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Getting to the soul of parliaments: using multi-methods to understand the parliamentary ecosystem

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Abstract: This chapter tracks my journey of just over 30 years studying parliaments, to explore the challenges arising with the study of this institution and the myriad of approaches that I have used. It shows that in order to understand this institution of power, one needs to view it as an ecosystem and adopt varied and supplementary methods. It also explores some of the paradoxes inherent to the institution and how these shape its study. As my journey spans the time before and after the rise of the internet, this is a core element of this reflection: how what we know and can access of the institution shapes the study of parliaments and how this has changed. My reflections are based on my journey developing research about a range of parliaments, from Portugal to the UK, with stops in Brazil, France, Europe and Scotland.

Introduction

I have been researching parliaments for over 30 years. From the study of a legal document to the focus on how citizens interact with parliament, my journey has encompassed a wide range of foci of research and different parliaments. In this short piece I reflect on this journey – what it has taught me about studying parliaments and what is the key to developing a study that gets to the soul of parliament, that is a deep understanding of why parliaments work the way they do. This is a personal reflection informed by my own experiences studying parliament, which have shaped the way I approach the institution still today. I start with an outline of my journey trying to understand parliaments, where I explain how researching a newly democratic parliament such as the Portuguese shaped my approach to the study of parliament, and what this taught me in contrast with the well-established American and British traditions in the study of legislatures. In the second part of this piece, I identify lessons from this journey, namely the paradoxical nature of parliaments as public yet utterly private institutions.

My journey so far in trying to understand parliaments

The Portuguese beginnings

So, I started studying parliaments in 1990. Amongst the fall of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, the release of Mandela from prison, and soon after the defiance and subsequent blood bath of Tiananmen Square in China. But I was nowhere near any of these. I was in Lisbon, Portugal, doing my undergraduate degree in Sociology (*yes, I am a sociologist by training – never took a course in politics, let alone the so-called political science*) in a still fresh newly democratic regime of only 16 years. We had a

young democracy and, with it, a young parliament, after 48 years of fascist dictatorship. This has most definitely shaped my journey studying parliaments.

Perhaps I even need to step back a little more, to the birth of the new democratic regime in Portugal. I come from a highly political family. My parents had moved to France to get away from the dictatorship regime. When the revolution happened on the 25 April 1974, my mother was on the first flight back to Portugal to witness it all first-hand. By July my parents had auctioned everything in their flat in Paris and moved back to Portugal. I grew up amongst (*chaotic*) political demonstrations and (*boring*) party meetings. Every step of the development of the new democratic regime was deeply lived. My grandmother often queued to attend the public galleries of the new parliament and listen to debates. In short, politics, deep belief in core democratic values, but also the intensity of different political views (*not all the family thought the same way!*) have been ingrained in me for all my life. This shapes still today my approach to studying parliament.

My first study of parliament was of its rules: an analysis of the *Regimento*, the Rules of Procedure of the Portuguese parliament, the *Assembleia da República* still in my undergraduate studies (Leston-Bandeira and Magalhães 1990). It may seem an incredibly dry object of research, but it was in fact a perfect introduction to the study of parliament. The Rules of Procedure determine the internal formal rules that oversee all parliamentary work. These rules are particularly important in a new democracy, as they dictate who has power, the relationships between political actors and the pace and feel of parliament. What is more, what I found already then in my research was that the Rules of Procedure, and the way in which they are amended over the years, gives us a unique and precious insight into how a new parliament develops. It signifies political actors' preferences and vision for democratic practices, but also how power is exercised within the parliamentary arena through such simple means as setting time limits for interventions in parliamentary debates. I would later expand this study considerably in my PhD research. Over 30 years later, these same Rules of Procedure have consolidated, but they still shape parliamentary behaviour and norms within the *Assembleia da República* and any new amendment signifies yet another set of priorities from parliamentarians.

The methods I used then were traditional legal analysis of procedural articles and their amendments, but, utilising my critical sociology approach, also an understanding of the consequences of those articles onto power, relationships, pace and feel of parliament, together with the context of who proposed which amendments, and why. The legal analysis would not give me the why though. Interviews were the key for this, as well as the analysis of the official verbatim record of parliamentary debates, combined with news reports. Already then, a multi-methods research approach emerged as the only way to understand this institution. The legal documents may tell me of rules and priorities, but not of their context, aims and impact on practice.

