

Scripted Politics • An analysis of the Scottish State's reliance of Charisma

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the goings on of First Minister's Questions in the Scottish Parliament. Through the realisation that this spectacle is largely semi-scripted I make the argument that the idea of the state relies on the charisma of events like this in order to encourage engagement, thereby reinforcing its existence. I argue that the alternative of pitting facts and figures against each other without the spectacle lacks the charisma to engage an audience in the idea of the state. I conclude that spectacle remains a useful analytic of state power.

keywords: power, scottish parliament, charisma, state

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On 12th May 1999 Scottish Parliament met for the first time in 292 years. This was following a 1979 referendum in which the people of Scotland were asked the following questions: 'Do you agree that there should be a Scottish Parliament as proposed by the Government?' and 'Do you agree that a Scottish Parliament should have tax-raising powers as proposed by the Government?' In response to both questions, the public answered yes, thus leading to the devolution of power from Parliament in Westminster to a Scottish Government in Holyrood. Decision making in areas such: agriculture, energy and tourism now lay in the hands of the Scottish Parliament. With creation of the Scottish Government came the creation of the position of First Minister of Scotland, the leader of the government in Scotland. Since 2014, Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish National Party holds this position. Once a week the First Minister fields questions from Members of Scottish Parliament (MSPs) across the political spectrum. This event is open to the public and streamed online for all who

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wish to watch. It is the public performance of this event that I will be analysing in this paper.

Act One

Parallels have been drawn between the performance of state power and theatre before (Geertz: 1980), and it is with this comparison that I will start my paper. The opportunity to notice similarities between going to see a play and First Minister's Questions (FMQs) started before even entering that chamber when my ticket is checked, and I am pointed towards my seat, much like in a theatre. The seating is tiered, and all facing towards to focal point down below. There is rope separating the VIP seats at one end of the gallery from us in the cheap seats, and like seeing any show, we are expected to sit and silently observe as the Ministers perform to us from down below. There are many ways the setting evokes the experience of seeing a play, although with the booing, applause and table slamming it more often resembles cheap pantomime rather than a night in the West End. What is a striking difference however is that it appears all the actors had trouble learning their lines since they are still holding their scripts.

The chamber is dominated by an arc of MSPs' desks facing towards the Presiding Officer in the centre. In the middle of the arc is the First Minister fielding questions with the confidence of someone at home on the stage. Around her groups of MSPs sit in groups according to their political party. Whenever the first minister moves either up to her lectern, or back down to her seat, her folder full of reams of facts and figures moves with her. The folder has an array of coloured tabs pointing out the side, and a

new question, like the start of the next act, is marked by the finding of a tab and the turning of pages to it. Even when she is stood up addressing the room, her eyes never move too far from the paper in front of her. She moves her gaze around the room, resting for a second, either on the MSP who delivered the question, or to the Presiding Officer and then back to the paper in front of her. Whatever she does her black folder is an anchor to which she always returns. The same can be said for the supporting members of the cast. All those with speaking parts are marked by their lecterns being flipped up and paper resting on the stand, and again when they do stand and speak their lines are, to a certain extent, read from their scripts.

While saying that what is spoken in the chamber is word-for-word what is written down in front of the ministers may be an exaggeration it does raise the question what would happen if the paper was removed from the lecterns? Would the ministers freeze and fall silent? Would they suddenly run out the room in embarrassment? Would Nicola Sturgeon implode? Unlikely, but the papers role in providing facts and figures that form the basis for the questioning and debate does beg the question of the importance of theatrical displays such as this. Could the bare facts not be pitted against each other and then posted online for public consumption? Alternatively, would it not be possible to write an algorithm that you feed statistics into and a fully formed debate is presented at the end? In this paper, I argue that the role of events such as this is to present the inner workings of political power to the public in a way that is engaging. Making the public engage helps the idea of the state reinforce its existence in the public imaginary. I want to quickly note here that it would be equally valid to analyse wheth-

er what is presented to the public is a warped version of the workings of political power, showing only what the state wants the public to see, but this is not the focus of this paper.

Act Two

I want to start by briefly discussing the state, and what it is. Radcliffe-Brown's view of the state was that it was a fiction. He argued that the state "does not exist in the phenomenological world" instead must be considered a "collection of individual human beings connected by a complex system of relations" (Radcliffe-Brown 1955: xxiii). The idea that the state is not something that physically exists is something that Abrams takes forwards in his concept of the state idea. Abrams distinguished between the state-system, the practice and institutional structure of government, and the state-idea, the state as a social construction created by the collective belief in its existence (1988: 82). He viewed the state idea as a mask that blocks the public from seeing the workings of political power (1988: 79). This is where I want to depart from this line of thinking.

