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Keynote I: “Parliament as an emotional space: Historical reflections” by Ute Frevert (Max Planck Institute for Human Development)

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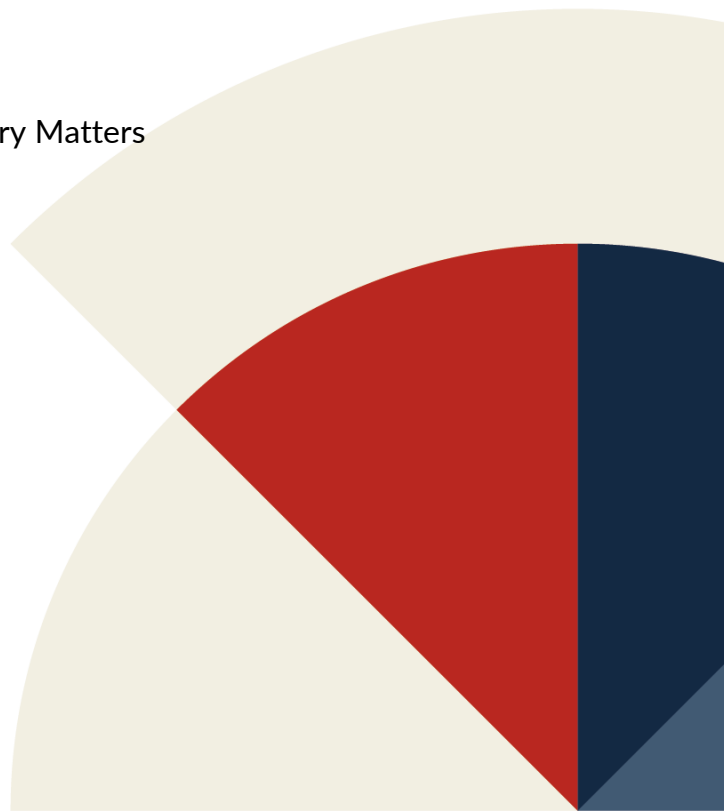
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Thank you for these very kind words of introduction and above all, thank you for inviting me here to this beautiful city of Vienna, which I confess is my second best loved city in the world. The first one is, of course, Berlin.

Now, analysing the role of emotions in democracy as we are doing today invites us to focus on parliament as a major democratic institution. That focus includes multiple elements:

Parliament first as a political site, a body for political deliberation and decision making.

Parliament is also a social site, a forum for social interaction and communication.

And last but not least, parliament is a material site, an architecture with a particular emotional message, or maybe even more than one message.

As a historian, I would like to shed light on all three elements as they are closely intertwined.

Let me start with politics. Politics underwent major transformations during the 19th century. Until the French Revolution, political decisions had been the monopoly of a mostly monarchical ruler who was surrounded by a hand-picked group of councillors and ministers. From time to time, the monarch would gather together the representatives of the estate, the clergy, the nobility, the commoners. They deliberated over taxes or legislation, though they did not have a real say on them.

This all changed after 1789 when the Third Estate famously assumed power and formed a national assembly that was supposed to be in charge of all political matters. That was the beginning of what we might call participatory politics, politics in which the whole nation participated.

For over a century, the nation consisted of male citizens only, although women from the very start had demanded to be included as well. Their demands, however, had been bluntly rejected. The reasons given for that rejection actually offer a window that allows us to approach the issue of emotions first-hand.



Since the late 18th century, people had been debating who should in fact enjoy full citizenship and political rights. For the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant, the answer was clear: only men - as long as they were economically and socially independent. The latter ruled out servants or day labourers who were, though, not categorically excluded. Every servant could become an active citizen once he stood on his own feet.

Women, though, regardless of their social status, could not due to their so-called natural qualities. What kind of qualities were these, we may ask, and why did they bar women from politics?

Let's zoom in on an article from 1838 written by the South German professor and liberal politician Carl Welcker. He argued firmly against women's equal and direct participation in elections, assemblies, or parliamentary representation. Such participation, he stated, would disrupt families and marriages. It would undermine "true femininity" and run counter to women's purpose in life.

But again, how and why would politics disrupt family life? The answer was: Because they were passionate. Politics, as the author knew from first-hand experience, was about different opinions, different values, different interests. These differences were passionately contested with "rage, defiance, and impatience". In those fights, women could but lose. Either their "mild, soft nature" would put them at a disadvantage and prevent them from raising their voices or - and this option was deemed far more dangerous - they might learn to be passionate as well. This would then spill over into family and marriage. It would destroy what a member of the first German National Assembly in 1849 called the "inner sanctuary", where men, returning from their passionate worldly struggles, found the necessary peace and quiet.

