurated on January 21, 1799, the anniversary of the King’s execution—no longer exists, but the significance of its chosen location was to be long lasting. In immediate proximity to the Seine and the future Pont de la Concorde, the parliament was housed in an area consisting of two aristocratic palaces: the Hôtel de Bourbon, and the Hôtel de Lassay. Seized as national property during the Revolution, it was returned to the Bourbon dynasty during the Restoration and then eventually bought by the State in 1827. Administrators of the successive chambers had to sustain endless effort from one constitutional regime to the next in order to preserve the parliament’s prerogatives on the building.<sup>7</sup> Despite political turbulence, the French MPs tried to produce and preserve a form of continuity: a sort of skeleton of the Chamber’s processes that could persist over time, embodied in the buildings, furniture, archives, and committed staff. It is under the more “liberal” July Monarchy (1830–1848) that the core architectural features of the Palais Bourbon were designed and consolidated, in particular with the current debating room—which was first rebuilt in 1832 in the form of a semicircle (the “Hemicycle”) in order to revive the architectural and moral choices made by former revolutionary assemblies.<sup>8</sup>

The parliamentary order also needed to be invented as a dialogical space.<sup>9</sup> An assembly, by virtue of not being the State but rather a spatial form preserving itself from the power and excesses of the executive, comprises a counter-space.

7. SARHP, 17AN52; 17AN53: Bâtiments.

8. Jean-Philippe Heurtin, *L’Espace parlementaire. Essai sur les raisons du législateur* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999).

9. Claire de Galembert, Olivier Rozenberg, and Cécile Vigour, eds., *Faire parler le parlement. Méthodes et enjeux de l’analyse des débats parlementaires pour les sciences sociales* (Paris: Librairie Générale de Droit et Jurisprudence, 2014).

Within even the earliest forms of assemblies, formal measures and procedures were transmitted and compiled. They aimed to define who would initiate the agenda, what the modalities were and who had the right to voice an opinion; how to organize the discussion, and so on. Parliamentary procedure took the form of a (voluminous) law, as encompassed by the publication of *Traité de droit parlementaire*<sup>10</sup> at the end of the nineteenth century—the equivalent of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons. Administrative and legislative jurisprudence were determining and the two were closely intertwined. They had a generative capacity; they could be mobilized in order to execute and perform the last incarnation of the reborn parliament, and to recover previous values and strengths erased by political reaction.<sup>11</sup>

## The Right of Police

Structuring and ordering the National Assembly as a comprehensive counter-site also depends on police and military capacities. “Politics” cannot live without “policing.” Here we follow Foucault’s investigations into the double sense of “police”: as a science of the State, or cameralism, and as an instrument of “order keeping.”<sup>12</sup> There is no utopia (in this instance the National Assembly) without territory, no consecration of values without material settings. In other words, there is no political body without administration or without police. In order for there to be a Chamber (politics), it is necessary to regulate a space and *create* a territory, and with this a specific administration. Considerable effort was made in the history of the making of the French Parliament to produce and indeed to protect, the National Assembly’s territory as singular and exceptional by ensuring it remained disembedded from the *commun*; from the State and the city.

