

## ETHNOGRAPHY OF PARLIAMENT:

### FINDING CULTURE AND POLITICS ENTANGLED IN THE COMMONS AND THE LORDS

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#### **Abstract**

Ethnographic approaches are beginning to percolate political science, but are often taken up as a 'method', rather than an approach to methodology and theory. I describe my experience of doing ethnography in the Houses of Lords and Commons. Through the themes of whipping and gender, I explain how theory and method were interwoven and how reflexivity improves rigour. Dealing with the methodological challenge of disjunctions and contradictions is explored through the case studies of constituency work, law-making and ceremonies. Finally I remark on how ethnographic approaches to ethics entails attention to process and relationships rather than compliance with rules.

#### **1. Ethnography: organisations, the state and Parliaments**

Anthropologists have traditionally put ethnography at the centre of their research practice. Ethnography is a methodological and theoretical approach to studying social worlds as well as the written product (usually a book) that contains the ethnographer's discoveries. The social world is usually defined by its members, in terms of geography, culture, ethnicity or organisation or a combination of these. Undertaking an ethnography does not require particular research techniques but is rather a process of 'fieldwork', that is, prolonged engagement with a specific group of people to find out how they act, think, talk and relate with and to each other. Most ethnographers rely primarily on a mixture of different qualitative research techniques, although quantitative methods are often employed as well. Their responses to concerns about subjectivity versus objectivity are distinct from positivistic approaches; rather than attempting to remove their influence on the research findings, ethnographers consider this part of their research. Such reflexivity entails 'turning back on oneself', as Davies puts it, reflecting on how the social interaction between ethnographer and informant reveals their respective assumptions and responses to each other and produces the theories that generate conclusions (1998: 4-5). When ethnography by anthropologists was predominantly the study of foreign cultures (until the 1970s), the researcher was stepping into and out of what was obviously a different culture from their own. Since ethnographers have turned their gaze to cultures, groups or organisations 'at home', and boundaries between groups have blurred with globalisation, the

need for reflexivity in good research has become more pressing.

When embarking on ethnographic fieldwork, a skilled researcher will pay attention to how the process of research is experienced by their relationship with informants. Skinner quotes the classic *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (1874) on the difficulties of interviewing, suggesting it is often 'difficult to put the question before him in such a way that he can comprehend it. The result often is that from timidity, or desire to please, or from weariness of the questioning, he will give an answer that he thinks will satisfy the inquirer' (2012: 25). Interviewing does not produce simple social facts. By the 1970s it became clear to anthropologists that research is not about what one individual, the researcher, does in the search for understanding, but what various actors do in encounters with each other within which multiple assumptions, understandings and power relations all play a part. The whiteness and Britishness of anthropologists studying post-colonial cultures in the first half of the twentieth century contributed to a downplaying of racism and economic exploitation (Davies 1998: 12). Feminists have pointed out that that the gender and sexuality of researchers and informants are always involved in the production of knowledge (Moore 1994). When research is reflexive, and taking account of the researcher's subjectivity, then it tends to have an emergent quality because it is impossible to anticipate what the researcher will discover about both others and themselves. This complicates research ethics, including securing informed consent from informants for their participation, rendering it an on-going process throughout the project rather than a one-off event. Ethical concerns and problems with access tend to become especially acute when doing ethnographic research within organisations (Gellner and Hirsch 2001: 6), a point I will return to in relation to my own research.

The vicissitudes in the study of organisations by anthropologists up to 1997 have been reviewed by Bate (1997: 1147-75); at their best, they can surprise us with revelations by seeing the familiar with fresh perspectives and describing these in rich detail. But many have been tempted to fly into organisations and come up with superficial observations and easy solutions. Since then the direction of travel for ethnographies of organisations has been influenced by at least three important intellectual developments. Jonathan Spencer explains how political anthropology liberated itself from models and theories that reduced politics to merely the function of institutions or processes, partly by bringing imagination, morality, and ritual into the study of everyday social relations and cultural practices (2007). Culture and politics became re-entangled. For example, in Marc Abéles' research on French politics (1991) and Olivier de Sardan's on corruption in West Africa (2009), politicians or bureaucrats are embedded in their own society at a particular time in history. These three influential anthropologists were researching politics as a global activity – that 'morally unsettling space in which friend is differentiated from foe', as Spencer puts it (2007: 180) – but also specific cultural manifestations. The keystone of French political culture, for example, is 'the point where a logic of political space meets a logic of political representation' (Abéles 1991: 267-9). This means that

to gain political office in France you have to navigate local networks, symbols and rituals in ways that demonstrate your power of evocation.