Now, can I take you back to the fact that this was in 1990? This means the inexistence of the internet (*or more precisely, the inexistence of widespread internet, as in fact I think the internet was being created at the time*). To access any of these documents – Rules of Procedure, amendments, record of parliamentary debates, news reports – one would not simply open a web browser. One would have to physically go somewhere that holds these types of documents. Some, such as news reports, were available in public local archives. However, to access parliamentary material, one would need to physically go to the (*beautiful*) library inside parliament. To do so, one needed contacts and longwinded processes of writing letters. These experiences taught me a lot about access but also about the nature of parliament as a public

yet private institution. It also meant that in order to get to the object of my research, I actually had to liaise with the institution (and its staff) at a relatively deep level, having to get to grips with the organisation before even starting my research. In short, the process of researching parliament was in itself developing my understanding of the institution. Before getting to the point of collecting any data, I had to get a sense of the place and its people.

Something else deriving from the context of studying parliament in a newly democratic country was the almost inexistence of research to refer to. The few studies on the Portuguese parliament had been developed mainly by historians (on pre-democratic era iterations of a parliament, e.g. Pinto dos Santos 1986) and constitutional lawyers (e.g. Miranda 1979, Rebelo de Sousa 1983); with a handful of precious exceptions which would give me the basis on which to start, namely Baptista Coelho 1989, Braga da Cruz 1988 and Lobo Antunes 1988. There was therefore a mountain to uncover and understand, particularly of political practice. Furthermore, access to books, particularly foreign books, was very difficult. For theories, I was reliant on the scholarly work I could find in libraries (*remember, no internet*), mainly French, Italian and Spanish; some American and British stuff, but not much. This may in part explain why I have always been closer to the empirical reality than to theories; the reality is still today my starting point. What matters studying in reality; not the minute holes identified in complex theoretical frameworks which are often completely disconnected from reality – a particular problem with the study of parliament still today.

The Portuguese beginnings were therefore key in shaping my journey studying parliament and I often reflect on all that it taught me, which no doubt would have passed me by had I been in a different context. It would also give me my first publication, already then based on multi-methods research by interviews, legal analysis of the Rules of Procedure, supplemented by quantitative analysis of scrutiny activity (Leston-Bandeira 1995).

The British initiation

By 1995 I had obtained a scholarship to do my PhD in the UK, at the University of Hull. I came to Hull because I wanted to do my PhD with Philip Norton, after seeing his 1993 book in display at the Portuguese Constitutional Court library (*my favourite*) entitled *Does Parliament Matter?*. That was what I wanted to do for my PhD – an enquiry into whether parliament mattered, and if so why, particularly at times of absolute majorities (as we had at the time in Portugal) and even in non-democratic contexts, inspired by the great Kornberg and Musolf (1970) study of parliaments in non-democratic contexts, getting to the core of what parliaments do beyond democratic ideals. What roles did parliament play, regardless of the politics, as so well outlined in Pakenham's seminal study of the Brazilian Congress during the 1960s military junta (Pakenham 1970)? So, I wrote a little letter to Philip Norton (*remember, no email*), did my British Council IELTS English language exam, applied for a scholarship and ended up in Hull (*slightly different to Lisbon, if you've never been...*).

I still remember the first time I went to the third floor of Hull University's Brynmor Jones library (*famously led by librarian and poet Philip Larkin back in the day*). I was totally in awe of the fact there was a library not only with a whole floor full of books and journals on politics, but also shelves and shelves of books on parliament! Many of which I had seen cited but had never been able to actually read. However, studying parliament in the UK was actually quite difficult at first and much was learned in the lunch time workshops that Philip Norton organised then at the Centre for Legislative Studies – which for a long time felt completely alien to me, so so British 😊.

My research focused on an institution still in its adolescence years (the Portuguese parliament), with not much scholarly work to refer to, whilst in a country where parliament was not only centuries old, but its study well established. One of the consequences of this was that I kept being confronted with specific (Anglo-Saxon) expectations of parliament, its power base(s), relationships, pace and feel. These almost each and every time did not fit with the framework I knew of parliament; and this is despite the fact I knew the UK Parliament was elected through a majoritarian electoral system, was a monarchy, had no written constitution etc. What I had not appreciated was the extent to which this affected everything in parliament, from the way representatives organised their work, to the way voting took place, to the role of staff, to the relationship with citizens.