Where Abrams sees the idea of the state as a mask, I want to consider it a mouthpiece. For Abrams the state-as-mask served to conceal, I argue that the mouthpiece does the opposite. Spectacles such as FMQs vocalise and make public the inner workings of political power. They serve to present a version of the workings of political power to the public in a way which attempts to engage them, thereby reproducing the idea of the state. This idea manifests in the reading of 'scripts' as described above. The paper in front of the ministers can be considered to be workings of political power. They are

collections of facts, figures and statistics that show behind the scenes of politics, the evaluations of enacted policies, the work of think tanks advising of future policy and statistics representing the state of the country. FMQs serve to pit differing opinions from the inner political workings against each other, in a form of semi-scripted theatre that is consumed by the public. I want to consider the spectacle itself to represent the idea of the state. It is what is projected and purveyed to the public. It is one of the ways in which the public engage with the state, thereby reinforcing its existence. This leads us back to the question posed earlier of the need for this performance, why can political workings not just be presented to the public as they appear on the paper in front of the ministers? Or as debate formed by an algorithm which is fed by the information on the sheets and then distributed to the public?

Act Three

When we consider the idea of the state as a mouthpiece rather than a mask, we need to consider what would make an effective mouthpiece? My answer to this question is charisma. Facts presented on paper do not have the charisma required to make the public engage. If the public do not engage with the debate, which is the idea of the state, then existence of the idea of the state comes into question. As with any social construction, it requires people to participate in it in order to reproduce its affect and therefore its existence. On the other hand, having ministers read the facts and figures and pit them against each other in theatrical display like this produces the charismatic affects needed.

Max Weber described three types

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of legitimate authority: Traditional, rational-legal and charismatic (1946). What is central to this essay is charismatic authority. Weber saw the authority as individual gains over the public due to their personality and charisma. Shils developed Weber's thinking seeing charisma as something that was more pervasive, existing within institutions rather than just in a single figure (Shils 1965: 200). Following this line of thought makes charismatic authority a spectre omnipresent throughout parliament, rather than solely contained in a leader. This authority is made tangible in the theatrics of FMQs. In the situation of parliament, charisma gives the spectacle of FMQs authority. The paper in front of the ministers cannot command authority to the same extent as it lacks charisma. It cannot stand up, call to arms, wave its fists or berate its opposition. It is just words on a sheet. The authority gained through charisma is what makes the people attend to the spectacle, they engage with the way that political workings are presented to them, therefore engaging with the idea of the state. It is through this that the idea of the state is reconstituted. If we turn back to the ethnographic descriptions with which we began, we can see that while politicians need their scripts that equally the scripts are in need of politicians. The facts on the pages require something to animate them, to make them catch the public's attention. Without the spectacle in which they verbally hurled back-and-forth across a room by the performers, they lack any of the authority that this charismatic event produces.

Comaroff and Comaroff posed the question "Has Foucault not convinced us that it is the panopticon, rather than the theatre, that holds the key to power in its modernist form?" (2004: 802). Through

their analysis of policing in post-colonial South Africa they demonstrate an inversion of the Foucauldian argument that power is diffuse, internalised and implicit (2004: 804). Comaroff and Comaroff argue that in South Africa the enacted spectacles of policing signify not a return to a pre-biopolitics power-as-spectacle, but instead that theatre has never been absent from modern policing (822- 823). They suggest that, spectacle attempts to, not only make the state tangible, but also produce a public that recognises its authority. I suggest we see a similar use of theatrics with the Scottish Parliament. The injection of charisma into the inner workings of power by publicised debate aims to produce a spectacle. A spectacle through which the public engage with the idea of the state, thereby reinforcing its existence. State power is enacted in a dramatic and centralised form through the animation of a 'script', rather than the diffuse and intangible power outlined in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977). While I make no attempt to argue the degree to which these spectacles are successful in engaging the public, I think we can see, as the Comaroff's do, that spectacle is still a useful analytic of power.

Curtain

To close, the power of the state is performed in events such as FMQs, through a form of semi-scripted theatre. These theatricals are required in order to engage the public in the event. The idea of the state in these events serves to present the workings of political power to the public in a way that continues the state's effect on the public. This effect serves as to keep the idea of the state alive. The alternative of scripts without the specta-

cle, the display of raw facts and figures, lacks the charisma to engage the public. Failure to engage the public would result in the disappearance of the idea of the state, as it relies on people's engagement with the idea for its existence. This realisation enables us to see that even within move towards pervasive modern power spectacle retains its relevance. The comparison of the parliament to the theatre endures as a useful analytic of the politics of today.

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