REDESCRIPTIONS
Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

Book Review: *The Anthropology of Parliaments: Entanglements in Democratic Politics* by Emma Crewe, Routledge, 2021, 242 pages. ISBN: 9781350089594

BOOK REVIEW

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Emma Crewe is professor of Social Anthropology at SOAS, University of London, UK. For almost two decades, she has been developing an anthropological approach to the unique political institutions that are parliaments, in Europe and around the world. This book is another important step in a personal research agenda already distinguished by the publication of *House of Commons: An Anthropology of MPs at Work* (Bloomsbury 2015) and *Lords of Parliament: Manners, Rituals and Politics* (Manchester University Press 2005).

The book is 229 pages long (including the bibliography and the index). It is divided into nine chapters that can be read independently and divided into three parts. The author's objectives are 'to summarise what anthropologists have written about parliaments so far and provoke questions for future research [and] to continue what previous anthropologists have already shown: that anthropology can be useful to the study of parliaments' (p. 2). Indeed, according to the author, anthropology helps 'to wrestle with a series of questions and puzzles about gender, whipping, emotion, ritual, conflict ad political work left unsolved by political science' (p. 3).

This is a state-of-the-art book, for which the author explains that she 'make[s] no claim to be comprehensive, holistic or systematic about parliaments in this book' (p. 2) and which she chooses to present by drawing primarily on her own research on the Westminster case. The book is written for researchers and students, and in particular for those who are interested 'in researching parliaments ethnographically' (p. 3) and who are therefore not necessarily trained in anthropology. The author devotes a long part of the introduction (chapter 1) to 'explaining [her] version of anthropology' (*ibid.*) and its methodological issues, and then details how she became progressively interested and specialised in this research object.

Part 1 consists of three chapters in which Crewe writes about 'the nature of everyday political work and what it is involved when politicians are electioneering, representing, governing and scrutinizing' (p. 29). In order to carry out the tasks attached to their

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mandate, MPs are led to adopt contradictory behaviours as they constantly address audiences with different expectations. Yet, the author tells us, 'most politicians find ways of dealing with it without breaking down' (*ibid.*). To understand how they do this, the author begins in chapter 2 by looking at 'what voting means and does to relationships between people', with a particular focus on the ritual dimension whereby 'the will of the people is treated as sacred' (p. 31). Chapter 3 looks at what the activity of representation entails in terms of social processes and relations, attempting to take the opposite view from political studies and, in doing so, drawing on feminist theories of under-representation. In chapter 4, Crewe poses the question of what state scrutiny means for MPs, pointing out that there is an aspect of parliamentary work here that remains poorly understood due to a general lack of knowledge of 'what states are and what they do' (p. 80). In particular, the ambivalent action of the state regarding the population is little dealt with in the literature, since it escapes from the 'rigid typologies' (p. 81) of political science. Overall, this first part shows how MPs constantly perform their role on a daily basis, constantly adapting to places, audiences and expectations, demonstrating a high capacity for 'shapeshifting' (p. 100).

The three chapters in part two focus on the work of MPs from the perspective of culture. Emma Crewe begins by reminding us that in anthropology, this notion should not be considered as static but rather as 'something you do, create, reproduce and contest, not something you have or live in' (p. 103). On this basis, the author explains that three processes structure the culture of parliaments, around which inter-personal relations between MPs, and therefore alliances and enmities, are built and broken. The first of these processes is that of the 'rhythms of performance' (p. 107), which is the subject of chapter 5 and which gives MPs' activity a temporal structure made up of repetitions in space and time around incessantly reproduced schedules. The second process, dealt with in chapter 6 and called 'riffs of meaning' (p. 131), allows the MPs to give meaning and to communicate about their action. The third process, presented in chapter 7 and entitled 'rituals and symbols' (p. 154), is situated at the intersection of the first two. Through this last process, recurring events that are particularly charged with meaning can be the subject of discourses and practices that have a singular status, extra-ordinary because they are assimilated to the foundations of the parliamentary order. With these three processes, Crewe intends to propose 'a more generative way of conceiving MPs' work than the reliance on a typology of roles of functions' (p. 105). The strength of this alternative analytical grid is that it gives a central place to processes, i.e. to the profoundly changing and performing dimensions of the parliamentary order, as well as to its interdisciplinary aspect.