The second development is that anthropologists argue less than they did about whether they are interested in commonalities or differences across cultures globally – nearly all are interested in both, and grapple with questions about what creates the most socially and culturally significant differences. In response to Latour’s actor network theory, which implies that universal patterns can be found in the social networks of both modern and nonmodern societies, Strathern suggests that notions of property and ownership predispose networks to being constituted with important variations in different cultures (1996). Anthropological research makes it clear that opposing ‘modern’ with ‘nonmodern’ is no longer a convincing way to categorise nations in the face of globalisation. But the question about whether or not the search for global patterns is futile, and if not how to conceptualise those patterns, still emerges at the heart of much anthropological research and writing. The query about the possibilities for generalisation has been posed in relation to organisations too. Gellner and Hirsh ask, for example: do the social research methods and theories applied to people in society work equally well within organisations or are there aspects to the way people organise at work that sets these activities apart?, a question I hope to address in this article (2001: 13).

Finally, other disciplines are beginning to take an interest in ethnography in their study of politics and political institutions but at a gradual pace. The US political scientist Richard Fenno’s amazingly innovative study of Member of Congress in their constituencies was carried out over eight years and he even called his method ‘participant-observation’, the traditional approach of social anthropology (1978).<sup>1</sup> Given the richness of his portrait and interpretation, and the recognition of this pioneering work with various prizes awarded, it is hard to understand why it did not catch on more readily within political science. Politics scholars in Europe have adopted elements of ethnographic method, such as Rhodes (2011), or an interest in themes that are associated with anthropology, with Shirin Rai and Rachel Johnson (2014) turning their attention to rituals, symbols and performance, but on the whole ethnographic methods remain mysterious to political science. Anthropologists have begun writing expressly for a wider audience of scholars beyond their own discipline (Schumann 2009 and Crewe 2015) and this article aims to contribute further to that small body of literature. In a bid to convey what the art and science of ethnographic research consists of, I will reflect on my own within the UK Parliament.

## **2. Ethnographies of the Westminster Houses of Parliament 1998-2015**

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<sup>1</sup> Soon after Jack Weatherford wrote an anthropology of the US Congress but it did not have as much impact as Fenno’s (1981).

In 1997 I wrote a letter to the then Clerk of the Parliaments, the top official in the House of Lords, Sir Michael Davies, and asked for a meeting to discuss a research proposal. I wanted to study the House of Lords because the new Labour government planned to abolish the right of hereditary peers to sit in Parliament and I was interested in organisational change. As I sought permission to do ethnographic research, Sir Michael explained that no one person had the authority to grant such a request but that it would be sensible to run it by various people. He asked whether I knew anyone. I mentioned the some names of peers I had a tenuous connection to and he put my proposal to the three main party leaders and the Convenor of the Cross-benchers. None objected during this meeting but subsequently both the Leader of the House and one of the most senior clerks argued against the decision to issue me with a pass. Sir Michael told them it was too late; approval had already been given.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1998-2000 I immersed myself in the House of Lords, watching the way debate and law-making was ritualised, the gaps and contradictions between ethos, rules and practices and how these related to formal and informal hierarchies. *Lords of Parliament: rituals, manners and politics* (2005) was a departure from most monographs on the upper house. Rather than a normative account of roles, functions and impact, I painted a picture of relationships, networks and cultural practices between people working in the House. The respect and deference towards peers reminded me of the Hindu caste system, with clerks holding the sacred priestly knowledge and peers seen as warriors. Peers' elevated social status in society seemed to act as a form of compensation for their relative powerlessness in relation to MPs. Although the Lords manage to defeat the government more often than the Commons, it is the elected Chamber that controls most parliamentary proposals and debates as well as the bulk of the administration of government. Given this, as well as an ethos of being independent-minded experts, a puzzling aspect of the Lords was the pattern of most party peers voting mainly in accordance with the instructions of their party. Neither of the theories that still held sway over political science in early 2000s – rational choice theory and new institutionalism – could explain this puzzle. My surmise was that it is only when you see how politics is entangled with social networks and culture that peers' relative obedience makes sense (Crewe 2005 and Crewe 2015b). Peers' loyalty to party, and enmity towards the other parties, develops over years of everyday interaction – socialising, giving each other support in the chamber, committee or in party work, and arguing indignantly about the moral wickedness of opponents. An ethos of independence is contradicted by a practice of more political 'tribalism' than peers claim or I expected.