10. Eugène Pierre and Jules Poudra, *Traité de droit parlementaire* (Paris: Chambre des Députés, 1902).

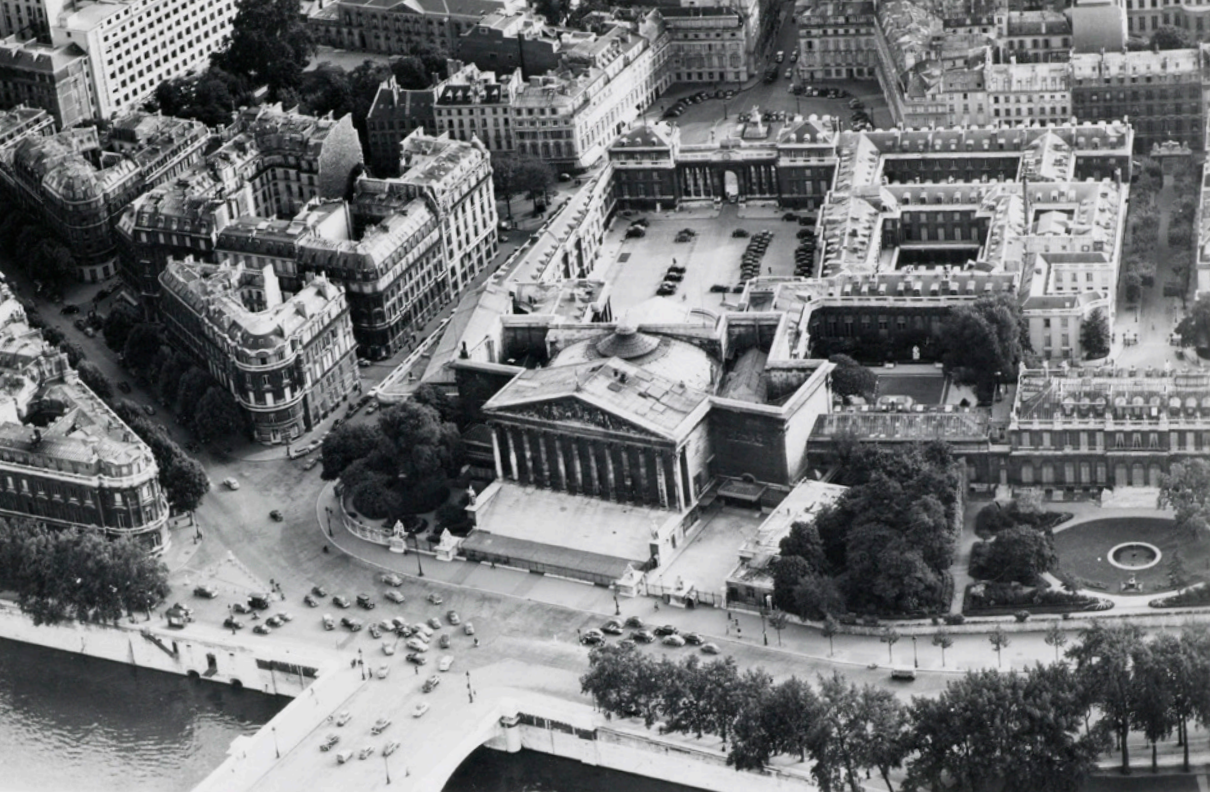
11. Delphine Gardéy, *Le Linge du Palais Bourbon. Corps, matérialité et genre du politique à l’ère démocratique* (Lormont: Le Bord de l’Eau, 2015).

12. Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*. Vol. IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

Emanating from revolutionary assemblies, the right to enforcing internal discipline, as ascribed to the President of the Assembly, is the prerequisite for freedom of speech and voting liberties. Coextensive with the right to police is the right to security. Within the model of republican chambers, the remit of the military forces in charge of the security of the assemblies expires at the doors of the plenary hall, at which point bailiffs take over. Since the French Revolution, assemblies have each created and maintained their dedicated military forces. They were formed of companies provided by the military but placed under parliamentary command and regularly replaced, to avoid dependence on the executive power. No police force—and much less external any military force—should be allowed to penetrate the ring-fence surrounding the Chamber’s territory without authorization from the President. As for the plenary hall, its preservation from any violation or invasion remains an absolute priority. The wearing of swords and the instantiation of military rituals are used to signify that violence is suspended, and that the use of (legitimate) force is submitted to the authority of the Chamber.

The “right of police” is thus a fundamental prerogative that contributes to the parliamentary assemblies’ capacity for self-determination. Beyond the policing of the plenary hall, it is in the French case the whole territory of the Palais Bourbon that is regulated. In a sense, one could see nested territories within the territory of the Assembly, organized in concentric circles, from the most profane to the most sacred,<sup>13</sup> the latter being the hall where the members of parliament sit. The law, rules, staff and practices may vary from the attics of the Palais Bourbon to the corridors, the courtyards and the plenary hall, but none of the spaces that constitute the territory of the Chamber are left exempt from regulations or administrative and police control.

13. Philip Manow, *In the King’s Shadow. The Political Anatomy of Democratic Representation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).



