Anthropology at the French National Assembly: The Semiotic Aspects of a Political Institution

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In the conclusion of his book *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, Clifford Geertz writes: “What our concept of polit power obscures, that of the Balinese exposes; and vice versa. And so far as a political theory is concerned, it is there in exposing the symbolic dimensions of state-power.” Commenting, a few pages later, on the classical conceptions of the state, Geertz notes also that “in these views the semiotic aspects of the state remain so much a mummery.” What seems to me very stimulating in these reflections, as in the whole analysis of *Negara*, is that it opens new perspectives for the scholars who try, like me, to understand the political process from an anthropological point of view.

From these two quotations I will extract two main ideas. The first one deals with our ethnocentric conception of politics. When we think about politics, there is a sort of spontaneous association between power, violence, hegemony, and domination. These concepts are circulating all along the spectrum of political philosophy, from Thomas Hobbes to Max Weber and Antonio Gramsci. Geertz, by contrast, emphasizes the symbolic aspects of politics; he refuses to consider the equation between symbolism and ideology. He produces a critique of these reductionist theories for which state ceremony is no more than mystification, hiding the real conflicts, creating an artificial consensus. But it seems to me that there is a second idea in the conclusion of *Negara*, one that posits a challenge to me, working as I am on European and French institutions. Is it possible to study the semiotic aspects of the state in occidental societies? And what do these “semiotic aspects” mean in the context of modernity or postmodernity? Trying to answer these questions, I will use some of my own data and I will argue that what Geertz calls *semiotic aspect* plays a central part in the political process if we examine all the meanings of *semiotic*.
Semiotic dimension connotes, first, the theatricality of power, the strong association between governance, ritual, and symbolism. In contemporary political institutions, the meaning of semiotic aspects is far more extensive, as it deals with the complex imbrication between orality and writing. We must not forget that one of the aims of politics consists in the production of the law. My study of the French National Assembly engages with the importance of the texts and the speeches. This semiotic dimension of political agency has often been underestimated by political scientists. I will further suggest that a specific contribution of anthropological work on politics deals with what I would call the semiotic acting out of the politicians.

To begin, I would like to give some details on the French political system. Members of the National Assembly are elected by a majority election system in which the candidate who receives the largest number of votes wins. Normally, there are two rounds in the election. Candidates who receive less than the specified percentage of the vote in the first round are not allowed to stand in the second round, and the other minor candidates usually withdraw after the first round and offer their support to the winner or the runner-up of the first round. In France, the majority system has usually been uninominal: there is one seat to be filled per election district and voters choose a single candidate.

To be elected, a candidate must be well known at the local level, within his or her constituency. A candidate’s electability depends on two different parameters: the candidate’s political party and the candidate’s personality and local influence. For instance, in the Paris suburbs, such as Saint-Denis and Ivry, the Communist Party has always been very powerful, and it is nearly impossible for an outsider to be elected. In the western province of Vendée, since the Revolution and the revolt of the royalist peasants against the republican order, a majority of the votes have been in favor of the rightist parties. Under such conditions, it would be very difficult for a Socialist candidate to win in those electoral areas. The historical specificity of France explains why there is a sort of political inertia in these areas (Vendée, Saint-Denis, and Ivry). French politics is still marked by three founding events: the Revolution, the separation of church and state, and the World War II Resistance. These were turning points in French history, periods of intense conflict that continue to form the collective imagination. These founding events have left their mark on the behavior of voters, which is strongly affected by the sort of imprint transmitted from generation to generation.
Legitimacy is certainly one of the key words in the French political vocabulary. To enjoy legitimacy means to belong to the world of eligible individuals to whom responsibilities can be entrusted. As I have shown in *Quiet Days in Burgundy*, the French political system places a high value on regional roots. The first question asked of a candidate concerns his or her origins: whether the candidate is from the district will be a major influence on his or her future. Professional politicians take great pains to emphasize their roots and their local connections with their constituencies. Everyone places great importance on local activity. Yet I do not wish to minimize the importance of national political parties, notably in the selection of candidates. A number of candidates are sent to provinces where they have no link. This phenomenon is tellingly called “parachute landing.” Some of the newcomers are successful in the election. But once elected, they will spend a lot of time promoting their local networks. An elected representative is never simply the embodiment of an idea or a party. What wins for the representative the support of his or her fellow citizens is above all the incarnation of a series of qualities that make the representative similar to those citizens. An elected representative is simultaneously a person and a symbol. Politicians are not only men or women of action; they also have the power of evocation. Many rituals are intended to express in material form the continuing identification of the elected representative with his or her community. Some rituals commemorate events that have marked significance for the community, and here the elective representatives must speak and behave in a way that magnifies their personalities, the incarnation of their common heritage. Others, such as the ceremony of inauguration, permit the display of improvements or the common heritage to which the elected representative has contributed.