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<sup>2</sup> This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council 1998-2002.

I carried out fieldwork in the House of Commons between 2011-13<sup>3</sup> but this time confined myself to a focus on MPs' work in parliament and constituencies, why it varies between members and how it is changing. *House of Commons: an anthropology of MPs at work* continues on the theme that politics is entangled with social and cultural life; for example, gender inequality persists in the politically more competitive and powerful lower house because it reflects broader trends in UK society. Entanglements vary according to the identity of the MP and change over time; the demands of constituency and social media work have exploded and are experienced differently depending on gender, age, ideology and constituency. Politics is inseparable from evidence, so I challenge the assumption made by some legal scholars and scientists that good law-making contains evidence separated from politics. I mention these arguments to offer a flavour of what the final ethnographies contained. In the rest of the article I will explain how I reached these conclusions on each House of Parliament in more detail and what that reveals about ethnography.

In both Houses the fieldwork consisted of six categories of overlapping activities:

- Interviews. Formal semi-structured and unstructured interviews in the Lords with 121 peers, 67 parliamentary staff or former staff, and 16 others (special advisers, journalists, spouses and MPs) and in the Commons with 44 MPs, 24 former MPs (19 of these were peers interviewed during the Lords project), 14 staff and 28 others (special advisers, peers, parliamentary candidates, MPs' staff, civil servants, journalists, civil society representatives). I held four interviews with staff groups – doorkeepers, housekeepers, secretaries and Hansard – in the Lords, and one with MPs' staff in the Commons. The peers and MPs were chosen to be roughly representative in terms of gender, length of service, party and position. For the interviews with parliamentarians I had a checklist of questions for each House.
- Observation. I observed regularly debates in the chambers, select and public bill committees, and both formal and informal and public and private meetings, ceremonies (including the State Opening of Parliament) and parliamentary videos, TV and media interview and reports in both Houses over several years. I also watched weekly Cross-bench meetings in the House of Lords, when they discussed upcoming business and interviews as well as meetings between the Lords' Staff Advisor and various members of staff. In the Commons I watched interactions between MPs and Clerks in the Table Office and sat in on a 'Hurroosh' and a 'Reading', meetings to reflect on the previous week's work in the Table Office and Journal Office respectively. I observed a 'conference' between the Speaker, Deputy Speaker and top Clerks to discuss the day's anticipated parliamentary business.

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<sup>3</sup> The House of Commons project was funded by a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship 2011-2012.

- Texts. I reviewed literature on Parliament, documents produced by Parliament and politicians and articles, stories, blogs or tweets on both conventional and social media. In particular, I read transcripts of parliamentary proceedings, committee reports and policy statements, notices from whips and letters to both peers and MPs from citizens or constituents as well as academic work mainly by political scientists, biographies and diaries of politicians.
- Participation. Informal interaction with MPs, peers, constituents, party workers, civil servants, staff, journalists, and visitors in offices, meeting rooms, corridors, eating places and at functions took the form of discussion, gossip and talking about current issues. Sharing an office with Cross-bench peers provided an excellent opportunity for gossip. Gossip is far from trivial in organisations – often it is when people talk about what is really going on, rather than what is supposed to be happening. I also engaged in various initiatives on a pro-bono basis: (a) assisting a Clerk in the House of Lords in registering candidates for electing the hereditary peers who were to remain in the House after 90% were removed, (b) sitting on the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority as an external expert advising on MPs’ pay, pensions and allowances, (c) giving advice about conducting qualitative research within the House of Commons (e.g., to elicit MPs’ views about the quality of services provided by within Parliament), (d) giving oral evidence to the Liaison Committee, Administration Committee, and ad hoc Governance Committee, (e) discussing Parliament with officials and academics at the Study of Parliament Group and with journalists at the Pebble Club.
- Case studies. I compiled narratives within both Houses to get into more depth on specific encounters between MPs and others. In the House of Lords I followed all the stages and interviewed various protagonists about the House of Lords Reform Act 1999, the piece of legislation that removed the right of peers to sit in the Lords on the basis of hereditary privileges. In the Commons I followed Clause (later Section) 11 in the Children and Families Bill 2014 before and as it travelled through the House and was discussed by stakeholders outside, including a coalition of children’s and legal charities co-ordinated by Coram Children’s Legal Centre. I tracked one parliamentary candidate in her bid to get selected and campaigned with the Liberal Democrat, Labour and Conservative parties at the Eastleigh by-election. Finally I visited seven constituencies in England, Scotland and Wales, watching various meetings held with MPs in public, private and charitable organisations and thirty-two ‘surgery’ meetings with constituents.
- Recording and publishing. I recorded notes on all of the above, with verbatim quotes and analysis of what I heard and saw, as well as logs (or diaries) amounting to 416 typed pages in total. Whenever I drafted any book or article, I sought permission to name