## A City within a City

Foucault interrogated the historical and political links between “security,” “territory” and “population.”<sup>14</sup> Within the French Parliament, a social and a sanitary police was in place in order to delimit and regulate its whole population. Throughout its history, the Palais Bourbon has tended to remain closed off from the outside world. But these long-standing attempts at the enforcement of boundaries were rendered complex by the presence of the families of the various employees, all of whom lived within the space until the mid-twentieth century. As a city within the city, with its garrets housing the domestics of senior officials, lodging gas workers, workhands and other laborers dedicated to maintaining the outbuildings, the Palais Bourbon appeared

14. Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population*. Cours au Collège de France, 1977–1978 (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

to be a complex and socially heterogeneous world which needed to be policed. The caretakers hunted down bags of coal abandoned under the stairs, forgotten trash cans, linen hanging in the attics. They kept an eye out for dogs and children whose presence did not chime with the image the institution wished to project. The caretakers were bound by the regulations to return to their parents “the children of all classes” who had either strayed into or were playing in the courtyard.<sup>15</sup>

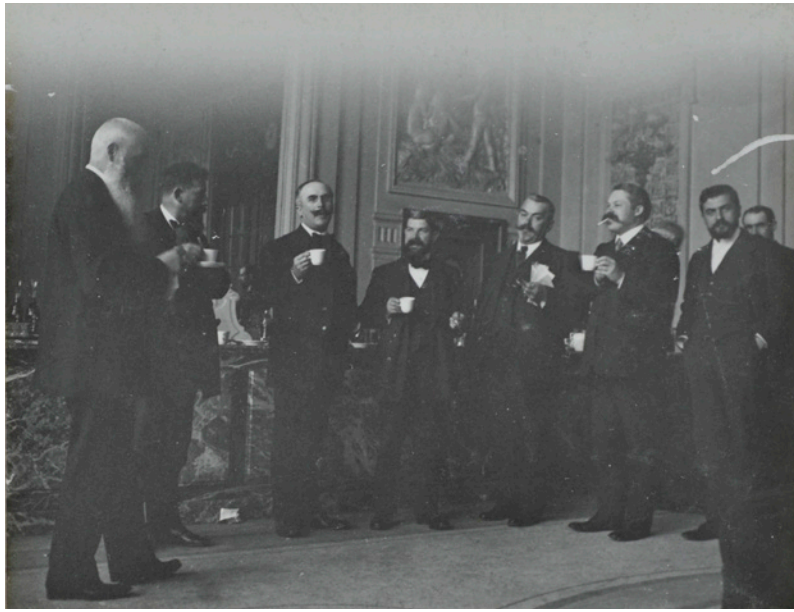
This vigilant “social police” was supplemented by a form of sanitary regulation, which was particularly vigorous under the Third Republic. With the help of the physician attached to the parliament, the administrators deployed numerous examinations and vaccination campaigns in aid of the population of the Palais Bourbon, so as to preserve the national representatives from noxious air, infection and epidemics. In the case of an old, confined and poorly ventilated Hemicycle, the desire for openness to the public (a necessity for those who defend a liberal and then republican conception of parliamentarism) appeared in contradiction with the sanitary protection of the legislative body.<sup>16</sup>

A territory cut off from the city, detached from Paris, socially policed, sanitarily boxed off: the territory of the French Assembly and its palace was insular and clearly marked out. Contrary to the new open territory of economics, which historically characterized the emergence of liberalism and was described by Foucault as fluid, open and interpenetrated, the liberal (then republican) territory of modern politics paradoxically had to be preserved and separated from the vernacular.

When technological networks such as the telephone or electricity appeared, it was a primary concern for the Assembly to oversee their control. A power station was built inside the Palais Bourbon and administrators recruited “their” men (dedicated blue collars or technicians) as

15. SARHP, 17AN52; 17AN69: Sécurité du Palais Bourbon.

16. SARHP, 17AN13: Service médical; 16AN30 to 16AN37: Archives du secrétariat général de la Présidence: Rapports médicaux.



operators.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile however, in order to avoid the presence of too many blue-collar workers, especially printing workers known for their class consciousness and their strong union traditions, the Assembly, upon returning from Versailles to Paris in 1879,<sup>18</sup> decided to move to a pneumatic system. Pneumatic technology helped to displace the printing workshop formerly located within the walls of the parliament where proceedings, resolutions and laws were published.<sup>19</sup> The shorthand office was then directly connected to the national printing house some kilometers away.<sup>20</sup> In this instance a technological system appeared as a solution to preserve the Assembly from potential political and social threats posed by the integrated presence of the working class.