One of the essential activities of the deputy consists in repeated weekly journeys to meet with his or her constituency. Part of a deputy’s time is dedicated to management of economic and social problems, a task that involves numerous meetings with local elected representatives, as members of the state administration. The deputies also spend much time in ceremonies of inauguration and commemoration that are not so different from those that anthropologists have observed in non-Western societies. There is, of course, no ritual sacrifice; instead, monuments are unveiled, a minute’s silence is observed, and so on, but the meaning of the ceremony, the affirmation of local roots and a common territory, are equally basic rituals. Those who refuse to devote the required time to these political rituals will sooner or later learn, to their detriment, that it is a mistake to neglect this aspect of political representation. All deputies, whatever their
Marc Abeles's political affiliation, divide their week into two almost equal parts: from Monday afternoon to Thursday night, they work in Paris at the National Assembly; from Friday morning to Monday afternoon, they stay with their constituency. For a deputy, the best way to enforce his or her local influence is to be at the same time a local representative, a mayor, or a member of the departmental assembly, the conseil général. Until the 1980s, there was no restriction on what we call the *cumul des mandats*. I knew a deputy who was simultaneously a member of the European Parliament (MEP), president of the departmental assembly, mayor, and conseiller régional. Nowadays, one may not hold more than three political offices. But it is very difficult to fight against this tendency of monopolizing political functions. A deputy I interviewed, referring to this centralization, explained that a representative will be more influential in Paris if he or she is simply the mayor of the main city of that representative’s constituency or president of the conseil général.

Another reason for the French phenomenon of the *cumul* is that a politician will be reelected more easily if he or she is also a well-known local personality. We have a specific word for these people: we call them *les notables*. France is the kingdom of the notables.

Inside the National Assembly we find two kinds of people: deputies who have no other elected functions or who have only a small local responsibility (a very small group) and those who also are mayors or chair their departmental or regional assemblies. Politicians such as François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac (who was mayor of Paris and deputy in Corrèze), Philippe Séguin, Pierre Mauroy, Jack Lang, and François Bayrou are what one would call “typically French.” The younger ones, such as Martine Aubry and Elizabeth Guigou, try to conquer local positions, the first in Lille, the second in Avignon. There is an official discourse that consists in denouncing the *cumul des mandats*. But the truth is that there are only a very few politicians who would willingly resign one of their elective functions. Even the French citizens are ambivalent on this matter: when surveyed, they answer that they are against the *cumul*, but at the local level, they like to identify a personality as their mayor and their deputy. A new restrictive law concerning the *cumul* has not yet been voted on.

Among all the political groups in the Assembly we find a cleavage between the “big men”—those who are sorts of provincial lords—and the rest of the deputies. Some of these “big men” are so involved with their local constituencies that they have almost no time to spend in Paris. When
they come to the Palais Bourbon, their main motivation is to meet minis-
ters and cabinet members—especially for purposes of local lobbying. Dur-
ing the year I spent in the Assembly, I saw only a few times the deputy-
mayor of Montpellier, Georges Freches. This kind of politician, I was told,
knows that the people will reelect him or her not for the work done in the
Palais Bourbon committees but for what he or she does at the local level.

The position that one occupies in the national hierarchy represents an-
other cleavage. There is a distinction between the députés de base (the back-
benchers), on the one hand, and two other categories of deputies, on the
other hand: (1) those who have a leading role inside their party and share
the most prestigious functions inside their political group and, if they are
part of the governmental majority, are appointed as chairmen of the com-
mittees or of the working groups and (2) the deputies who are well-known
in the media. Politicians such as Édouard Balladur, Jack Lang, and Nicolas
Sarkozy, even if they don’t get a governmental position or a special res-
ponsibility in their group or in their party, are much more influential
than most of their colleagues. When something important happens, jour-
nalists are eager to interview these personalities. It is very easy, in the
lobby of the Palais Bourbon, to identify the few people the media view as
political leaders.

