THE ARCHITECTURE OF DEMOCRACY *
A reflection on the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar by Endre Dányi

In one of the most fascinating panels at this year's Milton Wolf Seminar, an important distinction was made between two particular conceptualizations of the internet. According to the first one, the internet should be thought of as a tool or an instrument; whereas according to the second one, it should be conceived of as the extension of a public place where people can gather. In this short reaction piece I would like to take this distinction as my point of departure. I will argue that if we are indeed witnessing a shift, as some participants of the panel claimed, from an instrumental to a spatial understanding of the internet and other media technologies, then there is a pressing need to examine how public places are being regulated—not by abstract user manuals—but by the very architecture of democracy.

This proposed turn to architecture is not new. Ever since Michel Foucault used Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon1—an imaginary prison that looks surprisingly similar to Vienna’s Narrenturm, Europe’s first psychiatric hospital—to demonstrate the subtle, seemingly invisible mechanisms of disciplinary power, all sorts of buildings have been used as methodological devices for the socio-cultural analysis of modernity.2 Sociologists of science have entered laboratories, hospitals, and high-tech innovation centers in order to examine how scientific knowledge is made and put to use. Social anthropologists and cultural historians have analyzed everyday practices associated with museums and archives to describe how art and history are organized. Economic sociologists have scrutinized both physical and virtual markets in order to explain the evolution of the global economy.3 Interestingly, however, there have been few studies that use buildings as a focal point through which to explore the nuances of democratic politics. Town halls, party headquarters, ministries and parliaments are almost entirely missing from the list of

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1 I would like to thank the organisers of the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar, especially Professor Monroe Price, for inviting me to Vienna, and making it possible for me to attend and participate in the discussions.
2 Michel Foucault (1979). Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Harmondsworth: Penguin. For more information on the Narrenturm (Fool’s Tower), see http://www.narrenturm.at/ [last accessed on 10 April 2012].
common ethnographic sites. The lack of parliaments is particularly striking, since most European and North American legislatures are very strongly associated with their physical locations. Just think of the Palace of Westminster, the U.S. Capitol, the renovated Reichstag, the Assemblée Nationale, or the Austrian Parliament. If, as Claude Lefort famously asserted, the locus of power in a democratic setting is really an empty place, then why do we need such imposing and visibly singular shells around it?4

What could we learn if—following in the footsteps of Michael Foucault and the sociologists of science, art, and economy—we tried to understand democracy not against the background of, but through its architecture? These were some of the questions that guided my PhD project, which was a combination of historical and ethnographic research about the Hungarian Parliament.5 I chose the Hungarian Parliament, not only because, as a Hungarian citizen, I had better chances of securing access to my field site than anywhere else, but also because the paradox I mentioned above is probably nowhere more apparent than in Budapest. The parliament building, which at the time of its opening in 1902 was the largest and one of the most impressive of its kind, is simultaneously older and younger than Hungarian democracy. It was built fifty years after the first democratic election in Hungary and a hundred years before the country became a fully functioning, independent republic. As such, the physical home of the Hungarian legislature actively resists the idea that democracy in Hungary (and in other Central and Eastern European countries) began in 1989. Instead, this more than a century old building portrays democracy as a historically and culturally specific development that began sometime in the end of the 18th century, and took a hundred years to institutionalize.6

This, in itself, is not very surprising; but the Hungarian Parliament, a huge neo-Gothic palace on the East bank of the Danube, also provides clues about the less tangible processes of constructing a democracy. One of the main purposes of the Hungarian parliament building was to demonstrate the existence of a Hungarian political community within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (a political formation that lasted until 1918). While the classical Austrian parliament building was meant to be the manifestation of universal values and ideas, its Hungarian counterpart was supposed to emphasize the uniqueness of the Hungarian people and their thousand-year-old state. This is the reason why the building and its interiors are full of historical references to medieval princes, kings, and queens; this is also the reason why the royal jewels (including the Holy Crown) are on display in the Cupola Hall of Parliament, making it the single most popular tourist attraction in Hungary.7