17. SARHP, 16AN107: Usine électrique. The alternative for the Assembly was to connect to the existing secteur rive gauche.
18. In order to flee the revolutionary turmoil of the Paris Commune, the National Assembly took refuge in Versailles in February 1871 and remained there until 1879.
19. SARHP, 16AN62: Impressions. Compte-rendu intégral.
20. SARHP, 17AN10: Sténographie et lignes pneumatiques; 16AN86: Lignes pneumatiques.

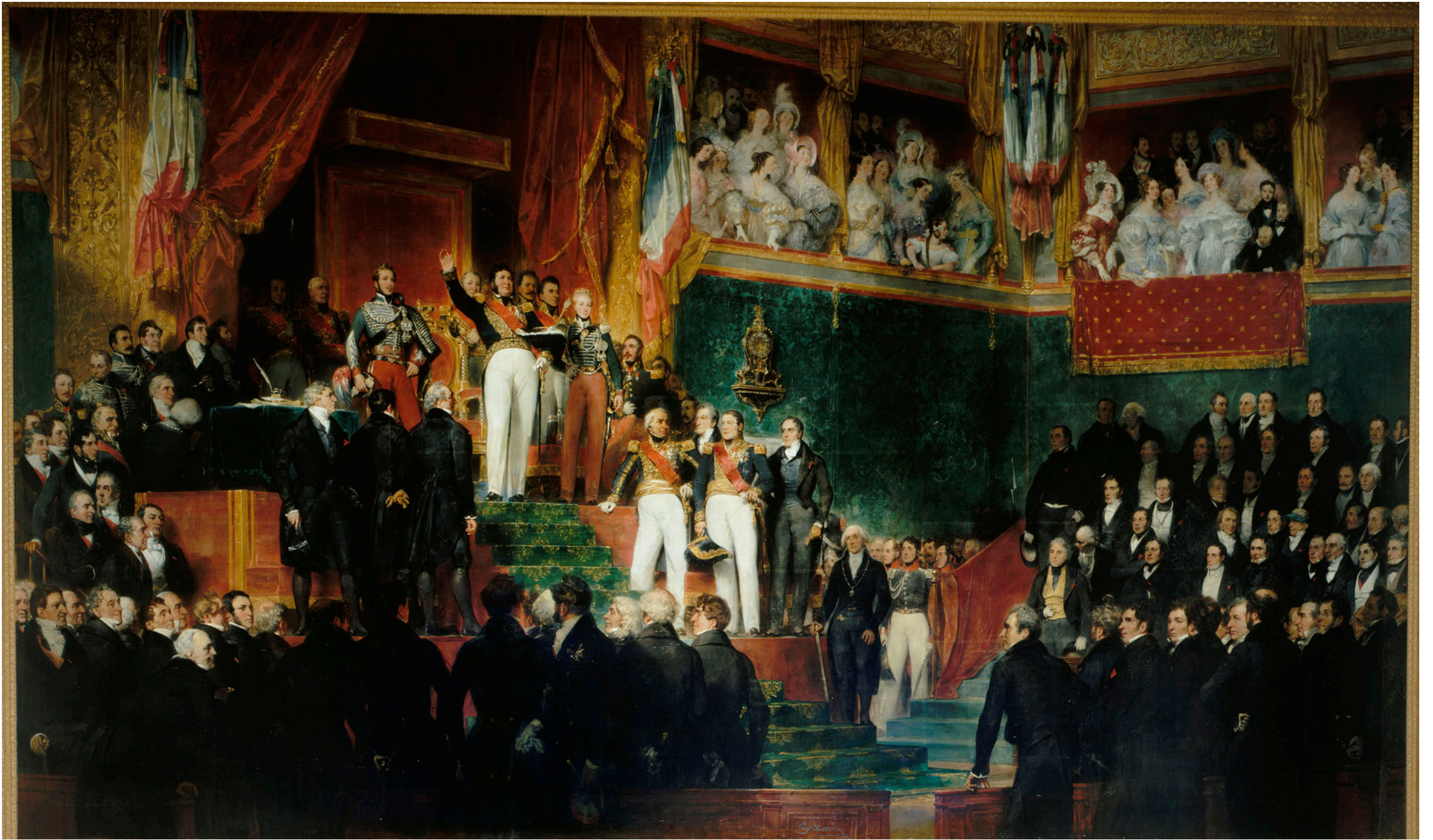


## The Household of French Republican Parliamentarism

The presence of working class bodies, right on the premises of the Palais Bourbon, had to be linked to worker (under)representation within the legislative body. This was a key issue after the Paris Commune and under the Third Republic, in a context of fresh defiance generated by the labor movement and the simultaneously increasing tension with the parliamentary Republic. As a symbol of this defiance, the socialist representative Thivrier (1841–1895), a former member of the Commune, attended all parliamentary sessions wearing worker's overalls, worn over his bourgeois costume. Thivrier's ironic cross-dressing<sup>21</sup> was a way to demonstrate the pretense of bourgeois parliamentary order and to address the impossible representation of workers.

If we are to consider here the representation of those who have been historically considered “outsiders” of French

21. First page of *Le Petit Journal*, February 18, 1894.



Eugène Devéria, *Le Roi Louis-Philippe prête serment de maintenir la Charte de 1830*  
(King Louis-Philippe swearing the oath to keep the Charter of 1830), 1836, oil on canvas,  
Versailles, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon

universalism (working class, colonial subjects, women), we also need to consider the place that was reserved for them inside the walls of the parliament as audiences, workers and civil servants. If we are to understand the machinery of the legislative body as a new theater of politics, we have to consider the invisible workers, both male and female, who constituted the parliament itself, as well as the anthropological milieu the newly elected MPs experienced in their daily life.

Let's consider for a moment the question of the long-term exclusion of women from democracy and parliaments.<sup>22</sup> Once they finally became voters and acquired the right to be elected, 33 women entered the French National Assembly for the first time in November 1945. Their stage entrance was discreet, and their subsequent presence remained so. French women remained a minority in the National Assembly, and between 1945 and 1997 never accounted for more than 7% of the elected representatives. The French chambers firmly resisted the feminisation of its body. It was this long-standing imbalance that was at stake in the 2000 movement for parity; a demand for equal representation that has still not been achieved.