There is also a distinction between the elders (those who have been
elected two or more times) and the newcomers. It takes almost one year
to understand the diverse inner workings of the Assembly. Diversity of
motivation is also observed between those who devote most of their en-
ergy to the local affairs and define themselves mainly as the representa-
tants of their constituency and those who are involved in the lawmaking
process, participating in the committees and the general discussion in the hemi-
cycle. But there is also diversity of generation in terms of allegiance. For
instance, one could distinguish three generations of Socialists: those who
were first elected in 1981, when Mitterrand became president; those who
came to the National Assembly during Mitterrand’s second term and were
a minority fighting against the Balladur government; and those who were
elected in 1997, when Lionel Jospin was elected prime minister (the Jos-
pininist generation). This last generation presents two key characteristics:
(1) their discourse insists on the necessity of a moralization of politics; and
(2) the proportion of women is much more important (and higher) in this
generation than in others, and this generation tries to be more connected
to the daily problems of civil society. There is a common issue raised by
the new generation of deputies, and not only among the Socialists; it concerns the modernization of political life in France. Many young members of parliament (MPs), both from the Right and from the Left, highlight the gap between politicians and the rest of the citizens. For them, the workings of the Assembly are too much embedded in old rituals; the way of speaking is too difficult to be understood by the common people. The media are not able to reflect the sophistication of the political debate inside the National Assembly, and they report only superficial aspects of the political activity. These MPs would like to simplify the procedures of the National Assembly, but after two years they realize that it is very difficult to transform the institution.

In fact, the Palais Bourbon is one of the key places of French political life. The National Assembly has two different responsibilities: the main one is to legislate; the second consists in control of the government. When Charles de Gaulle became president in 1958, his first initiative was to give more power to the president and to the prime minister and the cabinet, and to limit the prerogatives of Parliament. During the Fourth Republic, any government could fall by a single vote of the National Assembly. Also, initiating legislation was in the hands of the deputies. De Gaulle changed the rules of the political game, so that the government would write the texts to be discussed by the deputies. The Assembly has to follow the agenda prepared by the government. The president can also dissolve the Assembly. It is impossible for the Assembly to limit the government, because the prime minister is the leader of the parliamentary majority. The National Assembly is mainly an institution dedicated to the discussion, in order to amend the texts that have been elaborated by the government. As an old MP told me, “When you are part of the opposition, your influence is very limited, because you will never obtain a vote for your amendment. When you are part of the majority, you have to follow the government. So you will not be able to bring forth some original contribution.” This statement has been checked many times. But if there is no consensus between the different components of the majority, the work of the deputies becomes much more exciting. For instance, in October 2006 the Socialist minister Martine Aubry had to accept some of the Communist amendments to her proposed legislation on the thirty-five-hour workweek.

The political role of the French National Assembly is restricted in comparison with that of the U.S. Congress. When French deputies visit the Congress in Washington, they return with a certain nostalgia. They would like to be as autonomous as their American colleagues. Nostalgia notwithstanding, the Palais Bourbon plays an important role. Every day, members
of the government are obliged to spend hours in the National Assembly listening to the deputies’ propositions and debating with them. A law could not be adopted without this process, during which the majority and the opposition discuss and debate for hours. Sometimes it takes all night: the Assembly is one of the few institutions that is open around the clock. If you want to read a book in the library, no problem, there will be somebody to bring it to you. Members of the government do not just participate in the debates concerning their legal texts. They also have to answer questions asked by the MPs during special sessions: two of these sessions are broadcast on France 3, one of the public television channels, for one hour on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons. Usually, the hemicycle is full because the MPs know that the session can be watched on television by their constituencies. They have to present an image of assiduity. After the hour of oral questions, most of the deputies leave the hemicycle, and only a minority stay there for the continuation of parliamentary activity.

When I did my fieldwork at the National Assembly, I adopted a strategy of defamiliarization. I was confronted with the very general assertion, which I found among journalists but also among intellectuals, that the Assembly is no longer a central place as before, but only a kind of theater where a parody of political struggle is enacted. Two main reasons were offered. First, the French political system has been completely transformed by de Gaulle: during the Third and Fourth Republics, the National Assembly was the true basis of political power; in 1958 the new constitution promoted by de Gaulle gave preeminence to the executive. Decisions come from the president and the prime minister, leaving to Parliament a deliberative function. More recently, François Mitterrand, who had often shown contempt for presidentialism, did not modify the constitution when the opportunity presented itself. On the contrary, his reign was characterized by a reinforcement of the authoritarian practices. Second, the consumption of mass media throughout the country has had devastating consequences for the political process. Until the end of the 1960s, the Assembly was a central place for political communication. It was the temple of a kind of oratory that has now completely disappeared. More important now are one-minute speeches on television and participation in any type of talk show.