informants, requested checks for accuracy and confidentiality, and solicited comments from key informants. Increasingly I realised that this was no mere check but a valuable way to elicit responses and learn more about how different informants viewed their world.

Presenting methods in terms of activity tells you rather little about how I developed an understanding of what I encountered. Since the fieldwork phases spanned over five years part-time in both Houses, and involved thousands of encounters with people, performances or texts, describing these experiences is complex. So I will pick on some themes running through my ethnographies to narrate what happened when my fieldwork experiences were gradually turned into interpretations and then publications.

### ***2.1. Theory and method: the case of whipping***

Assumptions, theory and methods are intimately bound up with each other, entangled rather than treated separately in anthropological research. Who, what and how we choose to research derives from our understanding of people based on past social research – our own but also that of other anthropologists since the discipline began in its present form in the 1920s (Westbrook 2008: 91). The process of doing ethnography is iterative and experimental, both in the sense of ethnographic methods evolving within the discipline but also within a particular project. It involves trial and error, working out your assumptions about a community or organisation, what questions you are interesting in, how you are going to pursue an inquiry into those questions, making sense of what you find and what people say, conceal or don't say, reviewing your assumptions, seeing what new questions you or your informants are interested in, and so on. To illustrate this through a specific example, I will explain how I inquired into the whips in the House of Commons.

I began my inquiry into Commons' whips holding assumptions developed while researching the House of Lords. By talking to whips and peers in the Lords, and sitting in on meetings between whips, I discovered that the 'usual channels' – that is, the whips and party managers across parties – negotiated deals that went unnoticed by the backbenchers. I watched to see how much peers obey their whips. Despite an ethos of independence articulated by almost all peers, and few bribes or threats at the whips' disposal, peers rarely vote against the instructions sent out by their parties (relative to my and their expectations). When I asked why they were so much more obedient than their ethos of independence implied, they would explain that they did not have the time to find out about such a huge range of issues and trusted the judgement of their own side, felt strong party loyalty, or they couldn't face 'voting with the enemy.' Time and again peers voiced opinions that conveyed a strong solidarity within party in contrast to the idealised individualism of their ethos.

I expected fewer deals, harsher whipping and firmer government controls in the Commons, all achieved by promises, bribes and threats. Although trained to question the easy assumptions of rational choice theory – that individuals are motivated by a calculation of their interests – I slipped into assuming that MPs obey the whip to get re-elected, promoted or supported by their party. However, Commons whipping wasn't as I had anticipated. I read Phil Cowley's work on rebels; MPs obey the whip less and less each Parliament so that the 2010-2015 was yet again the most rebellious since 1945 (2015). Why was it that peers appeared to be getting more obedient and MPs less so? It was clearly not simple individual self-interest. Perhaps party loyalty was getting stronger in the Lords but weaker in the Commons? I launched into an inquiry by talking to whips, rebels and those close to them. They revealed that not only were MPs rebelling more often, but the nature of whipping was changing so that it was more about coaxing than bullying party members. I first realised this on talking to Roy Stone – the Principal Private Secretary to the Government Chief Whip – a post of immense influence that acts as intermediary between the leaders and whips in the main political parties in the House of Commons. There had only been four PPSs since 1919, when the post was created, and a former MP had told me it is because they know all the secrets of the political parties so they can't be sacked. For this person to be trusted with the secrets of all sides, he has to be discreet. Discretion is not just a matter of keeping secrets to yourself; it is about knowing what is a political secret or sensitive in the first place. So what are the secrets exactly? These days the secrets are not about policy initiatives – these are widely known, leaked and impossible to hide – but disagreement within the parties.