The exclusion of women from democracy is one of the core paradoxes at the heart of the definition of universalism that has held since the French Revolution.<sup>23</sup> And throughout the nineteenth century, citizenship as republican institutions were actively produced as masculinist spheres. Strangely, the situation seemed more open in terms of gender issues in parliamentary monarchies.<sup>24</sup> In the aristocracy-dominated representation of the eighteenth century, another gender arrangement prevailed via the presence of the house of the King, women and children. The influence of the ladies, and

22. Catherine Achin and Delphine Gardey, "Gender and Parliaments," in *Handbook of Parliamentary Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Legislatures*, eds. Cyril Benoit and Olivier Rozenberg (London: Edward Elgard Publishing, 2020).

23. Joan W. Scott, *Only paradoxes to Offer. French Feminism and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

24. Geneviève Fraisse and Michelle Perrot, "Histoire des femmes. Le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *Histoire des femmes en Occident. Vol. 4*, eds. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Paris: Plon, 1991).

the culture of the Enlightenment salons, was felt both in private and public political spheres.

The republican model operated a radical split between the public and the private sphere, and invented a parliamentary scene that organized a genuine "gender theater." The republican order was based on bourgeois conventions which organized and delimited positions in the political space according to both gender and class. Shaped as it was by private spaces and active demonstrations of masculine sociability (ie. the fencing hall, the smoking room, the *salons* and the library), the Palais Bourbon was modeled on dominant bourgeois social uses and behaviors. The architectural arrangement followed the model of the theater, which strongly influenced the architectures of many parliaments. The gender roles assigned within this were clear: the ladies were in the balcony among the general public, whereas the scene of action, speech and discussion were contained within the male spheres. Passiveness and activity, speaking and listening, seeing and being seen were organized along gender lines.