In this context (with changes in the political system and the growth of mass media), the National Assembly ought to be considered an out-of-date institution. Moreover, there are many discourses that announce the end of politics within a world entirely dominated by the media constraints. We find this thesis in the writings of Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard.
Both Debord and Baudrillard consider that politics has become a sort of spectacle. Politics take place in a global universe of simulacra. Antagonisms have lost any consistency. The media-driven game reproduces or recreates the opposition between the Right and the Left because confrontation is more attractive to spectators. What is interesting to me is that politicians who have not read Debord or Baudrillard speak of the crisis of politics as a consequence of the reign of the “société du spectacle.” From this perspective, it did not seem very interesting to study the workings of the French National Assembly. It would have produced one more book on the crisis of politics. Or maybe a description of an archaic form, a way of doing politics as it worked a long time ago. When I spoke with MPs, many of them thought that, being an anthropologist, I would be interested almost exclusively in the protocol and rituals. As an old institution, the Assembly has cultivated its own rituals. That is what would typically interest an anthropologist, they told me. But I did not want to gather the folklore of the institution. Moreover, I refused to be an archaeologist looking at an archaic political structure.

I decided to consider politics at the National Assembly as a form of production, a way of producing intangible goods. I would deal with the elected representative as I would deal with workers in any other organization. I had to identify which type of production resulted from this organization. It was not very difficult: the Assembly produces laws. What are laws? Everybody can answer: laws are texts that contain norms that apply to the whole society. Most of the activity of the MPs inside the Palais Bourbon was dedicated to the production of laws. When we say that the MPs deliberate, most of the time we forget the true aim of these debates. Now I had to investigate something very precise: the fabrication of the laws. I tried to note very precisely the daily activity of the MPs, each one a member of one of the six committees that examine the legislation proposed by the government. Every week they have to attend committee meetings and meetings with their parliamentary group. They spend part of their time in the hemicycle participating in the plenary meetings, where legislation is discussed and voted. The Assembly’s agenda focuses on the making of laws. At the end of the annual session, the government will give the result of the parliamentary work; for instance, 1999 was a good year—thirty-four new texts were proposed.

This result notwithstanding, one cannot forget that every project presented by the government creates an opportunity for confrontation between the two opposite camps. I tried to shed light on the complexity of the lawmaking process. Indeed, part of the lawmaking activity is carried
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on by the parliamentary committees. The main work is devoted to the discussion of the text (the draft legislation) and its amendment. I was struck by the extraordinary creativity developed by the MPs in suggesting a lot of amendments. Adding a word (or cutting one), for instance, can completely change the meaning of a provision. One may also change part of a sentence or propose a completely different formulation of the same idea. In the lawmaking process, we could find an illustration of the “semiotic aspects of the state.” Inside the committees, the parliamentary work is exegetic. Each text, or part of a text, gives birth to several interpretations. For instance, I attended the discussion of the pacte civil de solidarité, or PACS, a form of civil union that will give legal status to homosexual couples. During the 1999 session, this was the most controversial project of the government, giving rise to a tough confrontation between the Right and the Left. The Right did not accept the legalization of homosexual unions. Its representatives used all their procedural power to delay the adoption of the legislation.

A more sophisticated way of going about this subject was to contest the semantic choices of the government. For example, the proposition included the word agreement. Some of the right-wing MPs proposed replacing agreement with contract. The aim of the Right was to point out the contradictions of the majority: the word contract is used to designate marriage. But the government and its majority did not want to create equivalence between the PACS and marriage. They always asserted that the PACS would not modify the institution of family and marriage. In the end, the majority won and the MPs maintained the definition of the PACS as an agreement. What appears very clearly in this example is the importance of textual production as part of political action. Text is also a pretext, a pretext to semantic elaborations: sometimes I attended negotiations between the two camps in their attempt to find a more satisfying formulation of the future law.