I began to realise that whipping is not so much about forceful control of individuals to get them into line as it is about intelligence (more specifically, gathering information), negotiation and discretion. For the backbenchers, whipping looks completely different, of course, and they are fragmented into different groups depending on their career trajectory. Supporters of the party leaders and young ambitious MPs invest in the image of whips as team leaders inspiring loyalty and holding the party together. Those out of favour, without any desire to get a job on the frontbench, talk of whips as bullies and control freaks. Even if the days of violence and blackmail by whips are long gone, those MPs tend to be indignant at the insult of being told what to think and do. In considering these contrasting positions, it becomes clear that the position of the whips is weakening in the UK House of Commons. There are various reasons for this: political parties (including their polarised ideologies) are in a decline, the demands of constituencies and local parties are becoming more vociferous, and reforms in 2010 gave more clout to backbenchers especially on select committees (Crewe 2015). How did I build up this more complex picture of the whipping in recent times? I investigated what happened and why on particular votes by observing and listening to MPs in the chamber and in the corridors. To theorise about how whipping is embedded in all sorts of complex social relationships, I needed to do more than merely look at the narrow tactics of whips in trying to persuade backbenches



to comply with their will. I looked at it from all angles and at the gaps between perspectives. I have tried to convey through the example of the whips how finding out what is going on in ethnographic research entails attention to theory and method at the same time.

## ***2.2. Reflexivity: the case of gender***

The second way ethnography is different to most other approaches to the study of Parliament concerns the social position of the researcher. Ethnographers usually see the process of research as reflexive and emergent which means not only will the study of every Parliament be different (because each is embedded in different cultures and politics), but studies of the same Parliament will vary because of the identity of different researchers. It is easiest to show how my own history and identity has influenced my research by giving an example. In my study of the Lords and Commons I found contrasts that emerged partly out of their different cultures but also out of my relationship with those I interviewed. Research is a social process of conversation, observation, action and response, just like any encounter between people. So when I asked questions, my own social position as a female white anthropologist gave a particular shape to the asking as well as the response. The same was true of observation. When nearly all peers claimed that the Lords is egalitarian, I was sceptical; I had never entered an organisation within which women participated on equal terms to men. When watching and talking to them, it became apparent that women thrive in debates where courtly manners reign and aggression is deemed unsuitable behaviour for a peer, even if other hierarchies are in play (Crewe 2005, chapter 6). My own female identity (and a history of working on feminist projects) sharpened my interest in gender and the sense of openness to new ideas that is part of the ethnographic approach at its best, allowed me to challenge my own assumption that patriarchy is to be found in every organisation.

Gender in the Commons was more familiar. In the more ambitious and competitive House there is no ethos of equality or even shared ethos. Most men reported that they relish performing in the Chamber during the gladiatorial battles (such as Prime Minister's Questions or debates on controversial bills), heckling their opponents and cheering their allies, while women tend to say they prefer the calmer, more deliberative debates. Based on observing male and female MPs in seven constituencies, it seemed to me that they handle their representative role differently too. Within increasingly demanding constituencies, nearly every MP holds surgeries where they advise constituents with severe problems and hand the case to their staff to take up with local or national government. Labour MP Paul Flynn writes tellingly, 'The MP should be the living embodiment of the constituency, tirelessly promoting and defending the territory with the ferocity of a mother protecting her offspring' (2012: 138). The only MPs I could find who never attend surgeries seemed to be male in safe seats, whereas female MPs always hold surgeries and appear more confident especially in intensely emotional conversations with constituents.

So there is social and political significance in the gendered experience of being an MP. The reflexive part of this is that my own identity had an important influence on the methodology, specifically where my attention was drawn. It was easy to ask men and women about how their experiences were gendered partly because I was a woman. Neither were surprised nor offended, and women were positively delighted to be able to talk about sexism with someone they assumed to be sympathetic. Contrast this with another aspect of parliamentarians' identity – sexuality – which is at least as interesting. A fair amount of legislation about homosexuality has gone through Parliament in the last 15 years, which reflects and contributes to a revolution in attitudes towards LGBT people in UK society. Alongside these changes in law we have seen various parliamentarians come out as gay. But when I studied the Lords there was only one out gay peer – Lord Alli – and although this theme was sorely neglected by scholars, I didn't study it in detail. Although the legislation came up in conversations, so I managed to find out something about homophobia, I did not get as far as I would have done if I had more experience in exploring this theme. If I was lesbian myself, then I would have had a greater store of personal experience and knowledge of LGBT issues to draw on.