What we should keep in mind here is that politics was not considered a rational business, where people exchanged thoughtful arguments and strove to find reasonable compromises. Precisely the opposite held true. Politics, and parliamentary politics above all, were considered passionate affairs, "hotbeds of feuding", as the above-mentioned delegate of 1849 put it.



Actually, this building here bears ample testimony to such feuding. Just think of the controversies concerning language politics in 1897 that Mark Twain and many others reported on. Twain was stunned by how Reichsrat members insulted each other, how they screamed at and yelled at and cursed each other during plenary sessions. In 1900, the young Czechs used all kinds of musical and non-musical instruments to make their protests known.

We saw similar spectacles of passionate encounters in the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848–49. Representatives came from various political factions and they fought bitterly about each and everything. As their plenary sessions were public, the audience, both men and women, contributed their own vitriol. Outside of parliament, crowds of people gathered, bringing more or less threatening messages and interventions. Riots, murder, and civil war scenarios formed the backdrop to parliamentary debates. Street politics followed their own emotional script and continued to do so until this very day.

This said, it becomes clear that participatory politics, as they developed after 1789, were deeply enmeshed in passions and affects, sentiments and feelings. Parliament served as a major theatre of emotions and was closely observed by the public. Newspapers printed parliamentary reports and journalists provided their own comments, took sides, and stoked conflicts. At times, such conflicts of opinion even resulted in real-life duels, in Germany, as much as in Austria, France, or Switzerland. When the newly established Swiss Parliament met for its first session in 1848, two members clashed in a way that made a sabre fight inevitable. In Austria, Prime Minister Baldeni challenged a representative to a pistol duel in 1897, when the latter called him a political scoundrel – a „Schuft“.

But again, parliament was not an isolated political sphere. Its members were elected by the people, first by men, later by women, too. Electoral campaigns were anything but sober or dull. Instead, they were fought with passion and antagonistic feeling. The German term „Wahlkampf“ says it all. No „Kampf“ is fought and won with material weapons only. The English „campaign“ also bears military associations of victory and



defeat that again have strong emotional overtones in an age that teems with nationalistic fervour.

At the same time, parliament was thought to represent the whole nation in all its political factions. MPs considered themselves „Vertrauensmänner des Volkes“, trustees of the people. Being trusted involved a direct mode of communication, not just during elections, but also during the legislative period. We still do not have enough evidence of how that communication worked, if it served to whip up or simmer down emotions. In 1848-49, there were many MPs who regularly met with their constituency or wrote letters explaining constitutional procedure. This communication clearly introduced a more sober and restrained tone. The same held true for the short-lived parliament of the North German Federation of 1867, where Austria was no longer present.

Looking at the private correspondence of MPs, another element comes to the fore: the role of parliament as a site of social encounter, my second focus today. Even though men spent many hours in plenary sessions and committees, they still had time for socializing at lavish dinners and comfortable get-togethers.

Sometimes those get-togethers would be politically exclusive, meaning that members of political factions met only among themselves to discuss political strategy and tactics. But more often than not, they also met across factions. Certain citizens of Frankfurt in 1848-49 were famous for hosting dinners or lunches that deliberately brought members of warring political factions together. They were a kind of public-private events. One spoke behind closed doors, but not among themselves. In this way, compromises could be tested and worked out.

The Frankfurt experience was not unique in this regard. The Wilhelmine Parliament was likewise known for offering spaces and opportunities to meet political opponents and reach agreements that would not have been possible in plain view. Bismarck, for example, regularly invited MPs to what we now would call a happy hour, an early evening meeting at the Chancellery that allowed friends and foes to mingle and discuss politics over a glass of beer or two.



During the Weimar Republic, that kind of considerate exchange and the search for compromise mostly happened in parliamentary committees that met separately from plenary sessions. While the latter's tone was frequently antagonistic and polarizing, including physical fights, the former were geared towards collegiality, mutual respect, and sometimes even friendship.

This brings me to my third and final observation about parliaments and emotions: spatial politics. Parliaments are buildings designed by architects and negotiated with those in power. How they look, where they are located, how big or small they are, all this sends a particular emotional message about what happens inside.

The first German National Assembly met in a Lutheran church. The neoclassical building seemed particularly well suited to host the assembly since it offered the largest and most modern space within the city of Frankfurt. Furthermore, its centralized design allowed everyone to easily hear the speaker. Of course, the most obvious religious symbols had to be disguised. The walls and windows were decorated with black, red, and gold flags. The pulpit was veiled and the organ covered by a curtain that bore a painting of Germania as symbol of the nation. Still, the serene character of the site was obvious to all, representatives and spectators alike. It helped to emphasize and enforce the importance of what was being done there: the drafting of a German constitution. Religious symbolism also adorned the depiction of the first major document passed by the Assembly: the Fundamental Rights of the German People.