Amendments are discussed not only inside the committees but also publicly in the plenary meetings. We find again this semiotic contest, but something else can be noted. The atmosphere is not the same in the hemicycle as in the committee rooms. One could speak of dramatization to emphasize the specificity of the public debate. For instance, the discussion of the PACS, which was relatively courteous inside the committees, took a very violent form in the hemicycle. Insults are not uncommon. Once, Lionel Jospin addressed a comment to his main opponent, a female MP from the Right, which she interpreted as an insult. She began to cry and ran to the government bench; the ushers kept her from striking the prime
minister. This incident gives an idea of the tension that characterizes this kind of public debate. Speeches are punctuated by jokes, shouts, and insults. Sometimes when one of the camps wins a vote, members of that camp stand up and applaud.

What must be kept in mind is that the lawmaking process includes two different components. One is what I called the semiotic contest. The other component is the theatricalization of the conflict during the plenary meetings. But the idea of theatricalization must not be misinterpreted. Many times it has been said or it has been written that the public debate is something artificial. Theatricalization would mean that MPs give a performance; they play their part and after that, out of the hemicycle, members of the two camps can be friendly together. In other words, the hemicycle would be like a stage—it would be the reign of the appearance, not the true reality. We find again the idea that political activity deals more with simulacra than with the real. In this interpretation, politicians are playing their part on two complementary stages—in the Assembly’s theater and on television’s permanent political show, the second one being more attractive to the people than the first one, which is often described as something a bit obsolete.

I cannot agree with this conceptualization of the political, which, in my opinion, underestimates the true consistency of this political process. I think the public debate can be interpreted as a ritual struggle. By ritual struggle, I mean an effective and sometimes violent confrontation between people who incarnate intellectually and physically different segments of civil society, as can be observed in the debates dealing with controversial texts like the PACS. The confrontation of MPs on the topics of homosexuality was nothing but a tough one. The word struggle means exactly the sort of interaction I witnessed. When I talk of ritual struggle, I mean that the confrontation is from the beginning to the end codified by a specific procedure. No one can claim the floor at will. Just as in any parliament, the regulations are included in a special book and address, among other things, the organization of the plenary meetings and speech time. The MPs must all be aware of the protocol; for instance, there is a repartition of the hemicycle between the Right and the Left, with each segment going in and out through different doors. The MPs cannot speak with the ministers when they pass by the bench of the government: this protocol symbolizes the separation between executive and legislative powers. As the French classical tragedy, the parliamentary debate has kept its own specific tempo, which does not follow the temporality imposed by the media. The discussion of a law may take more time than was expected. Often, the final text includes important modifications.
This is not the place to give more details on parliamentary activity. I only want to shed some light on the specific interest that contemporary politics might hold for anthropology. Many things have been written by philosophers and sociologists on the topic of “public space.” But most of these writings do not focus on the concrete modality of political action and discourse inside these public spaces. For instance, the main thesis of Jürgen Habermas’s *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen* concerns the conditions required to make possible a better intercomprehension realized through the creation of new forums emerging from civil society. The ideal of transparency plays here the central part in this analysis of public space. An opposite thesis has been developed by the postmodernists, like Baudrillard, who assert that in the société du spectacle, the simulacrum is omnipotent, not the political communication. I think that these two opposite conceptions of the public sphere have something in common. They deal with politics in terms of communication: for Habermas more democracy could be achieved through intercomprehension; to Baudrillard this ideal of transparency does not mean anything. Postmodern communication is essentially perverted, and the only way of thinking must be a radical critique of the simulacrum of democracy. In these two positions what becomes transparent is that they are grounded in a normative and reductionist position, confusing politics and communication. The point of view adopted by Habermas and Baudrillard is one adopted by those who pay attention to the political spectacle and its actors.

By contrast, the anthropologist gives another interpretation of what happens in the political space. This is an interpretation that focuses on the point of view of the actors. Referring to the “semiotic aspects” of contemporary politics, I have tried to deconstruct the complex process in which they are involved. From this perspective, my analysis is focused on the making of the law. There is an exegetic activity, a semiotic contest, from which the text of the law emerges. Almost simultaneously there happens a ritual struggle, and it is the combination of these two modalities that can produce at the same time a political event (that will be echoed by the media) and a textual production (the law itself that everyone must respect, independently of its conditions of production). This anthropological way of thinking about politics contrasts with the approaches in terms of simulacra or intercomprehension. Not far from interpretive and textual anthropology, it offers new grounds for constructing the political object, breaking away from the idealistic dominant conceptions and promoting a realistic approach of the public space.