### ***2.3. Gaps, connections and contradictions: constituencies, law-making and ceremonies***

Ethnography achieves its rigour and depth through its emphasis on making sense of gaps, connections and contradictions. I employed different methods in the sense of techniques depending on what I was trying to find out. In the interactive, rather than observational mode, the art of interpretative questioning was key. The questions tended to be focused and open. To get beneath the surface, and make sense of multiple views, a researcher has to continually ask, "why is she saying that?", because like anyone else politicians' statements are produced by their specific social context and a mix of cultural values, pressures, ideologies, norms, emotions, and aspirations. As well as asking about people's idealised versions about what they were supposed to do, or probing their representations of themselves, I observed their everyday practices and interaction. This kind of open-ended inquiry means that ethnographers find out what they perceive to be of socio-political significance to their informants and can then more easily analyse why patterns such as gaps, connections and contradictions exist, persist or change. It is in the endless analysis of similarities and differences between different aspects of social worlds that patterns emerge.

Gaps often appear between what people say about their work and what they actually do. If you listen to what MPs say about constituency work, and watch surgery meetings, it looks as if MPs just obediently do as they are told when dealing with constituents' grievances, writing letters on their behalf and never turning anyone away. However, if you look across many cases it is possible to see that MPs assess the merit of different cases and alter the way they deal with

different people on the basis of weighing up the truth or what their constituents say. Since most of them have to develop close relationships across their constituency with bureaucrats in all the major agencies, MPs don't want to annoy them by wasting their time with cases that are not worth troubling about. So they develop a subtle code for indicating the urgency (or lack of it) of the case in the letters or emails that convey the details of the problem. People working in agencies told me how much they valued these judgments of merit that MPs make so that they can prioritise and give more time to urgent cases. At the other extreme, in one instance an MP refused to write at all because she told me afterwards that the constituent was not telling the whole truth about his application for asylum.

Complex connections are found less easily if you rely on only one method of research. Following one clause of one bill for about two years with multiple methods – interviews, observation and tracking documents as they change – enabled me to observe the connections created or maintained between a huge range of different people involved in one particular issue. The issue concerned decisions made by judges when parents separate and go to court to settle children's care and residential arrangements. A close study of the text and the authors of its amendments might lead a researcher to conclude that the government was persuaded to tone down this clause from a fathers' rights to a children's welfare perspective by a cross-political select committee and then a seemingly apolitical Cross-bench peer. However, the amendments were actually the result of a complex alliance that can only be understood if you investigate the connections between different people, events and private meetings (Crewe 2015a, chapter 6). When I interviewed various protagonists they inevitably painted their own role in the passage of the bill through their own lens, not always seeing the part played by others. By watching various meetings and contrasting different points of view, I came up with a version of events that was more persuasive than one insider's account could ever be. By emailing my draft version to all the key protagonists and asking for their comments, and then adjusting the narrative to more faithfully and precisely reflect the multiple voices, and the contradictions between them, the research process continued – in the sense of finding out what happened – until I judged that a persuasive account had been reached and the final editing was complete.

Contradictions will always appear when you look closely at connections because differences and conflicting or changing interests and views between people inevitably generate them. The State Opening of Parliament has contradictory meanings for the various groups involved. Contradictions in the meaning of symbols can even be their strength (Kertzer 1988: 11). The ceremony demonstrates the majesty of the Monarch with a mighty procession from Buckingham Place to Westminster, and through the Royal Gallery in the Palace of Westminster, putting on her Imperial State Crown and reading out the government's plans, and holding an MP hostage in Buckingham Palace to ensure her safe return. Peers surround the Monarch in the procession and in the Lords Chamber, signifying their social proximity to the Queen and their high social status in society. Contrast this with how MPs experience the ceremony. When the

Queen's representative, the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, has the door slammed in his face and has to knock three times on the door of the House of Commons, to summon MPs to the House of Lords, MPs are asserting their political independence. The Monarch is not allowed to visit, still less interfere with governing the country. Dennis Skinner, a republican, customarily makes a small personal demonstration, such as replying to Black Rod's summons by shouting quips such as 'Hey up, here comes Puss in Boots!' As MPs amble to the Lords, talking noisily and joking along the way, they are obeying in their own time and manner with the air of adults humouring children. In this one event, the most public occasion when all three parts of the constitution are together in one place, each group's superiority is asserted over the other.