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5 The research itself, funded by The Leverhulme Trust, which was part of a larger project called "Relocating Innovation: Places and Material Practices of Future Making." For more information, see http://www.sand14.com/relocatinginnovation/ [last accessed on 10 April 2012].
7 The transfer of the royal jewels from the National Museum to the Parliament in 2000 generated a huge debate about the appropriate place of the regalia in a republic. For a concise history of the Holy Crown and
Clearly, there is no democracy without demos; and, in this sense, a parliament building can be seen as a monument or a memorial to (a well-defined group of) people. But a parliament building is also the home of a legislature, the only political institution that has the right to create and modify laws, and, as such, it has to meet certain architectural requirements. Unlike Bentham’s Panopticon, which was envisioned as an oval structure with an invisible center and an outer layer of transparent rooms, in a parliament building, it is the political center that has to be fully transparent to the public, while the public is kindly asked to remain as invisible as possible. At the time when the Hungarian Parliament was constructed, transparency was achieved in two ways. On the one hand, all plenary sittings of the National Assembly were openly accessible, and so were usually attended by large groups of citizens and journalists. On the other hand, thanks to highly skilled shorthand writers, all political debates were quickly transcribed and published in the official Parliamentary journals. Although the dominant media technologies have changed, this is still the case today; all plenary sittings are broadcast and archived on the Parliament’s official website.

There is no doubt that political debates have to be visible in a democratic setting. But why does the public have to be invisible at the same time? Why can citizens attend and listen, but not speak in plenary sittings? Does democracy not mean the kratos (rule) of the demos? Well, it does; but in contemporary democracies this rule is mostly practiced through elected representatives. The first Hungarian democratic election took place in 1848, soon after the outbreak of the anti-Habsburg revolution. The setting up of the revolutionary government marked the beginning of professional politics in Hungary. For the first time, members of the National Assembly could take part in politics not because of their wealth or family connections, but because of the authority that was granted to them by the people. As representatives, their task was to represent the people’s interests according to their conscience. If representatives failed to adequately represent the people’s interests, they could not be called back, as was the case prior to 1848, but had to be replaced by other representatives at a subsequent election. What Claude Lefort means when he says the locus of power in a democracy is an empty place is that the place identified as the symbolic core of democratic politics is supposed to remain constant, while politicians come and go.

for a different, earlier country.”

It is tempting to think of the post-1989 period as a second chance to complete the architecture of democracy in Hungary, but what I have tried to show in this piece is the necessary incompleteness of that architecture.

Incompleteness is not the weakness, but the quite possibly the greatest strength of the architecture of democracy. The widespread use of the internet and other media technologies are powerful indicators of what I mean by this. The internet and media technologies can make the boundaries between politicians and the demos more porous and more distributed, turning seemingly local issues like the 2010 Hungarian Media Law into international controversies in a very short period of time. They can problematize the notion of transparency in democratic politics (as in the case of the WikiLeaks). Equally importantly, they can challenge conventional notions of political participation, as they did during the 2011 demonstrations and uprisings in the Middle East, North Africa, and elsewhere. To paraphrase a wise comment of one of the participants at this year’s Milton Wolf Seminar, the important question is not whether we like all these changes or not, but whether we are willing to engage in an ongoing dialogue about them.

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Endre Dányi was selected as an Emerging Scholar Delegate to the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar. He is a final-year PhD student at the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University and a visiting researcher at the Innovation in Governance Research Group at the Center for Technology and Society at the Technical University in Berlin. Drawing on recent works in science and technology studies and historical sociology, his doctoral research re-conceptualizes democracy in Hungary as a culturally and historically specific set of material practices, held together by the parliament building in Budapest.

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8 My translation. For the original blog entry of Lajos Parti Nagy see http://ittvan.blog.hu/2007/09/28/parti_nagy_lajos_a_parlament_ha_targy [last accessed on 27 April 2012].
About the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar
Launched in 2001, the Milton Wolf Seminar Series aims to deal with developing issues in diplomacy and journalism – both broadly defined. Using case studies such as Hungary, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia, the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar, Transitions Transformed: Ideas of Information and Democracy Post-2011 explored the evolving relationship between media and democratic transition in light of rapid technological change and the shifting structure and dynamics of the international communication system. The seminar was jointly organized by the Center for Global Communication Studies (CGCS) at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, The American Austrian Foundation (AAF), and the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna (DA). More information about this and previous seminars is available on the Milton Wolf Seminar website [http://global.asc.upenn.edu] and our Facebook Page [https://www.facebook.com/MiltonWolfSeminar].