The initiation in Hull showed me the value of comparing and, more precisely, to never assume that all parliaments do X – often they don't or do it in different ways. It revealed the idiosyncrasies that were perhaps a specific feature of the Portuguese parliament, such as the ubiquitous central role that political parties have in this institution's role and functioning. It also showed though how parliaments could be so different, with the UK Parliament having its own (a plenty) idiosyncrasies. It showed me to never assume anything.

It also made me aware of why I was using multiple methods to study the Portuguese parliament (legal analysis, analysis of verbatim parliamentary records, interviews, media analysis): to get to the practice of parliamentary politics. Having to explain what I knew of the Portuguese parliament to others helped me understand what knowledge I was getting from where. What is more, the contrast between what I knew from books of the UK Parliament and the practical consequences of this in the parliamentary reality reinforced the idea that to understand parliament you need to get under its skin so to say; you need to access it and you need to speak (interview) to people; you also need to observe or, closest, read the verbatim records, to understand the contrast between the formal politics and the informal practices, and how these shape parliamentary reality. In short, only a multi-methods approach really gets to the soul of parliament. My PhD would eventually be published as my first book (Leston-Bandeira 2004).

The focus on the relationship between parliament and citizens

As I finished my PhD and decided to make the UK my home, I soon realised that I would not get very far by being a specialist of the Portuguese parliament. If I was to become a lecturer in the UK, I needed to diversify. And that is how I became a comparativist and eventually ended up specialising on the relationship between parliament and citizens. Besides the Portuguese and UK Parliaments, this would also include studies of the Brazilian (Brum Bernardes and Leston-Bandeira 2016), French, European (Leston-Bandeira 2014), and Scottish parliaments (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018).

My research on newly democratic parliaments led me increasingly to consider the theme of reform of parliament – what makes for democratic parliamentary practices? What is the balance between fair, representative processes, and those that ensure efficiency of outcomes? Are there ideal processes for parliamentary practice? And does any of this matter? Does the way parliamentary practice unfold matter to the way the public perceives parliament, for instance? This would increasingly lead me to focus on the relationship between parliament and public, an area severely under-studied still today. By then the internet had become pervasive in our lives and this would have a huge impact in my research.

It became clear that what people thought and said about parliament was being shaped by this new thing called internet, firstly through the emerging of parliamentary websites, years later through social media,

and crucially not just those accounts managed by parliaments, but all social media; suddenly pretty much everyone could comment, often live, on what was happening in an institution which had hitherto been visible only to those participating in it. This would bring a completely new outlook into parliaments – you did not need to physically access the institution, you could find out about it at the reach of a few clicks; what is more, you could respond to it rather than simply observe it.

However, this was of no interest to parliamentary studies scholars. I remember presenting a paper in 2007 at the International Political Science's Association main conference in Japan, and despite everyone being very kind, they clearly did not get why I was focusing on the impact of the internet on parliaments – this would lead to my article setting out a legislative studies framework for the study of the impact of the internet on parliaments (2007). And this was in great part because studies on parliament focused on its internal workings and behaviour (parties, MPs). At the most, any external focus would stretch to parliament's relationship with the executive and interest groups. The relationship with the public was not really of interest – other than at elections of course. But what the internet, and later on social media, showed very clearly was that the period between elections was becoming increasingly more important to comment, interact, learn, find out. And that, as parliamentary scholars, we could not just focus on the internal workings of parliament, we needed to also understand how these were being communicated to and perceived by those outside.

This would make me develop research on new media and parliament (Leston-Bandeira and Bender 2013), eventually settling on the broader concept of public engagement (Leston-Bandeira 2016), including petitions to parliament. This brings me to a study on which I would like to linger for the remaining of this outline of my journey: research on the new e-petitions system of the UK Parliament (Asher et al 2019; Leston-Bandeira 2019).

This is a study I am particularly proud of, but one that has been very difficult to get through scholarly reviews, both in terms of publishing and grant applications. And, as I reflect upon below, I think this is very symptomatic of the type of challenges parliamentary scholars face: to bridge between parliament's internal workings and its consequences externally.