Alongside such contrasting perspectives between and within groups, depending upon where the boundaries are delineated, anthropologists tend to find that the human experience consists of contradictions for every individual. The expectations of, and demands upon, politicians are a concentrated form of contradiction. She represents thousands of constituents with diverse interests as if they were one; scrutinises government on select committees or in the chamber or takes part in running / supporting government; and promotes herself, her causes and her political party simultaneously in the media and on twitter. As Andrew Percy (MP) tweeted, 'The rock and roll MP lifestyle. One min it's speaking in the Mother of Parliaments, next it's a visit to a Chicken Cottage' (Crewe 2015a: 223). Navigating such a wide range of public and private audiences, scripts and cast of characters, enables most MPs to develop extraordinary skill at adaptation. It was not interviewing that brought this home to me most forcefully but a chance encounter. In September 2012 I was interviewing a Clerk, let's call him Harry, in Portcullis House café (an outbuilding of the Westminster Parliament), asking about what it was like working with MPs. A prominent Conservative MP walked up to us and saw we were having an informal meeting – we had only coffee and no notebooks in front of us – and he started joking with the Clerk, pretending to treat him as if he was unstable. "Did you know I am his psychotherapist?" he said to me, "H-o-w a-r-e y-o-u d-o-i-n-g...?" he asked loudly, as if to someone unhinged and deaf. Harry kept trying to intervene and finally managed to say: 'Do you know Dr. Crewe from the University of London, who is doing an academic study of MPs?' The MP appeared visibly shocked and in a second shape-shifted from jovial, chatty mate leaning over our table into an upright, straight-backed, highly dignified important person offering to help with my research project. In a blink his face was transformed from a huge smile and twinkling eyes to sombre formality.

The MP departed swiftly and I asked Harry, 'what on earth was all that about?' He laughed and explained that he had been Clerk to the MP's committee and they had been on an overseas trip together, one of the main ways that Clerks and MPs get to know each other well. He was joking around, as he always does with Harry, because he saw that I had an officials' pass, so he assumed I was an insider. As soon as he realized that I was not only an outsider, but an academic on a serious mission who was planning to write about MPs, he changed his tune from

warmth to formality, politeness and reserve. It is perhaps what anyone has to do in a place of work when adjusting from encounters with close colleagues to one with strangers. But on discussing this encounter with Harry, I realized that MPs have to switch between performing different roles and guises on the turn of a sixpence multiple times a day. Ethnographic methodology requires the researcher to be open to such chance encounters, to allow them to unfold before your eyes without too much judgment or interference and then to search for patterns, usually with the help of others. In this and many other senses, research is a social process.

### **3. Making sense of politics through ethnography**

An ethnographic approach to the study of politics shares in common with historians that their construction of theory is rarely divorced from the everyday reality of politicians. These everyday realities are understood as emerging in a particular time and place – in my case in the House of Commons between 2011-13 and the House of Lords 1998-2000 – but once understood, can tell us (confirm or challenge) something about people in all organisations. From my viewpoint, generalisations arise from comparing organisations or cultures and my comparison between the Lords, Commons and other organisations challenges the claim that patriarchy is to be found within every site. The behaviour of MPs, in contrast to peers, challenges assumptions underlying rational choice theory that politicians are primarily motivated by self-interest. Common patterns across organisations can be found as well. For example, there are always gaps between the rhetoric promoted by organisations and the practice of fulfilling promises – whether political parties, charities or governments. Contradictions arise in democratic politics in part out of the inevitable conflicts between people – their divergence and changing interests, preferences and ideas – so any politician or political organisation will face dilemmas if claiming to represent whole diverse communities or groups.

To return to the question of whether organisations and societies or cultures are significantly different social worlds for researchers, like Gellner and Hirsch I think most ethnographic methods apply equally well in the study of organisations as they do in research on communities (2001: 9-10). These two anthropologists list ingredients that all ethnographic research should have: a sense of being there, unexpected conclusions, multiple voices, rich detail, a theory, and contextualization to that theory. Attention should be paid to power and inequality, gaps and connections, front and back stage, language and the ethnographer's ambiguous position, they add. The implication is that there are shared social, cultural and political experiences between people in all social settings.

Ethnography in all sites, or multi-sites, tends towards seeing ethics as a process rather than a set of rules. In both organisations and other cultural settings, ethnographers agonise less than other

social researchers about the formal aspects of ethical rules but more about ethics as a process. The Association of Social Anthropologists ethical guidelines explain that in emergent social research getting written consent from all participants in your project, a requirement made by many university ethics committees, is impossible. You do not usually know whom you might encounter. When observing politicians in debate in the chamber of Parliament, or when canvassing on the doorstep, we don't necessarily have the opportunity to seek even verbal consent from everyone you meet. But we take ethics seriously nonetheless. We inform people that we are doing research whenever we can, seek permission to quote or identify them as individuals and give them opportunities to comment on our findings. In the case of Parliament I sought formal permission to have access to the building. The authorities issued me with a pass, which conferred an acceptance of the project. I gave or emailed a summary of the research with a statement about my aims and ethics, and before publishing anything I gave informants I mentioned the chance to check for misrepresentation or identifying in error and sought permission before quoting anyone who was identifiable.