Part 3 provides a two-part conclusion to the book, in which Crewe attempts to take a step back from the field of research of which she has been working to define the scope. In chapter 8, she returns to the difficulty of studying the political, social and cultural entanglements and asks 'where to focus our gaze [as a researcher], and how to study the entanglements with a sense of proportion' (p. 175). Here, she defends an idea central to an anthropology of parliaments, according to which 'the meaning of democracy shapeshifts across the world' (p. 192), making it important to study the variations of its institutions. Moreover, she argues that researchers could play a role as intermediaries between elected representatives and the population, proposing in each cultural context a reflection on the best ways to articulate the principles of representative democracy with the new expectations of citizen participation. In chapter 9, the author then offers a reflexive analysis of the place of improvisation in her own research practice and more broadly in the foundation of anthropological

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analysis, as a mode of reciprocal learning between researchers and informants. Finally, the book ends with a discussion of the many grey areas that still affect the comprehensive knowledge of parliaments and opens with a call 'to encourage other anthropologists to study parliaments around the world or better still, to work in governments and stand for election' (p. 209) in order to think about the current and future transformations of democracy.

On closing the book, I was convinced by the author's choice of a state of the art far from the canonical form of the genre, in which she chooses to assume a point of view from her personal research agenda. The fact that her chapters are articulated around specifically identified tensions rather than around the supposed times of the law-making process or around the missions classically devolved to the legislative power makes complete sense. In this way, it is to Crewe's credit that the book gives a good account of a characteristic of parliaments that is rarely taken seriously: the intensity and complexity of the social life that they host. Furthermore, Crewe's ethnographic experience enables her to develop a detailed understanding of the reality of MPs' work, of the issues at stake and of the expectations associated with it, which allows the reader to go beyond his or her own representations and stereotypes. From this point of view, the book has every chance of fulfilling its objective of shifting the focus to this type of institution.

Moreover, from an anthropologist's point of view, we should praise the dynamic analysis model based on three structuring processes, which the author suggests as an alternative to the universal use of typologies within legislative studies. First, the author convinces us that there is a way forward to renew in depth, not so much the raw knowledge of the functioning of a parliament but the way we understand and view the place of MPs and parliamentary institutions in today's democracies. In this respect, it is not insignificant that the question of the relations between MPs and citizens (including researchers) constitutes an implicit thread in this book, which makes it possible to shed light on now-classic issues from an original angle. In this instance, we are concerned with the lived meaning of political representation, which is at the heart of the analysis of the ordinary activities that make up MPs' work. In turn, this could establish the specificity of the anthropological view of parliaments in, as contrasted with, political and legal sciences.

To conclude, if it is possible to initiate a discussion, I would like to point out what, from the point of view of my own research, seems to me to be two broader issues that have been relatively ignored by the anthropology of parliaments. The first is the obvious and almost unilateral neglect of all the most invisible and least legitimate protagonists in the legislative process: collaborators, civil servants and also lobbyists, etc. If we read this book literally, there is no reason to think that these 'unskilled workers' have offices, salaries and missions. On the other hand, MPs would be unable to act if they could not rely on these individuals' work. How do we think about their place in the parliamentary order? If anthropologists are not interested in them, if we do not draw attention to their participation in parliamentary work, who will? The second grey area concerns those specific actors that are the parliaments themselves, whose voice is often embodied by their presidents, independently of the MPs. These institutions have the capacity to act in their own right, mainly through the arm of their administration, and it happens that their interests occasionally conflict with those of the MPs. What status should be given to the internal controversies that arise in this way? Is this not also a vector for the transformation of institutional culture that anthropologists would benefit from studying?

These two issues seem to me to highlight the fact that, to date, the anthropology of parliaments is essentially limited to an anthropology of the work of MPs, whereas it could more broadly trend towards an anthropology of democracy. It is as if anthropologists accepted that the parliamentary institution defined the scope of their topics of interest and thus recognised the universality of their hierarchy of values. This raises questions not only about the scope and power of parliamentary ideology in the contemporary world but also about its permeation within the academic community. Shouldn't we study this subject by taking a step back, by investigating the sectors of activity that the institutions strive to preserve from scrutiny and by highlighting the logic and foundations of this ideology that they struggle to concretise on a daily basis? On these issues, the two chapters that Emma Crewe devotes to these matters at the end of her book are stimulating and should open up first-rate avenues of research.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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