POLITICS AT DISTANCE
Parliamentary politics in the face of contemporary challenges
Kari Palonen

Abstract

'L'enfer, c'est les autres,' a famous formula of Jean-Paul Sartre, has in the context of the corona virus gained an existential significance. The proximity with the others, possible bearers of the virus, is to be avoided. More prosaically Max Weber required from politicians 'Distanz zu den Dingen and Menschen'. Combining Weber and Sartre demands a politics that cultivates distance and avoids or neutralises proximity. In this paper I shall contextualise the current challenges to parliamentary politics, the danger of proximity as radicalised by the virus and the enabling of an action at distance through digitalisation of the debates. I shall compare the challenges and special chances of parliamentary politics as a paradigmatic example of politics at distance, which still requires certain proximity, with two other ideal types of political action, 'movement politics' relying on proximity and approaching identity, and 'signature politics' combining cultivating distance but excluding debate. All three share in a sense the principle that the number of persons supporting a certain policy or decision will be counted and not weighted. My point is to identify the distinctive chances of parliamentary politics as political regime, in which the priority of the politics time over the politics of space is recognised as its constitutive principle.

Keywords: styles of politics, parliament, movement, signature, distance, proximity, digitalisation, corona virus

The others as a threat

'L'enfer, c'est les autres'. This is a famous formula of the personage Garcin in Jean-Paul Sartre's wartime play *Huis clos*, presented for the first time in the occupied Paris in May 1944 (Sartre 1944, 128). In the year 2020 the formula suddenly gained a political actuality that Sartre would have been unable to imagine. The corona virus obliges us to take this formula very literally. Every other person must be regarded as a possible bearer of the virus. The hell of the others, as present due to a proximity with them, must be avoided.

Indeed, Max Weber put a similar point more prosaically, when he qualified *Augenmaß* as one of the three criteria required from the politician: 'Distanz zu den Dingen and Menschen' (Weber 1919, 75). The common point of Sartre and Weber could be formulated as follows: in order to be able to act politically, we have to cultivate the distance, not only to other persons but also to the issues to be dealt.

In this chapter I, a Weberologist and former Sartrologist (see Palonen 1992), want to speculate with the political consequences and chances of the requirement to keep distance for the parliamentary style of politics. This style combines a detached, procedural and time-consuming style of doing politics and the respect for adversaries with the proximity of members sitting and debating orally in the same audience. The common accusations against parliamentarism tend to focus on its being beyond the understanding of 'ordinary people', putting too much emphasis on the formal, procedural questions and, above all, being too slow in its decision-making and wasting precious time to *bavardage*. My point is to see just in these distance-creating qualities major advantages of the parliamentary-style politics.

The demand for the proximity in space between members now appears in the corona regime as a weakness of the parliamentary style of politics. I shall here discuss the concept of proximity with the two other ideal-typical styles of 'politics from below', both of them present in the work of Sartre. Furthermore, I will discuss the risks and *Chancen* of that new procedural style that the corona regime provoked to use as distance-creating medium, namely digitalisation, which, indeed, has been practised in parliaments at least since the 1990s.

During the months of the 'corona regime' we have repeatedly heard the thesis on the exceptional situation as the 'hour of the executive'. Indeed, opinion polls seem to affirm that

the incumbent governments of whatever political colour has gained support among the voters. The meetings of parliaments, have been reduced, postponed, replaced with emergency parliaments of a committee size or introduced online sittings (see https://www.ipu.org/parliaments-in-time-pandemic and https://www.ipu.org/country-compilation-parliamentary-responses-pandemic, quoted 3 May 2020). The quotes below on individual parliaments are taken from the latter document.

Besides the usual reasons of urgency now also the dangers of proximity are emphasised: the presence of numerous persons in the same audience, including the plenary sittings of parliaments, has been experienced as a threat to their health. The old arguments against the bavardage in parliamentary 'talking shops' have been activated again by nationalists and populists. The measures for the digitalisation of politics raise, the question can a digital presence in a parliamentary sitting form an alternative to the personal presence. Can the proximity criterion of parliamentary politics could be reinterpreted in digital terms.

In this article I avoided the *bricolage* vocabulary. Of course, many of politicians' practices could be called *bricolage* when they not only choose between courses of action which all have their strengths and weaknesses but are frequently obliged to apply opposed principles at the same time, with only intuitive insight how to do such *oxymoronic* decisions.

Movement politics: number and proximity

As thinkable competitors with parliamentary politics, I shall take up ideal typical cases of politics operating with identity and proximity. Due to my research interests from the 1980s and 1990s, I used to know the work Jean-Paul Sartre well. Sartre a today largely forgotten and badly understood as a political theorist, but in his writings we can identity extensive presentations of two types of political action, which I shall call *movement politics* and *signature politics*.

Although he hardly was a political theorist by academic criteria, Sartre was both a detached observer and a sympathetic critic of different kind of political activities. As a well-known non-voter by reputation (see Sartre 1973), who could however be also interpreted as internal critic of electoral and parliamentary politics (see his critiques of two Gaullist referenda, Sartre 1958, 1961), he would hardly share my use of him in favour of parliamentary politics.

Nonetheless, his work is so rich that even such unconventional uses appears to me as fully legitimate.

In his *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960) Sartre presents the ideal type of *groupe-en-fusion* with his famous example of capturing the fortress of Bastille. The description has been based on the work of Georges Lefevbre, criticised by historians (see Lüsebrink and Reichardt 1990). Sartre illustrates with the example a paradigmatic description of politics, in which the distance, even the difference to the others, is minimised, ideally even abolished, that is, the identity and the proximity of the actors are bound together.