In this study I employed ethnographic methods such as non-participant observations and interviews, combined with big data analysis thanks to collaboration with incredibly talented colleagues from computational social sciences. So, for example, one specific paper deriving from this research combines methods such as non-participant observations of parliamentary staff meetings and of parliamentary debates, with natural language processing, machine learning and social network analysis of Twitter data (Asher et al 2019). What we do is try to understand how and why parliamentary debates on e-petitions develop, and how these same debates are perceived live by petitioners; contrasting what parliamentary actors expect the debates to be about, and how they are perceived from the outside as they take place. This study showed the value of combining very different methods to understand one very specific reality – and how by combining these methods, we got to a more nuanced understanding of these parliamentary debates. Although published now (and widely cited), this was an article that had multiple journal rejections, as its inter-disciplinary approach did not fit traditional politics journals.

Something else represented in this example was my focus on parliamentary staff in the main. Although I also observed and interviewed MPs, my interest was mainly on staff. Again this has not been the norm in traditional studies of parliament which have tended to focus on politicians. But something that my research on public engagement has shown is the importance of capturing the role of staff in order to

understand parliament – and this is applicable to any other themes within parliamentary studies besides public engagement – though, as I have shown in my research, staff are particularly important to the way parliaments develop and implement public engagement strategies (Leston-Bandeira 2014; Leston-Bandeira 2016; Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018). Whilst politicians come and go, parliamentary staff tend to stay and, collectively, become the institutional memory of a legislature.

I hope this brief sketch of my journey researching parliament so far shows a long path of a few twists, from the Rules of Procedure of the Portuguese parliament to e-petitions to the UK Parliament. I now identify some of the lessons this journey has taught me about the nature of parliament and of its study.

What my journey so far has taught me about parliaments

Parliaments are ecosystems – shaped by actors, relationships and spaces. They are composed of multiple types of actors, each with different – often opposing – agendas, with no single identity and voice for the actual institution of parliament. It is a collective institution where the constitutive parts do not add to a collective entity. To understand parliament, one needs to capture this diversity, but also recognise the existence of often paradoxical perspectives.

The different actors include of course the politicians themselves and the political parties, but also the political staff supporting representatives, the impartial parliamentary staff, the groups of office holders who run parliament, and committees, to name just a few; adjacent to these, but as important, are those external actors who affect parliamentary practice, namely the executive, interest groups, journalists, charities and public in general. The over focus on just politicians in parliamentary studies has often missed the full picture. That focus is understandable in that representatives are the ones who have the legitimacy to act on behalf of citizens (mostly due to being elected). This is reinforced by the public visibility of representatives. They are the ones who personify parliamentary politics. However, they clearly do not do their job on their own – there has to be a system, an infrastructure, other people supporting that role. But this is often forgotten in studies of parliament, so much so that studies on parliamentary support staff are still only few and far between.

The parliamentary ecosystem encompasses endless relationships and networks which define political practice. These vary acquiring different contours according to the different fora in which they take place, from the political party headquarters, to the private meeting with a constituent, or a committee hearing. Getting to the core of parliamentary activity therefore involves understanding how those relationships and networks develop and their consequences, and an insight into the different fora in which parliamentary activity may be taking place. This includes informal and formal fora, as well as internal and external to the institution of parliament itself.

Parliament is not only an ecosystem, but one in the public eye. This means that there will always be the action that is meant to be seen publicly and the action that takes place in private, behind closed doors and off-the-record. And this is not about misleading others or hiding behaviour – it is simply about the private spaces and relationships that support and facilitate the public work. Failing to grasp this is completely misunderstanding politics, but also human interactions. Our lives are built on private spaces.

Parliament is also an institution that leaves trace. Most modern parliaments produce records of one sort or another, namely verbatim records of debates and the text of laws. In fact, the majority of parliaments

produce huge daily amounts of data; each and every one being an opportunity for research. There are many advantages to these records, namely in them representing the official perspective of specific actors, but also of portraying politics as it happened. However, there is a danger of researchers being tempted by so much data. For parliamentary data to be meaningful, one needs to understand its ecosystem and to use multi-methods, such as a combination of documentary analysis and interviews.

As recalled above, the existence of the internet has made a huge difference in the study of parliament, namely in terms of access to parliamentary data. Once protracted long distances and longwinded processes can now be overcome at the touch of a few clicks. However, this in many ways has created a false reality. This is what I refer to as the access paradox. Yes, material, data, information is now far more accessible than it used to be. However, this does not equate to access to the informal practices shaping parliamentary practice. What is more, the online access can give a false sense of proximity – the data is there, let's analyse it – without the understanding of the ecosystem that contextualises the data. Access to data does not equate to its understanding.

