Inhabiting the Palais Bourbon Together

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The Democratic Ideals and the Hierarchy of Patterns of Movement in the French National Assembly

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Introduction

For more than two centuries, the French National Assembly has been housed in the Palais Bourbon – in central Paris – which was a princely residence before the French Revolution. The Assembly has not left this place since. It has gradually been configured to meet its needs, and even expanded in the 1970s by adding on other buildings in the neighbourhood. Despite efforts to make the Palais Bourbon as functional as possible, it remains a place that was not designed for the use of a state institution. Space is limited and the historical character of the site makes difficult to carry out extensive work. Since the end of the 19th century, many deputies (equivalent to Members of Parliament) have been unsuccessfully calling for the construction of a modern parliament. Not only would the cost of such a project be monumental, but the idea of abandoning this symbolic place is also controversial. The Assembly has little choice but to make do with a place that is fundamentally unsuited to its needs.

To remedy this architectural defect and organise the movement of individuals in the Palais Bourbon, the parliamentary administration works hard. For the civil servants, a crucial question arises: how to welcome all the users of the Palais, how to make them live together in harmony and without giving up the symbolic ambition that this place should embody (Leston-Bandeira, 2016)? I would like to show here that, in order to achieve this objective, the Assembly is now based on a strict policy of the movement of individuals, without which it would simply not be able to carry out the tasks assigned to it. For the anthropologist, studying this policy of movement is a rich opportunity to question the materiality of the parliamentary world beyond its architectural, patrimonial and symbolic dimensions alone and to instead highlight its structuring effect on the daily activities of the individuals who work there (Goodsell, 1988).

The work I am presenting here is the result of a PhD thesis in anthropology, which led me to visit the Parliamentary Assembly often for about ten years as an ethnographer (Chibois, 2019). Throughout this experience, I held several positions in this social world and met a wide variety of categories of users - mainly deputies, staff, civil servants and journalists. I also consulted the archives of the parliamentary administration at length, which allowed me to give historical depth to my field observations when I had to juggle with the different badges and rights of movement to carry out my study. To complete the overview of the background of this work, I should point out that my thesis topic was the Assembly's so-called "digital revolution", and that I therefore became interested in this policy on the rights of movement because of a concern about the massive use of digital technologies for access control and video surveillance in the Palais Bourbon.

I will begin by briefly setting out the historical issues of access and movement in the Palais Bourbon and then explain the upheaval the Assembly experienced in the 1980s and 1990s on this matter. I will then detail the solution that the parliamentary administration has devised to solve the new challenges it faced and what the practical and symbolic consequences of this were.

1. A recent Upheaval in the Management of Access and Traffic Inside the Palais Bourbon

The history of the French National Assembly is closely linked to the movement of people within the space in the institution. Revolutionary times gave rise to numerous artistic representations showing the people of Paris cheering the debates of the self-proclaimed Assembly, which helped to create the myth of the public as onlookers who were passionate about the verbal jousting of their elected representatives. What these paintings do not show is that the presence of the crowd was soon considered invasive because it was noisy, fickle and impatient, which initiated attempts at regulation from the very first months of the National Assembly's existence. Because of several riots and popular revolts, protecting the deliberations against the crowd became an essential requirement when the Assembly chose to move to the Palais Bourbon in 1798, where it remains today.

Throughout the 19th century, this requirement was further reinforced under pressure from two forces. Firstly, the threats that the executive power posed to parliamentary sovereignty. The coup d'état of 1852 is the best illustration of this, where the army's intrusion into the Palace was literally experienced as "rape" (Gardey, 2015). As a result, the institution started developing its own defences in order to make the area an autonomous zone. Secondly, two attacks at the end of the 19th century made it clear that it was not only the crowds, but also isolated acts that should be feared. This led to the laying of the foundations for a policy of the movement of people in concentric circles. Observers of parliamentary work (first and foremost journalists) were gradually prevented from mingling with deputies and pushed further and further to the periphery (geographically and in terms of relationships).

From the end of the 19th century, with the formalisation of the parliamentary administration into a modern bureaucracy and the arrival of the golden age of French parliamentarism (under the Third Republic), a complementary dynamic emerged as a result of the need to make the Palais Bourbon the "home of the deputies". To that end, it was deemed necessary to erase as much as possible the presence of the administration staff within the walls of the palace in order to bring peace of mind, but also to reinforce the symbolic power of the elected representatives by granting them the privilege of having the place at their disposal. The installation of modern means of communication throughout the 20th century, particularly the telephone, is a typical example of these issues (Chibois, 2017). If the parliamentary administration was ever interested in the telephone, it was not for long-distance communications throughout France, but to bypass the messengers to communicate from one point to another in the palace.

After about two centuries of this history, these principles for controlling the movement of people in the parliamentary space have been shaken up by three major changes within the institution. Firstly, in the late 1970s, the Palais Bourbon decided to buy and construct additional buildings to provide personal offices for deputies. Secondly, the status of "parliamentary collaborator" was created in the 1980s to support the work of deputies and groups (Phélippeau, 2005). Thirdly, the anti-parliamentary discourse reached such a magnitude at that time that the powers that be of the institution have increased the number of initiatives in the project to make the Palais the "people's house" (Abélès, 2011), including the creation of a parliamentary TV channel, a children's parliament and, especially the development of guided tours of the palace on a large scale.

2. A Policy of "Separation of Flows" as a Response to New Challenges

Thus, within two decades, the Palais, which was a small space reserved for a limited number of regulars, saw its surface area suddenly expand and its level of attendance explode. The rights of movement, as implemented and patiently built since the Assembly was installed in the Palais, was suddenly faced with a paradox. It was necessary to make the Palais both the "house of the deputies" and the "people's house". In other words, the Palais needed to become a private as well as a public place while clearly emphasizing its symbolic and heritage dimensions.