The inhabitants of a poor Parisian quartier had heard rumours of arms in the Bastille, by which they expected to become able to defend themselves against the forces of order. Sartre's point with the ideal type is to illustrate, how the passive *collectif* of the inhabitants of the quartier transforms itself to an active and spontaneous *groupe-en-fusion*. In this ideal type of a group there are no leaders, but everyone can take an initiative and keep the group in movement towards the target. In such a group the difference between myself and my neighbour tends to lose its significance and the participating individuals could experience themselves as mutually exchangeable. Such a situation cannot last beyond the instance of obtaining the target. (Sartre 1960, 453-468)

Unlike to what many early interpreters claimed, the *groupe-en-fusion* is for Sartre only a formal, not a normative ideal type. It shows also the limits of the fusion, the impossibility of the human group to become like living organicism: Sartre is, like Weber, a strict methodological individualist. With the *groupe-in-fusion* and its modification into a *groupe-assermenté,* an extremely egalitarian group ruled by another famous Sartrean formula, *fraternité-terreur,* he is referring to limit situations of political action that discards procedures and stabilising organisations.

Indeed, these two extreme types of a human group have been given an entirely negative connotation in another figure of Sartre, namely the lynching group, as caricatured in his *Réflexions sur la question juive*, already using the term *fusion* (1946, 34-38). The spontaneous and internally egalitarian forms of the group can thus also be directed against an outside target of persons, against which the spontaneous group can act unscrupulously.

These Sartrean figures illustrate extreme versions of joint human action, which I call movement politics. Even more pragmatic and instrumental forms of movement politics also rely on both the identity between participants and on their tight proximity as the sources of their power shares (*Machtanteile* in Weber's sense, 1919, 36). Strikes, street demonstrations, occupations, blockades and so on are operating not only with maximising the number of participants but also the identity between them, which is achieved through the proximity of the actors. The tight coverage of space is seen as both defensive and offensive force: nobody can go through such a tight chain of human beings and with the joint forces of participants both physical and personal obstacles are easier to break down.

The sheer number of participants alone cannot, however, compensate their proximity as a source of power, applicable to both resistance and expansion. In Sartrean terms, for serial collectives – today visible in the food queues keeping the distance, more or less maintaining the 1,5 metres distance – as the specific *virtù* of the corona regime, would raise high hurdles for a transformation into a group and therefore for any kind of movement politics. At least much imagination is required from politics based on numbers and proximity, even when leaving out the strong identity criterion. This picture of the Finnish five female ministers-party leaders of Sanna Marin's government illustrates an ingenious use of such possibilities to act as a group. (https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006493304.html)

Joint action at distance – the signature politics

There are well-known precedents also for the politics of joint action at distance, retaining in principle the principle of greatest number and the identity of participants. An old parliamentary model consists of citizens' petitions for which a number of signatures to intervene in the agenda-setting parliament or, analogously, enabling participation in elections or corresponding the quota for a referendum. There are political institutions based on collecting a sufficient number of signatures among the citizens in order to render such political moves. In Finland founding an officially registered party that has in the elections more rights than the non-party candidate lists, requires 5000 valid signatures among the citizens, whereas a citizens' initiative to the parliament 50 000 required valid signatures. The EU Lisbon Treaty requires 500 000 valid signatures for a citizens' initiative – no successful attempt has yet been made. In the semi-plebiscitarian Switzerland the legislative initiative is the complementary side for the requirement that certain vital parliamentary decisions must be

ratified by referenda as well as the initiation of the legislation by citizens' initiatives with 100 000 confirmed signatures.

Nowadays the signatures for many of such petitions can be given and registered online, thus there is no need for personal proximity. In a wide sense both registering parties and launching citizens initiatives are legitimate parts of parliamentary procedure, for which there is since long time regular ways of how the parliament will proceed with them.

There is, however, another type of politics of signatures that is independent on parliaments and their procedures. The 'politics of intellectuals', with the Dreyfus affair from 1898 onwards as its historical paradigm, contains a famous practice of public action that requires individual signatures (see e.g. Sirinelli 1990, Bering 2010). Such signing actions differ from parliamentary petitions in so far as no rules require parliament or government to consider them. However, they also differ from strikes or street protests, in so far as the only move that is required from the supporters is the signature. There is no minimum limit for the signatures, but the maximisation of them would be in many cases the ideal. The public attention marks their political point of pressure towards the governmental authorities.

The common point of both signed online petitions and voluntary joint signatures to a

document lies in the separation of the force of numbers from the personal proximity of the participants. The public protest with online signatures has allowed the participants to transcend borders and to become a world-wide phenomenon. Like regular pressure groups and lobbyists, the politics of signature operates with pressure, focusing on the signatures and their numbers, combined with their collection in an as short time as possible, without any organised power to negotiate with governments or set to parliaments' agenda.

Unlike in the citizens' initiatives in the signature politics of intellectuals the number of signatures does not matter alone. The signature politics of intellectuals was by no means

egalitarian, that is, signatures are not like votes that are counted but weighed. The point is to receive signatures from person who count for something more than the average citizens, classically from 'intellectuals', today also from 'celebrities'. In the Dreyfus affair, there was an appeal to scholars, artists and other to combine rationality of the facts and moral indignation over injustice in order to press the military court to revise its decision to condemn captain Alfred Dreyfus, which, indeed, it did happen after some years.

The signature creates a kind of second-order proximity between the signing persons. In the time of Dreyfus there was still a certain deference towards intellectuals that made such assumptions plausible. Today academics and literati are regarded with suspicion from the 'ordinary people', and many of them do not want to appear on a list of signatures with certain others. More plausible is rather showing oneself in the proximity of celebrities, such as entertainment stars and sport professionals. The point is whether individual signatures are suitable form for such identification, as compared with the fan-clubs etc.

Jean-Paul Sartre was a famous signature-politician of this kind and let all kind of protesters to (mis-)use his name. Among his last moves was supporting the protest against the Moscow Olympics a few weeks before his death in 1980. His justification for the interventions of intellectuals is so far interesting that for him the intellectual offers a countertype to the representative of one's own immediate interests: 'l'intellectuel est quelqu'un qui se mêle de ce qui ne le regarde pas' (1966, 377). The rhetorical point is attention to a neglected or misunderstood cause, even a surprise the audience with defending unpopular causes, what Quentin Skinner discusses in the terms of *cause admirabilis* (2014). In such cases the names of signers are frequently more important than their number. In Arendtian (1958) terms it is important that the signers are 'somebodies' rather than 'nobodies'.