One can see a striking parallel between the strictly masculine world of representation, in all political contexts and regimes, and the strictly masculine world of administrative jobs that held form until the mid-twentieth century. The Palais Bourbon is a male territory: MPs in suits (*costumes*), then in formal wear (*habits*); military men and public servants in uniform (*tenue*); blue collars and caretakers. This was a lasting state of affairs. The laundresses and needlewomen, who maintained the linens and curtains, were the only female workers at the French Parliament from the Revolution to the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Typically wives or widows of male employees, these women were members of families dedicated to the upkeep, the protocol and the administration of the Chamber. From the beginning of the nineteenth century through to the 1950s, the Assembly surrounded itself with faithful and reliable personnel:

25. SARHP, 17AN17: Personnels; 16AN88: Lingerie.

domestic employees, civil servants (with a specific status) who were under the Assembly's sole authority and who were part of professional dynasties reaching back several generations, including stenographers for the parliamentary debates, as well as caretakers and bailiffs. The prevention of women working as civil servants was in that respect more vivid in the French Parliament than in any other private or public administration preceding it.

While the first female MPs made their humble appearance in 1945, the Chamber's administrative tasks, and in particular those affording access to the plenary hall, remained closed to them. It took a court trial in 1972<sup>26</sup> for the first women to be given permanent positions as stenographers for debates in the Chamber. Female bailiffs first made an appearance in the Hemicycle in the early 1990s. In France therefore it was not only the republican and democratic institutions that excluded women from voting rights and eligibility for elected political office—both of which were acquired in 1945—but the entire territory of the Palais Bourbon, a territory that had been defined as a masculine space, immune to female penetration.

This arrangement persisted because it was central to the republican parliamentary order and rituals.<sup>27</sup> In other words: in order to exist and persevere, the institution had to adopt conservative precedents. A social and material study of parliament allows us to explore the everyday enactment of the paradoxes of republicanism, as well as how abstractions like the universal masculine became highly effective forces within quotidian activity. Here we move from the material setting to that which underpins them: domestic arrangements. The “material” referred to here encompasses not only cold, inanimate, or technical components (as is often the case in Actor Network Theory and in Bruno

26. Delphine Gardey, “Turning Public Discourse into an Authentic Artefact: Shorthand Transcription in the French National Assembly,” in *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 836–843.

27. Emma Crew, “An Anthropology of the House of Lords: Socialization, Relationships and Rituals,” *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 16, no. 3 (August 2020): 313–324.

Latour's ontologies<sup>28</sup>), but also includes bodies; their real and symbolical presences as living entities, people of flesh and meaning,<sup>29</sup> sex and gender. As finally constituted, the parliamentary order held something of the order of a household. Have we sufficiently paid attention to the *domestic economy of politics*<sup>30</sup> defining western democratic institutions?

Focusing on rules, rituals and symbolic dimensions of parliamentary cultures, in addition to technological and material settings, is vital to considerations of the anthropological tissue that constitutes parliamentary orders, and to questioning what counts as “modern” in the definition of parliamentary democracies. It assists with addressing the question of how the “invention of tradition” occurs, as well as how parliamentary institutional culture processes both political continuity and institutional change. It renders visible the theoretical and political questions of representation as being both descriptive *and* substantive. It makes explicit that the legislative body, even when aligned with “universal” and “republican” absolutes, has been conceived and reiterated as a conservative, inhospitable ideal and concrete territory. Would it not be time to trouble that legacy, and to stake a claim for more hospitable parliaments?

28. Delphine Gardey, “Bruno Latour: Guerre et Paix, tours et détours féministes,” in *Sous les sciences sociales, le genre. Relectures critiques de Max Weber à Michel Foucault*, eds. Danièle Chabaud-Rychter, Virginie Descoutures, Eleni Varikas, and Anne-Marie Devreux (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 205–218.

29. Donna Haraway, “Modest Witness: Feminist Diffractions in Science Studies,” in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan@\_Meets\_On coMouse™* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

30. Christine Delphy, *The Main Enemy: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* (London: Women's Research and Resources Center, 1977).

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Salon de 1907. — *Une Séance à la Chambre des Députés, par René Rousseau-Decelle*



François Antoine Vizzavona, *Une séance à la Chambre des députés* by René Rousseau-Decelle  
(A session in the National Assembly), 1907, postcard, photomechanical print, Paris, Bibliothèque  
Historique de la Ville de Paris