To take up the challenge, the parliamentary administration has set up a policy known as the "separation of flows", consisting, on the one hand, of assigning dedicated entrances to the various categories of users of the palace and, on the other hand, assigning them authorised areas in which they could move. But movement jams appear, especially in central areas such as the "sacred perimeter" where the palace's heritage and architectural heritage is concentrated. This is why, in the most coveted areas, individual patterns of movement vary dynamically, depending on the hours of the day, the days of the week and the weeks of the year.

For instance, on days when the Assembly is not in session, there is no activity around the hemicycle. Therefore, in the so-called "sacred perimeter", there are few deputies and civil

servants and no journalists, the place is entirely devoted to guided tours, and some rooms can accommodate public conferences. On days when the Assembly is in session, this "sacred perimeter" is reserved exclusively for deputies, with some places adjacent to the meeting places for deputies and journalists. On these days, guided tours take a different route so that they can only visit the hemicycle from the public galleries.

This separation of flows is backed up against an elaborate system of access badges, which not only allows security officers to visually check that everyone does not overstep their rights of movement, but also to take advantage of the automation provided by digital access control technologies. In most functional areas, far from the view of visitors and television cameras, movement controls are carried out automatically by detecting the type of badge each individual is presenting. In the most mediatised or sensitive places, the parliamentary officers carry out the sorting and control by their discreet presence which has, in addition to the flexibility offered by human judgement, the great advantage of making access limits invisible and thus suggesting to the uninformed eye that the place be opened to the greatest number of people.

It should be noted that, since the early 2000s, all staff and visitors have been required to wear their badge visibly in all circumstances in order to make identification and verification possible. However, there are two notable exceptions to this general rule who do not need to wear badges: (1) Members of Parliament, whose faces staff have memorised and (2) individuals taking part in guided tours, whose presence is supervised by a guide. The consequence of this double exception is that, from the point of view of these two categories of users, nothing seems to hinder traffic in the Palais Bourbon, making it truly appear as a place welcoming to all. We are therefore dealing with a "exhibition" situation where the presence of the public "is part of the show" (Bennett, 1988), in a operation where visitors come to see the heritage of the Assembly as much as to be seen walking across the Palace, which aims to portray the opening of the institution to the public.

3. The Control of Interactions Between the Different Categories of Users of the Palais

For those who are neither deputies nor visitors, the parliamentary space is, on the contrary, a very fragmented space, both geographically and socially. For them, the badge does not symbolise the privilege of access to the focal point of the Republic, but rather a stigma that limits their freedom of movement and therefore their freedom of interaction. It is indeed important to understand that in this management of movement, it is fundamentally the control of interactions that is at stake. The two-century-old policy of keeping spectators away from the periphery and dedicating the heart of the Palace to the deputies alone has been transformed into a policy aimed at controlling who interacts with whom in the Palace and, above all, who interacts with the deputies.

In concrete terms, with this new policy, the deputies remain the legitimate *protagonists* par excellence (Heurtin, 1994) and visitors are only legitimate symbolically. Deputies' freedom of

movement is almost total, so that all the other users' patterns of movement revolve around the way they occupy the space of the Palais. For example, parliamentary assistants' badge only authorises them to circulate in corridors where their employer has an office and where their political group is located. Furthermore, journalists' badges only allow them to go to the galleries of the hemicycle, and to the Salle des quatre colonnes (Four Columns Hall) where they are only allowed to interview deputies after the sittings. Finally, civil servants' badges mean that they are only allowed to move about in those areas of the Palais that are necessary for their tasks.

Thus there is a hierarchy of traffic regimes, i.e. a hierarchy of access badges, which is attached to the implicit symbolic hierarchy that organises the users of the Palais according to their degree of involvement with legislative work. From a spatial point of view, this hierarchy of badges means that (deputies and visitors aside) the more individuals are *protagonists* in legislative work, the closer they are allowed to get to the heart of the parliamentary space that is the hemicycle. The more they are in the official position of *observers*, the more they are kept on the periphery. From a relational point of view, the more individuals are *protagonists*, the more their interactions with elected officials tend to be face-to-face; the more they are *observers*, the more their interactions with elected officials are mediated by communication tools (Le Torrec 2005) such as video broadcasting, telephone, SMS or email.

Consequently, we can see that this policy of "separation of flows" does not call into question the frontal opposition between the figures of the deputy and the public, i.e. between the protagonist and the observer, but reinforces it. Opening up the parliamentary space, in the French National Assembly, does not mean making the public protagonists, nor does it mean getting them to work with deputies. On the contrary, it means erecting virtual glass walls around the deputies so that the public can get as close as possible to the deliberations and become a kind of super-onlookers, in a logic similar to that which led to the construction of the famous dome of the German Parliament (Waylen & al., 2014). The Assembly's response to the rise in anti-parliamentary discourses, and more generally to the transformation of representative democracy over the last forty years, is not aimed at altering the places of each of these two protagonists (for example, in the direction of a more participatory democracy) but at consolidating the principles of republican elitism and the representative role.

Conclusion

Thus, the main interest of this policy of the "separation of flows", apart from allowing a large number of individuals to share the Palais Bourbon, is to make certain categories of users invisible to each other. In this way, the parliamentary administration is able to demonstrate that this place is, at times, the "house of the deputies" and at other times, the "people's house". Better still, in doing so, it even manages to show itself to be the emblematic place where deputies and people meet, thus embodying this ideal of an institution that guarantees popular sovereignty. The French National Assembly fully accepts the paradox that access and freedom of movement must be as tightly controlled as possible in order to make open and transparent public life possible.

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