Whereas the slogans of mass movements are oral, like parliamentary debates, the protest petitions are literary. They suit to the intellectuals, who quarrel about the exact formulations, although the point is, as Sartre well understood, to subscribe to a text, independently of its authors and the exact content. The inflationary use of this signature-based politics has nweakened its weight: the power shares of such protests paradoxically depend on that they are rare enough to gain visibility as well as spontaneous, no parts of a campaign planned in advance.

It should be noted that although the signatures initially were collected to protest, the supporters of the authorities from the anti-dreyfusards onwards to the present-day supporters of authoritarian governments have used the same device (on the loyalty fans after '9/11' in the US see Llanque 2008).

Many academics, including myself, remain very reluctant to give their name to support any protest actions even when sympathising with them. This refers partly to the broader insight that a protest by the signature as a plebiscitarian form of politics is rhetorically of the epideictic genre, a politics of yes or no, that is politically expressed in terms of acclamation, whether pro or contra the item to be acclaimed (see Palonen 2019).

It could be easy to claim that the politics of signatures has come to its end, except in rare cases of spontaneous protests, although Greta Thunberg et al. have submitted such a signed statement to the EU summit in July 2020. They only could still have chances, when they were approaching petitions, as citizens initiatives that were prepared professionally in the style of parliamentary motions. This would also include the possibility of amendments in the sense that not some persons draft a document that others can only subscribe or not. The online signatures could, perhaps allow amendments that could be voted among the signers, who could withdraw their signature if they were discontent with the amendments. The citizens initiatives could more genuinely become a proto-parliamentary phase of agenda-setting.

Parliamentary politics of distances

Frank Ankersmit has reconsidered the concept of political representation as an action that creates the represented and the representatives on the basis of an 'aesthetic gap' that separates them (1996, 2001, 2002). As opposed to the widespread view that a 'people' precedes the election of its representatives, for Ankersmit representation itself is a political act that conceptually precedes the represented as well as the representatives. He is a theorist of politics of distance, as opposed to the identitarian assumptions of the Rousseauvian tradition as well as of the movement and even signature politics.

Ankersmit illustrates his understanding representation as action renders it thoroughly political with the aesthetical model of watch a work of art from distance. Politics is marked by the distance and the representatives are equally indispensable for understanding it as the

represented. Historically, the model for a political act of this kind can be found in the ancient Athens. Cleisthenes opposed to the existing tribes with artificial politically created *demoi*, 'electoral districts', in the reform in Athens from 508/507 before our time. This could be regarded as a major step in the politicisation of the Athenian *polis* (see Meier 1980).

Inspired by Ankersmit, I once wrote an article called 'Parliamentarism: A Politics of Temporal and Rhetorical Distances' (Palonen 2004). Now, I shall speculate with the distinct *Chancen* for adopting a more conscious politics of distance and discuss, how parliamentary procedures and practices could be reconsidered in terms of the required distance but diminished proximity. I have replaced the termini in the article (later explicated in Palonen 2008) with those of my recent parliamentary studies (Palonen 2014, 2016, 2018).

My major point is that 'parliament' is not so much an arena in which politics takes place but rather an ideal typical way of doing politics of dissensus and debate (see Palonen 2018). Parliamentary politics is procedurally and rhetorically constituted by the dispute: it is contingent and controversial in its very 'roots'. The rhetorical distance that characterises parliamentary politics the openness of the question coming to the agenda to a debate *pro et contra* up the very core of politics.

The procedural style of politics has shaped the Westminster parliament since the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century onwards. In parliament the procedure forms a political condition for confronting opposed perspectives, *in utramque partem disputare* (see Skinner 1996, Peltonen 2013). Whereas rhetoric deals with items on the agenda, the procedure makes the agenda-setting itself controversial. Both assume that a question can be properly understood only when looked and evaluated from opposite points of view.

Preconditions for parliamentary distances are the freedom and equality of the members in the neo-Roman sense of not being dependent on the arbitrary power of the government or on any extra-parliamentary powers (Skinner 1998, 2002). The parliamentarians' freedom to debate contains four classical dimensions: freedom of speech, free mandate, freedom from arrest (parliamentary immunity) as well as free and fair elections. These are regulative ideas which might be threatened by quasi-mandates on the constituency or party basis, the unfair electoral systems or the lack of financial fair play in the campaigns or in the control of the extra-parliamentary revenues of the members.

The equality of the members of parliament as debaters and voters is based on the principle that in parliaments as well as in democratic elections voted are counted and not weighed (see Weber 1917, 167-169). The ministers, presidium members as well as the committee chairs, the members of the shadow cabinet might have some additional benefits, which, however, do not affect the members equal status in the debates and votes. Due to the equality and mutual replaceability of members, the votes – when a secret ballot is used – are always contingent.

The procedural interventions in parliamentary debates – amendments, adjournments, questions of order, informal interjections – renders playing with temporal distances to the core of parliamentary style of politics. Parliaments are elected to a definite or maximal time period, and the mandate of their members is temporally limited. The items on the agenda are debated as a rule in several rounds, in the plenum (three readings) and in committees. The single moves, including amendments and adjournments, have their own past, present and future. Parliamentary politics operates with a double presence, of an item on the agenda in any stage of debate and of an item momentary debated.

However, parliaments have from early on recognised that the time for debates is always limited. The parliamentarisation of government and democratisation of parliament brought a striking growth of the items on the agenda and the new expectation for every member to speak in the plenum. All this resulted in new types of scarcity of parliamentary time. Irish members used in Westminster of the 1870s and 1880s this scarcity to obstruction in order to paralyse the entire parliament. New devices to enable a fair distribution of parliamentary time were found necessary remained controversial due their tendency to weaken parliament's chances to political initiative and to the control of government and administration.