Fast forward from Frankfurt to Vienna, where members of the Reichsrat met, from 1883, in a huge and conspicuously beautiful building commissioned by the Austrian Emperor. His colleague in Berlin quickly joined the competition by mandating a new, equally prestigious building for the Imperial Reichstag. It was erected between 1884 and 1894 and praised by a liberal newspaper as a "palace that, in all its glory, does not shy away from comparison with the old royal palace". Commending its architectural splendour, the liberal paper expressed the pride and confidence of democratic parliamentarianism, although it could not conceal that the most important political



decisions continued to be taken in the old palace rather than in the new one.

When power relations shifted, the new palace initially had to be evacuated due to post-war street rioting in Berlin. The new National Assembly that was elected by both men and women in January 1919 moved to Weimar, the cradle of German classicism. The Assembly's central meeting place was the German National Theatre, with Goethe and Schiller holding guard. This was again highly and deliberately symbolic. The new spirit of the republic should have its foundation in the spirit of enlightened humanism. Amid this very aura, the new constitution was drafted and the first president sworn in. Soon after, the Assembly moved back to Berlin, to the Reichstag, which in February 1933 was set ablaze by a Dutch communist. One day later, the president issued a decree that suspended the basic rights protected by the Weimar constitution.

After World War II, the Reichstag again stood in ruins right at the border of the divided city. As the GDR's constitution abolished the classical separation of powers and put all power into the hands of the ruling party, the „Volkskammer“, the parliament, was relatively marginal and met only twice or at most four times a year. Until 1976, elected representatives convened in a provisional hall before they moved into the newly established „Palast der Republik“, a huge building in the centre of Berlin at the site of the former royal palace, which had been torn down by GDR authorities in the 1950s.

The new palace not only hosted the parliament, it also served as a space for popular entertainment with restaurants, dance floors, and theatres. This dual-use system was meant to align citizens with their representatives in an open, modern, and generous atmosphere. People and parliament, as the message went, were one of a kind.

Meanwhile, West Germany had shifted its capital to the small Rhenish city of Bonn. When Länder delegates met here in 1948–49 to draft a new constitution – another one –, they were hosted by the former Pedagogical Academy, built in the early 1930s in the international style of Neue Sachlichkeit. Passers-by could watch them do their work through large windows.



The aura of transparency also prevailed during the many decades when the parliament convened in a newly annexed plenary chamber. Its architect was very keen on keeping the building on a “human scale”, which for him meant avoiding the magnitude of both the Wilhelmine and the Nazi period. Its dimensions, he said, should not become “inhuman” and “express a wrong grandeur”. Instead, they should maintain that “the individual human had worth”. This kind of modesty and humility was complemented by open spaces within the building, such as a cafeteria where representatives had lunch together across party lines and mingled with visitors from outside. Those arrangements demonstrated and were meant to demonstrate the new democratic and equalizing spirit of the Federal Republic.

To sum up and conclude:

First, participatory politics, as they developed during the 19th century, were inconceivable without political emotions – emotions like trust and love, but also emotions like mistrust, outrage, and even hatred. Those emotions played out in many political theatres, in street politics (demonstrations) as much as in party assemblies and social movements. They were omnipresent in electoral campaigns, and they also travelled into parliament as the focal point of democratic self-government. Remember the 1849 MP who talked about the National Assembly as a “hotbed of feuding”!

Second, parliament was, however, not just a place for passionate arguments and antagonistic controversy, it was also – at least under full parliamentary rule – a place for social communication and encounter. In addition to plenary sessions where many representatives used to speak out of the window, political compromise could be facilitated and achieved by representatives crossing party lines over lunch or a beer. Committee work that took place behind closed doors also helped to ease antagonisms and cool passions down. More important and difficult issues were generally prepared through committees before being voted on by the plenary.

And third, parliaments were and are works of architecture. As such, they convey messages of grandeur and glory, power and self-confidence, but they can also express emotions like humility and modesty. They can pose as monumental palaces infusing



pride and superiority, but they can also exude transparency and openness, accessibility and equality. Over the course of two centuries, we see a trend towards more transparency. In contrast, traditional houses of parliament like Westminster stick to very different spatial arrangements which, as we might imagine, allow for very different emotional intercourse.

Thank you very much.