That is the easier part of ethics. Other aspects are particularly complex in organisations. Although it is only possible to research and write from one's own perspective, informed as it is by one's own history, place in society and ideological assumptions, ethnographers try to keep a spirit of openness to the logic, rationality and values in the minds and cultures of others. 'Others' were once foreign. As Gledhill puts it, examining

*'social realities in a cross-cultural frame of reference anthropology makes a significant theoretical contribution as a social science. In striving to transcend a view of the world based solely on the premises of European culture and history, anthropologists are encouraged to look beneath the world of appearances and taken-for-granted assumptions about social life in general'* (1994: 7).

The principle still applies even though 'others' share our nationality or identity in other ways. When researchers rush to judge the morality of their informants, their insight into what is going on tends to be cloudier. However, there comes a point – even if reached gradually with care – that what we find beneath the world of appearances can be ugly. Anthropologists have found that even people intending to achieve public good – aid workers, politicians, charity volunteers – can inadvertently cause harm, create poverty or increase inequalities. When drawing conclusions anthropologists have tended to take sides with the marginalized, dispossessed and victims of subordination. This means that when moral judgments are made, it is the perspective of elites, and the organisations that they control, that receive less fulsome attention and sympathy in our analysis. Since in our democratic age power tends to be concentrated in organisations rather than individuals, our criticism tends to be directed at legally constituted entities. Anthropologists have offered critical theories about how aid agencies marginalize indigenous knowledge, corporate organisations harm the environment and increase the gap

between rich and poor, and state planning creates havoc with people's lives, usually looking at the history of their impact from the perspective of those at the receiving end (Crewe and Axelby 2013). The expectation of anthropologists studying organisations is that when they look beneath the surface they will find coercion or collusion.

So what happens to ethics and critical theory when the elites and their organisations are at the centre of the research, as they were in mine? Perhaps naively, I drew the boundary of my research in Parliament around parliamentarians and officials in the Palace of Westminster and constituencies. To develop the kind of critical theory that would fit well with the anthropology of organisations, I would have had to investigate their relationship with citizens, the corporate sector, the media or civil society. But such a boundary would have created an impossible task in my limited time. Furthermore, elites are under-studied by anthropologists, and Parliamentarians only studied by a handful, so there was an intellectual argument for going into the unknown, offering a perspective that challenges public and media moral assumptions. In contrast to the image of politicians as venal, power-hungry and dishonest, beneath this cynical surface of the outward appearance of parliamentarians, I found well-intentioned people with mixed motivations – personal, social, political interests entangled and complex. This did not sit easily with my training, my politics or my idea of myself as a critical researcher finding injustices and setting the world to rights. I reflected before, during and after interviews, while reviewing what I had heard and seen, on why I was getting a more positive view of politicians than I expected. I took account of the tendency of the more positive, public-service oriented parliamentarians to be disposed to talk to a researcher who was interested in Parliament rather than politics or policy. I worried away at the possibility that I had 'Stockholm syndrome', as suggested by a friend, developing an attachment to your kidnappers as abducted people are inclined to do.

But none of this could account for what I discovered: parliamentarians may be more attention seeking than the average, but they are no more or less moral than others working for the public good. In contrast to aid workers, the group to which I have belonged professionally for twenty-five years, they are morally similar but politically more accountable. Like aid workers, the position of power varies according to their position in their party and whether their party is in government, official opposition or in the margins. Some peers and MPs are more equal than others, in the famous phrase that Orwell used in *Animal Farm*, and so even this elite has hierarchies within it. Not only do these hierarchies deserve study but since they continually change – with whips losing power in the Commons, for example, – they need regular investigation. My ethnographic research in Parliament is a start but has considered only the tip of the iceberg of British politics, and is partial, unfinished and, in the quite near future, unable to take account of the latest developments. For these reasons I urge other ethnographers to jump into the fray and research the most emotionally charged British political theatrical state available – the Westminster Parliament. This work would not only enrich anthropology, but the

detail scrutiny and analysis of democratic institutions would be healthy for our democracy too.

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