In the parliamentary control of the government and administration, the thorough and frequent meetings of the committees is of special value. Max Weber's argument that is the officials claim to possess a superior knowledge over the parliamentarians in three respects, which he calls *Fachwissen, Dienstwissen* and *Geheimwissen.* Weber disputes this superiority on the principle that 'knowledge' is always a matter of debate, which allows parliamentarians can better judge about the knowledge claims and require alternative views and interpretations than officials and construct instruments for controlling them. (Weber 1918, 235-248, see Palonen 2010, ch. 8).

Of course, parliaments are neither immune to misuse. One possibility consists in absolutising the majority principle, reducing the occasions for debate and use measures such as the *guillotine* against the *Chancen* of the opposition with the result that parliaments only can ratify the government motions or refuse to do so. Another lies in the manipulation of the electoral fair play in a way making the dismissal of government difficult or in privileging the re-election of the incumbent members (see Borchert 2003). A third lies in tendencies to a *deformation professionelle* among members to elevate contingent event of their election to regarding themselves as 'elected' in a quasi-religious to strengthen their status or at least having common interests independently of the government vs. opposition divide: the former French prime minister André Tardieu (1937) spoke of the trade union of parliamentarians. After WWII the professionalisation of parliaments in Western Europe has strengthened the criteria against the misuse and the control of members' extra-parliamentary revenues and of electoral campaigns, although there is still much to do for financial fair play between members and candidates.

Parliamentary sittings: proximity and distance

Besides the politics of distance, the parliamentary-style politics relies on the proximity between the members. A condition for the regularisation of parliaments in the medieval England was fixing London as the site of meetings as well as locating them to a definite parliament building in the borough of Westminster, today a metonymy for British-style parliament (see Vieira 2015).

To the parliament building corresponds the regular membership in parliament for an electoral term and the annual meetings, practised in Westminster since the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89. The powerful parliaments rely a relatively large number of members. In the House of Commons there was 296 members in 1491, 460 but members in 1586 (see Fryde 1970). There are good grounds for holding the number of parliamentarians clearly greater than of ministers. John Stuart Mill argued for a relatively large parliament on the grounds of debate:

> Representative assemblies are often taunted by their enemies with being places of mere talk and *bavardage*. There has seldom been more misplaced derision. I know not how a representative assembly can more usefully employ itself than in talk, when the subject of talk is the great public interests

of the country, and every sentence of it represents the opinion either of some important body of persons in the nation, or of an individual in whom some such body have reposed their confidence. A place where every interest an d shade of opinion in the country can have its cause even passionately pleaded, in the face of the government and of all other interests and opinions, can compel them to listen, and either comply, or state clearly why they do not, is in itself, if it answered no other purpose, one of the most important political institutions that can exist any where, and one of the foremost benefits of free government (1861, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5669/5669-h/5669-h.htm)

Reducing the size of the parliament is an old populist demand against the bavardage and the greatest variety of opinions. In the Westminster tradition the practice that motions and bills are first debated in the plenum provides an additional guarantee for the diversity of views an inherent part of the debate. The large membership has as its corollary the limited time for plenary debates, which, however, requires a fair distribution of parliamentary time between the motions and the speaking members.

The power of parliaments further depends on their sitting time. The 'vacations' still tend to be extensive and justified by the local presence of the members among voters. There are different ways of dividing the parliamentary term, year and week between parliaments (see Ridard 2018). In West European countries the ever-growing parliamentary agenda has resulted in accepting the professional and full-time membership in parliament (see Borchert 2003), with the partial exception of Switzerland with its semi-plebiscitarian system (see Vatter ed. 2018, esp. the chapter by Bundi, Eberli and Bütikofer).

A major aspect in parliamentary debates is their oral character, in Westminster reading of pre-written speeches in a debate is forbidden. Reforms to introduce more debate to the plenary sittings, such as allowing replies or questions from the floor in the middle of the speech, as well as references to previous speeches have been promoted in the continental parliaments. The parliamentary speeches differ from academic presentations, which has required professors elected to a parliament to change their speaking style (see e.g. Süßmuth 2000). In academic debates the oral presentations are shorthand expositions of the point presented in detail in the written form.

The orality of debates has as its corollary the sitting of members in a plenary hall in which they can easily hear and see each other, as a condition of debate. The conditions of parliamentary debate depend on the acoustics in the plenary hall, which differs whether the

plenary hall consists of opposed benches or of a hemicycle, as in most continental parliaments. Nonetheless, front seats used to be preferable also just for the reasons of hearing better what was said – and back seats for those who did not worry on the previous speakers. The acoustics has been nowadays of course facilitated by microphones.

The traditions of parliamentary architecture for seating the members contain different visions of proximity. In Westminster there are no permanent seats or, indeed, not enough seats for everyone to listen the debates in the plenary hall and voting takes place by means of division. In continental parliaments members do have their own places, sitting either according to their electoral district (Sweden, Norway) or according to the left-right scale of the parties in the French revolutionary tradition, including Germany and Finland. In Westminster the front- and backbenchers divide is better institutionalised than elsewhere, as a second dividing line besides that between government and opposition, allowing back-benchers cross-party initiatives and privileged speaking time of their own (see e.g. Wright 2012).

Blaming the 'empty parliament' is an old anti-parliamentary *topos* (for the Weimar Republic see Mergel 2002). The members are, of course, not expected to be present in the plenary hall in all debates. What is required, is a quorum, which used to be low in Westminster (40 members), but half of the membership in some continental parliaments. It is an old convention between parliamentary parties that occasional majorities in the plenary hall shall not be used to overthrow governmental motions.