All of this means that to get to the soul of parliament, that is a deep understanding of parliaments, one needs to utilise multiple methods and sources of data. The study of parliament needs to be able to disentangle through the maze of different perspectives and the ever-shifting cause and effect mechanisms taking place. This is a highly political environment naturally imbued with multiple perspectives of the same phenomenon. To follow just one perspective is to ignore the reality. Interviews work well to capture opinions, attitudes and values, but being complemented by the analysis of the official record provides them with new meaning still. Conversely, to simply consider the official record is to ignore the informal practices which shape parliamentary politics.

Throughout my career studying different parliaments, one constant is the disregard for, accompanied by misunderstanding of, the institution. This is not just about public perceptions. This happens within academia. Disregard derives in great part from the belief that all politicians are the same, they are all in it for themselves, and they all just want power. This is accompanied, and reinforced, by the lack of understanding about the difference between parliament and government. This may seem very simplistic, but it matters hugely and after 30 years of studying the institution, in such different contexts, it always shocks me to see it filtering through, including amongst politics academics.

This is probably in great part again because parliaments are in the public eye and are, in truth, one of the most visible institutions of politics. We do not see regular insights into cabinet meetings, most people would not be able to identify the building of government (*ok, 10 Downing Str in the UK is pretty famous, but that has more to do with the UK idiosyncrasies*). However, a large portion of people would be able to identify parliamentary buildings and parliamentary proceedings.

I am sure that some politicians are in politics for themselves and that many enjoy having power. However, firstly, this is hardly the most important thing to know about politicians and parliaments, secondly all professions have good and bad apples. One does not approach the study of doctors assuming they are in it for themselves. To understand parliament and parliamentarians, one needs to see it as a profession and respect it as a profession, regardless of the type of critical analysis being undertaken. This has been shown to me time and time again, through the many interviews I have undertaken over time of parliamentary staff and of politicians from a wide range of political allegiances. Approaching the study of parliament from the standpoint of it being an organisation that encompasses different types of professions (which

happen to take place within the political sphere), rather than just as a political creature, is a step closer into getting to the soul of parliament.

Another common assumption that often permeates the study of parliament is that this is an institution with power (this often emerges because of the conflation with government). But again, to understand parliament one needs first and foremost to realise that the institution encompasses many different groups. Some of these groups may be powerful, often because they are in government too. But most in fact have little power. The strongest power parliamentarians often have is simply the one of influence – whether through the power of embarrassment in the media and/or public debates, or through the power of meeting ministers behind closed doors, showing the case for specific policies behind the eyes of the cameras. In fact, part of the excitement of researching parliament is to understand the nuances of how the institution tries to exercise its powerless base of power.

Conclusion

In this short reflection I sought to identify how some of the key features of parliament shape its study. In brief, the fact this is a collective institution of differing (often opposing) actors with their specific agendas, acting in the public eye, whilst depending on the informal practices that take place within private spaces. My research journey from the study of the rules shaping the newly democratic Portuguese parliament, all the way to the e-petitions system in the UK parliament, have shown that to understand parliament one needs to see it as an ecosystem fundamentally shaped by its collective collation of differing interests under the public eye. This means combining different research methods, respecting the value of the official record whilst seeking to understand the informal practices surrounding it.

I finish with a short reflection looking forward rather than back into my journey so far. One type of research method I would like to explore far more are participatory approaches. Having worked closely with parliamentary officials over the years, I have had experience of co-creation of research, whereby the object of research, including research questions, is defined with officials. This has led to some of the most exciting pieces of research that I have undertaken, as it leads to research that responds to problems in the real world (rather than in the theoretical maze of academics' brains). However, thus far, I have not employed participatory co-creation methods with citizens. Despite this being a well-established research practice with well-defined protocols and methods in other disciplines, this is not the case in parliamentary studies (or in politics for that matter, despite some nascent practice in participatory democracy studies). And, as it is often the case when one adopts new methods, there is considerable resistance (*as demonstrated by all the failed grant applications I have had recently*). However, I have not given up and believe that part of the future of parliamentary studies lies in co-creation participatory approaches, to help make our research more meaningful and bridge the gap between existing bubbles of research.

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