Parliaments in the corona regime

The parliaments seems to be one of the 'victims' of the corona regime. The lockdowns and travel restrictions have made the regular presence of the members in parliament difficult. The members of parliament free travel in trains and other forms of public transport has become difficult. Lockdowns and travel restrictions and have even been used to justify interrupting or slowing down the rhythm of parliamentary sittings, whereas a hectic and improvised activity has been required from governments and officials. Against the suddenly strong power of the medical experts, whose judgments of the situation and expectations, fortunately, differ as much as between scholars the humanities.

A parliamentary debate *pro* et contra on expert judgements, on the political aspects of their presuppositions and consequences during the exceptional order appears in such a situation more important than ever. This idea requires a certain shift of self-understanding of members from party or constituency representatives to independent parliamentarians, for whom debate and scrutiny of the government and the officials appears as their main activities.

When looking at the actual responses of parliaments, it is easy to see how different they are (https://www.ipu.org/country-compilation-parliamentary-responses-pandemic). The suspension of parliament's sitting *sine die* in Hungary is an extreme case approaching a *coup d'état* that leaves the government and administration without any parliamentary control.

The 'corona emergency' has reduced the presence of members in both the plenary and the committee debates. Keeping the 1,5 metres distance between parliamentarians (and others present in the parliament buildings) is neither easily realisable in the present parliament buildings. Here different moves have been adopted. For example, in the Finnish Eduskunta the numbers allowed to be present in the plenary hall has been temporarily reduced from 200 to 54 (Helsingin Sanomat 28 June 2020). In Serbia a 'protective plexiglass partitions for each MP's seat', in Croatia 'voting in the plenary session was held in three different halls', in Switzerland an extraordinary plenary session was 'held at the Bern Expo exhibition centre' (see https://www.ipu.org/country-compilation-parliamentary-responses-pandemic). The proposals illustrate parliamentary innovativeness to maintain the parliamentary powers but to reducing the dangers of proximity.

A measure provided for previous emergency situations is the selection of a committee, a *Notparlament,* replacing the parliament for the period of emergency. Wolfgang Schäuble, the President of the German Bundestag, suggested this, but the parties definitely rejected the proposal. The law professor Christoph Möllers regards this as a false answer and opts for the emergency a Bundestag with proportionally reduced number of members (quoted in Geuther 2020). The historian Tobias Kaiser emphasises that – in contrast to the parliamentary disinterest in the past pandemics in the 1950s and 1960s – Bundestag acted well: 'Das parlamentarische System hat – Stand heute – den Stresstest bestanden. Es ist funktionsfähig geblieben, hat erstaunlich schnell reagiert und somit die Feuerprobe bestanden'. (https://www.kas.de/de/einzeltitel/-/content/bewaehrungsprobe-fuer-den-parlamentarismus). Olivier Rozenberg in his new study *Post-Pandemic Legislatures* similarly appreciates the

parliamentary performance in facing the pandemics, with the special attention on the possibilities present in the virtual debates (https://www.liberalforum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ELF_DiscussionPaper_2_Post-PandemicLegislatures.pdf)

The demand for proximity for parliamentary debates can either be relativised or reinterpreted, when they are set in relation to the processes of digitalisation, which have been ongoing in parliaments for a while. The 'Belgian House of Representatives amended its Rules of Procedure to allow Members, under certain conditions, to be considered as "present" at selected committee and plenary meetings even when they are not physically in the chamber, and to vote electronically' (https://www.ipu.org/country-compilation-parliamentary-responses-pandemic).

 The digital momentum

The digitalisation of politics seems almost exclude movement politics based on the pressure by both the numbers and proximity, although we could think of digital boycotts etc. For the politics of signatures , on the contrary, geographical and state border obstacles have been removed and a growing number of manifestos are supranational, addressed to the EU in particular.
s
Oliver Rozenberg recently presented the challenge to the principle of proximity as follows: "Legislatures have indeed been thought of as physical places where human beings sit, talk, and decide together. … Is it possible for legislatures to become virtual without losing their soul?" (2020, 6). He emphasises such things as that a legislation is more difficult to put to virtual form than the oversight, and lively plenary debates in the Westminster style might suffer under virtual conditions (ibid. 6-9). He suggests some devices to improve the virtual debates and sees *Chancen* of improvement in the consideration of multiple parliamentary levels (ibid. 10-11).

I would like to continue this debate from a slightly different perspective. Parliaments have been digitalised important respects during the last ca 30 years. For us scholars of politics the digitalisation of debates in long-term perspective has opened up extraordinary new chances to detailed and comparative analyses of different kinds (some of them indicated before practice in Ihalainen and Palonen 2009). Parliamentary records of debates and documents are today

available online in different countries for longer or shorter time periods. Constitutional documents, classical works on political theory, philosophy and rhetoric as well as literary works, also the classical documents and commentaries of parliamentary procedure (for the latter se Palonen 2014) can be found on the Internet, readable direct from home or office.

Prior to digitalisation parliamentarians emphasised the huge amount of 'paper' on their desks (see e.g. Lattmann 1981). The included only the daily agenda, governmental and members' motions, committee reports with expert statements but also background documents used in the justification of government's proposal or clarifying the state of art of debates in foreign parliament or in the scholarly debates. Today all that can be given to the members in the digital form. I can imagine that the members experience this change as a huge relief and will read only what immediately concerns them. The obvious danger is that specialists might get upper hand over parliamentary generalists, that a growing part of MPs would understand themselves as experts in certain issues and not as politicians.

Since decades parliamentarians have been able to see on an internal television what is happening in the plenum, when sitting in the parliament building, thus relativising the proximity demand. In continental parliaments with fixed and visible reading lists both the length and the contents of debates are more predictable that in Westminster with the Speakers' powers to 'catch' the next member to speak by keeping rotation *pro et contra* the motion on the agenda in mind. The spontaneous interjections from the floor have revived debates also in continental parliaments, for example in the German Bundestag the number of *Zwischenrufe* has been continuously growing (see Burkhardt 2016). In vote the personal presence is still required.

A major change provoked by the digitalisation is that the members do have access to the Internet inside the parliament, which might weaken the attention to on-going speeches but enables to check the information included in a speech almost in 'real time' in lexical sources. Most obviously, the digitalisation can improve the *intertextuality* of parliamentary debate by the access to previous debates in the same parliament. It allows the members to check their previous speeches – in the style 'as I said in this house 20 years ago' – or to quote government supporters, how they in opposition spoke against a motion that they now support.

The access to previous debates enables, furthermore, to check the exact formulae of amendment motions, by which one can accentuate or diminish the political point between the alternative formulations. The members – as well as the presidium and the parliament staff of the sitting – can reduce the danger of unintended accidents due to careless formulations. All this means a 'literalisation' of parliamentary debates, which might hinder innovative revisions or even creative misunderstandings of some formulae in comparison with the past debates.

Another major change lies in the new chances to compare parliaments. Especially when there is a relative simultaneity of the debates in several parliaments, such as in the debates commenting the EU legislation before the final decision in the European Parliament, it is much easier to refer to the debates on the other member states than in the pre-digital era. This might include a copy-paste politics from other parliaments without referring to the 'original', or mentioning that, when the quoted members belongs to the opposed party or different type of coalition. It, however, equally improves the chances to hear – in line with the quote from J.S. Mill – a broader spectrum of debates and arguments than what is present in the single parliament.

These examples illustrate not an interesting extension of the concept of parliamentary debate. As compared with other types of debates, parliamentary debates consist – with certain exceptions, such as the vote of no confidence, decided in a single event – of a sequence of debates in plenum or in committees. The intertextuality of the digitalised debate strengthens the significance of playing with time in parliamentary politics. The intra-parliamentary time between the stages and rules of debates remains in vigour but is complemented by the presence of inter-parliamentary time of activating some aspects from the past of the 'own' parliament as rhetorical devices in the present, that is, on-going debate about a decision to be made that concerns the content of future regulations.

The 'horizontal' inter-parliamentary time manifests itself in the debates between present-day parliaments, which has become more important than ever within the EU, both between the parliaments of the member states and between the parliament and the EU institutions, which deal with the item currently on the agenda of debate. For the EU all this contains both chances to get member state parliamentarians better acquainted with debates on the EU level and those of including arguments from the member state parliamentarians.

The question remains, whether the digital access to the sources outside the ongoing sitting rather justifies a *de facto* absence of members or, on the contrary, extends their parliamentary presence. The latter alternative deserves a closer discussion.

In democratised parliaments the adversaries are sitting in the same audience and listening the speeches of their 'opposites', to use the Westminster language. Would this be compatible with a digital presence. Wolfgang Scheuble for example thinks that debate cannot properly be digitalised: 'Wir müssen schon Argument Pro und Contra in Rede und Gegenrede diskutieren. Und wir müssen entscheiden'. (quoted in Geuther 2020)

The digitalisation allows the members to hear and see the speeches both inside and outside the parliament building and therefore uphold the orality of debate, including nuances of both the speaking members as well as of the audience without their co-presence in the plenary hall. Nonetheless, the attention to speeches would likely be more selective than when sitting in the plenary room. It would be difficult to respond spontaneously to the 'mood of the moment' in the parliament, as William Gladstone (1838/1953) put it, and adapt their argumentation to that mood.

Enabling a digital presence can lead to the insight that a lower number of members present in person in the plenary hall can be sufficient to hold in vigour a fair and thorough parliamentary-style debate. This would be the case at least when combined with a rotation principle to guarantee the quorum, to which those present online could be included. Such a rotation would provide each member access to plenary hall within a short period. The online meetings might be more relevant for the committees, especially those which meet frequently, but perhaps this would lower the intensity of debating the detail that characterises the committee debates in Westminster.

Of course, the interjections from the floor could be noticed by projecting them to a table as e-mails or SMSs from members outside the plenary hall. Such a simple reform might mark a shift towards strengthening the written element in debate at the cost of the oral, spontaneous, 'real-time' shouts from the floor, which are crucial for the present-day of parliamentary debates.

Directing a parliamentary debate with digitally present members puts higher demands for the parliament's presidency. The authors of written e-mails and SMSs could be identified better than what is frequently the case with shouts from the plenary room, when the records must be content to notes such as "strong protests among the Greens".

The parliamentary principle that only one member speaks at one time on one item on the parliamentary agenda might become more difficult to maintain in digital debates. The presidency of the parliament should retain the authority to direct debate even over the merely digital participants, which would be easier with parliaments operating with lists of speakers than in Westminster-style that relies on the president of the sitting. Even within a digital audience of say around 100 members it might be difficult to identify easily the legitimate interruptions, such as the adjournment motions, the raising questions of procedure (of 'order' in Westminster terms) or the requests for replies.

The politically important debates should require a personal presence in the plenary hall or in the parliament building – with a smooth rotation of members in the plenary hall – whereas the 'secondary' items would be debated online. At least major regular types of debates, such as the constitutional reforms, the installation of the government and vote of confidence for it, the plenary debates on the annual budget do definitely have a political weight to be debated in person. Other cases must be decided by the parliamentary presidium or majority within a couple of days interval. Still, disputes of first political rank might arise in the middle of debates by intervention of individual members, and for them the fair regulation of online debates requires forming new rules and conventions.

Extending parliamentary presence

Under the corona regime, the urgency of measures and the loyalty among citizens tend, however, to support the incumbent governments and expert powers, although it is nice to see how medical experts tend to dispute not unlike politicians. The institutional and procedural style of parliamentary debate once again marks the best ways to contest and control the expert powers also when the experts among themselves compete over the possession of knowledge. The parliamentarians have been all too modest, not fully conscious of their own powers and of the chances of using them against the expertise.

The corona regime excludes proximity as well as weakens orality and spontaneity of the debates as parliamentary virtues. This makes even more important to discuss the chances how far and in which forms the digitalisation of parliaments could provide improved conditions for regular and efficient parliamentary politics.

In parliamentary politics we speak of the presence of a question in two sense, namely that of the current item on the agenda and all those items that are currently 'in possession of the parliament' (see e.g. Campion 1929, also Palonen 2014, 2018). The chances of the digitalisation lie in extension of the parliamentary presence to the inter- and intra-parliamentary levels, that is in space and time. It is thus possible to extend parliamentary presence by lowering the proximity, especially between parliaments within the EU.

The extension of the present reminds us on the old *topos* that parliamentarians of all countries speak more or less the same language independently of dialectical variations in 'natural' languages. This accentuates the my aforementioned point 'parliament' does not refer mainly to an arena of politics but a style of doing politics through debating *pro et contra* with procedural rules, rhetorical practices and multiple stages of debate. Each stage refers to a knot-point in time, which offers a different perspective to the items on the agenda and a repertoire of different moves what to do with them, including the interrupting of the ongoing debate, reinterpreting the profile of the vices and virtues of the preceding debate and initiating a new debate on the interrupting motion. (see Palonen 2018) Analogous to that both past and simultaneous debating parliaments with public records serve as moments of extending the parliamentary present.

From this perspective we can also judge the chances for supra-national parliamentarism. This includes the understanding of the EU committees in the member state parliaments as a kind of virtual third chamber of the European Parliament (the two councils together forming the second chamber). This idea marks the recognition of the relatively similar and simultaneous parliamentary agendas in the EU member state parliaments and coordinate their debates in order to avoid repeating the same arguments everywhere and encouraging the member to put forward ideas, for example amendments, which could be taken up in other parliaments.

The EU-wide inter-parliamentary meetings could also be a medium for the member state parliamentarians to shift their political identity to the EU level. The EU would no longer be

'somewhere there', one week in the month in Strasbourg and others in Brussels but in the presence of EU-wide debates, in and between parliaments as well as between parliament and other EU institutions, operating with different rhetorical genres (see Palonen 2019). Indeed, the French prestige question of maintaining Strasbourg session could be relativised with the possibility of the presence at either site at each of the plenary sessions.

In rhetorical terms such parliamentarism would not be based on inter-chambre negotiations but on deliberations, in which the members of different parliaments could participate in the same or analogous debates, within a quasi-real time. Of course, such version of parliamentarism would require political imagination with historical understanding of past and existing practices in order to expand the parliamentary procedures and practical of fair and thorough debate within reasonable time limits to this kind of more complex debates.

Nonetheless, parliamentary proximity in the sense of personal presence would be concentrated to questions of first rank political significance. In such debates the presence could then be restricted to 'this parliament now dealing with this item on the agenda'. This would mark a dramatisation and intensification of debate by concentration in time and space. A decision over, in which rare questions such combination of presence with proximity – with 1,5 metres interval – should be required.

Conclusions

The styles of movement, signature and parliamentary politics have as a common qualification the principle of counting and not weighting the number of actors. However, they are not, unlike a referendum, approaching a purely numerical politics, but the number of participants will be qualified by different means.

The qualification of movement politics takes place through organising the joint action, either spontaneously as in Sartre's *groupe-en-fusion* or with the apparatus of the more traditional mass organisations, liable then to the well-known oligarchic tendencies. The signature politics in the version of a quorum for bringing an item to the agenda requires the qualifications of citizenship and voting rights but is otherwise disinterested who the signers are, The signatures of protest petitions relies, as I discussed above, besides the number on the signatures of

celebrities, which are assumed to bring both a bandwagon-effect in support and exercise a pressure on the authorities that is analogous to movement politics.

The procedural literature on Westminster has insisted on the inherent connection between debate and vote, in the demand that the motions put on the agenda also includes a resolution to be voted on (see Campion 1929, 147 and the discussion in Palonen 2014). In the course of debate rounds not only the constellation of voting for and against can be constantly changing but with the amendments the question to be voted will be debates against each other and in the final vote is between the original motion and the 'winning' amendment – if the motion has survived and reaches the vote at all. In parliamentary-style politics the vote is both an end of a debate and its last step, not intelligible without the preceding thorough debates in a way regulated by the procedure. In order to arrive to the final vote, the resolution must survive through debates or allow more or less radical modifications.

The ingenious distance arrangements that parliaments have more or less spontaneously invented in the face of the corona demands, illustrate that the distance criterion does not radically alter the debate or the vote. The effects of digitalisation might be more ambiguous. The oral character of the parliamentary style of debating is, after all, not the main problem, but the visual presence with political adversaries in the parliamentary audience might be a greater problem than for example in the party conferences, in which the adversaries are expected to sit outside.

As for the debate-concluding vote it looks likely that upholding a strict party discipline might be more difficult on parliamentarians who are only digitally present than those immediately subjected to the whip's pressure. How to appreciate this politically is a question of judging parliamentary politics. Those wanting disciplined partisan members in a stable majority government might be more likely opposed to the digitalisation of the vote than those, who would rehabilitate the parliamentarians' sindependent judgement, even against their own parties. If we want to guarantee that parliaments and their members gain more independence from parties and governments, my guess is that we should not be too afraid of digitalisation in both debate and vote.

REFERENCES

Ankersmit, Frank 1996. *Aesthetic Politics.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ankersmit, Frank 2001. *Historical Representation.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ankersmit, Frank 2002. *Political Representation.* Stanford: Stanford University Press

Arendt, Hannah 1960 [1981]. *Vita active oder Vom tätigen Leben*. München: Pieper.

Bering, Dietz 2010. *Die Epoche der Intellektuellen 1890-2001.* Berlin: Berlin University
    Press.

Borchert, Jens 2003. *Die Professionalisierung der Politik*. Frankfurt/M: Campus.

Burkhardt, Armin 2016. German Parliamentary Discourse since 1948 from a Linguistic Point
    of View, in Pasi Ihalainen, Cornelia Ilie and Kari Palonen eds. *Parliament and
    Parliamentarism.* Oxford: Berghahn, 176-191.

Campion, Gilbert 1929. *An Introduction to the Procedure of the House of Commons.* London:
    Allen et co.

Fryde, Edmund 1970. Introduction, in E.B. Fryde and Edward Miller, *Historical Studies on
    the English Parliament*, vol. 2 1399-1603. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-30.

Geuther, Gundula 2020. Deutscher Bundestag. Schwierige Selbstbehauptung in Coronazeiten.
    https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/deutscher-bundestag-schwierige-selbstbehauptung-
    in.724.de.html?dram:article_id=476166

Gladstone, William 1838/1953. Public Speaking. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 39, 266-272,

Helsingin Sanomat 3 May 2020, https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006493304.html

Helsingin Sanomat 28 June 2020. check

Ihalainen, Pasi and Kari Palonen 2009. Parliamentary Sources in the Comparative Study of
    Conceptual History, *Parliaments, Estates & Representation* 29, 17-34..

Inter-Parliamentary Union 2020. Parliaments in a time of pandemic,
    https://www.ipu.org/parliaments-in-time-pandemic and Country compilation of
    parliamentary responses to the pandemic, https://www.ipu.org/country-compilation-
    parliamentary-responses-pandemic

Kaiser, Tobias 2020. Bewährungsprobe für den Parlamentarismus? Repräsentative
    Demokratie in der Pandemie, https://www.kas.de/de/einzeltitel/-
    /content/bewaehrungsprobe-fuer-den-parlamentarismus

Lattmann, Dieter 1981. *Die lieblose Republik. Aufzeichnungen aus Bonn am Rhein*. München:
    Kindler.

Llanque, Marcus 2008. The Rhetoric of Intellectual Manifestos from the First World War to
    the War against Terrorism, in Kari Palonen, Tuija Pulkkinen and José María Rosales eds.

The Ashgate Research Companion to the Politics of Democratization in Europe. Concepts and Histories. Farnheim: Ashgate 185-198.

Lüsebrink, Hans-Jürgen and Rolf Reichardt 1990. *Die "Bastille". Zur Symbolgeschichte von Herrschaft und Freiheit.* Frankfurt/M: Fischer.

Mill, John Stuart 1861. *Considerations on Representative Government.* https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5669/5669-h/5669-h.htm

Meier, Christian 1980. *Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen.* Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.

Mergel, Thomas 2002. *Die parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik.* Düsseldorf: Droste.

Palonen, Kari 1992. *Politik als Vereitelung. Die Politikkonzeption in Jean-Paul Sartres* "Critique de la raison dialectique". Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot.

Palonen, Kari 2004. Parliamentarism: A Politics of Temporal and Rhetorical Distances. *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 15:3, 111-125.

Palonen, Kari 2008. *The Politics of Limited Times.* Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Palonen, Kari 2010. *"Objektivität" als faires Spiel. Wissenschaft als Politik bei Max Weber.* Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Palonen, Kari 2014. *The Politics of Parliamentary Procedure. The formation of the Westminster procedure as a parliamentary ideal type.* Leverkusen: Budrich.

Palonen, Kari 2016. *From Oratory to Debate. Parliamentarisation of Deliberative Rhetoric in Westminster.* Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Palonen, Kari 2018. *Parliamentary Thinking. Procedure, Rhetoric and Time.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Palonen, Kari 2019. Rethinking Political Representation from the Perspective of Rhetorical Genres. *Theoria. A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 158, 27-50.

Peltonen, Markku 2013. *Politics, Rhetoric and Popularity in Pre-revolutionary England.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Ridard, Basile 2018. L'*encadrement du temps parlementaire dans la procedure legislative. Étude comparée: Allemagne, Espagne, France, Royaume-Uni*. Paris: Institut Universitaire Varenne.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 1762 (1966). *Du contrat social.* Paris: Garnier-Flammarion.

Rozenberg, Olivier 2020. Post Pandemic Legislatures. Is real democracy possible with virtual parliaments?", *European Liberal Forum*, Discussion Paper, 2, July 2020.

https://www.liberalforum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ELF_DiscussionPaper_2_Post-PandemicLegislatures.pdf

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1944. Huis clos, in *Théâtre complet*, ed. Michel Contat. Paris: Gallimard, 2005, 91-136.

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1946 [1954]. *Réflexions sur la question juive.* Paris: Gallimard.

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1960 [1985]. *Critique de la raison dialectique*, tome 1. Paris: Gallimard.

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1966 [1972]. Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels, in *Situations VIII*, Paris: Gallimard, 375-455.

Schmitt, Carl 1928 [1970]. *Verfassungslehre.* Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.

Das Schweizer Parlament 2020, https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/sessionen/aktuelle-session

Sirinelli, Jean-François 1990. *Intellectuels et passions françaises. Manifestes et petitions au XX siècle.* Paris: Fayard.

Skinner, Quentin 1996. *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Skinner, Quentin 1998. *Liberty before Liberalism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Skinner, Quentin 2002. A Third Concept of Liberty. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117, 237-268.

Skinner, Quentin 2014. *Forensic Shakespeare.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Süßmuth, Rita 2000. *Wer nicht kämpft, hat schon verloren. Meine Erfahrungen in der Politik.* München: Econ.

Tardieu, André 1937. *La profession parlementaire.* Paris: Flammarion.

Vatter, André ed. 2018. *Das Parlament in der Schweiz.* Zürich: Libro.

Vieira, Ryan A. 2015. *Time and Politics. Parliament and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and the British World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weber, Max 1917[1988]. Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland. In *Max-Weber-Studienausgabe* I/15, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen. Tübingen: Mohr, 155-189.

Weber, Max 1918 [1988]. Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland. In *Max-Weber-Studienausgabe* I/15, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen. Tübingen: Mohr, 202-302.

Weber, Max 1919 [1994]. Politik als Beruf. In *Max-Weber-Studienausgabe* I/17, ed. Wolfgang Schluchter and Wolfgang J. Mommsen. Tübingen: Mohr, 35-88.