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Does the Body Politic Have No Genitals?

The Thick of It *and the Phallic Nature of the Political Arena*

Though it may not have required drastic proof, recent news from the political arena suggests that certain distinguished statesmen tend to rely on a candid exhibition of genitals in order to draw attention to their virility and, by implication, to their political power. Silvio Berlusconi made the headlines in 2010, when he insisted that the missing penis of a Mars statue be restored before the sculpture was deemed suitable to adorn his office as Italian Prime Minister, horrified reactions amongst art historians notwithstanding (cf. Williams). This anecdote sits comfortably amongst other tales from the *bunga bunga* crypt, yet one may as well wonder whether Berlusconi is not just a tad less inhibited than some of his colleagues when it comes to acknowledging that the body politic requires visible proofs of manhood. Slavoj Žižek has characterized the contemporary media environment as one in which it would not appear out of the question for a politician to "allow a hard-core video of his or her sexual shenanigans to circulate in public, to convince the voters of his or her force of attraction or potency" (208). And, lo and behold, just when you thought that Berlusconi's exhibition of unfiltered machismo (a reminder of Henry VIII as painted by Hans Holbein: the epitome of potency and virility) was a thing of the past, along comes another hyper-virile alpha male: Vladimir Putin releasing another wave of staged photographs celebrating his manhood, presidential candidate Donald Trump insisting that his famously short fingers are in no way a sign that "something else must be small"—during a GOP debate, no less. South African president Jacob Zuma, on the other hand, threatened to take legal steps following the public display of Brett Murray's painting, *The Spear* (2010), which depicts the president in a striking pose reminiscent of Russian revolutionary Lenin—but with his penis hanging out. Zuma, a polygamist who has fathered twenty children and whose political career even survived a rape

trial, publicly voiced his outrage at being depicted as "a philanderer" and as "an abuser of power, corrupt and suffer[ing from] political ineptness" (qtd. in Smith). The fact that Zuma himself draws the link between his exposed manhood and his abilities as a political leader underlines the unspoken agreement at work in the gendered political arena, so much so that we occasionally perceive of the penis "as the very basis of male power and dominance" (Brittan 46). To this day, we are careful to make a distinction between the body natural and the body politic—and to associate the latter with phallic qualities and stable masculinity (Horlacher 251)— yet it still does not seem like a matter of course to concede that there is an underlying gendered framework to the idea of the political organism.

On the basis of a brief overview of the body politic's traditional conceptualization, this article offers a reading of *The Thick of It* (2005-2012), a contemporary British TV program set in the corridors of power at Westminster. In this series, the alpha-male demeanor of characters like spin doctor Malcolm Tucker or his adversary, Cal "The Fucker" Richards, vividly renders the underlying phallic nature of the body politic, both in terms of the show's rhetoric and of its general obsession with genitalia, which are frequently equated with the center of power. By drawing upon some key characteristics of *The Thick of It* and its successful, Academy Award-nominated spinoff-film, *In the Loop* (2009), it becomes possible to look at masculinity as a concept linking the systemic and the corporeal, as well as pervading both—not just in the political arena.

A Short History of the Body Politic

There is no consensus on where the body metaphor was applied to the nation or to political entities for the first time. Some of the earliest examples of its use can be located in Sanskrit hymns (such as the *Rigveda*, ca. 1,000-500 B.C.), Aesopian fables, passages of the Old Testament, as well as in Plato's *The Republic* (cf. Harvey 4-10). In the political philosophy of

Ancient Rome, Cicero's and Seneca's invocations of the concept feature prominently. The former, in his account of a debate between Catiline and the senate, accuses Catiline of plotting a conspiracy against the state which bears two weakened bodies, "one frail with a weak head, the other strong but with no head at all", offering his own head to govern it (1977, 253). Another reference to the various members of the body politic occurs in one of Cicero's letters to Lucceius (2001, 237). Seneca invokes the same image as Cicero when he sketches the relationship between the body (the state) and the head (the emperor) as one of mutual dependence, so that "neither could be separated without the ruin of the other" (133). Moreover, in the very same essay (which is dedicated to the emperor Nero), Seneca paints a picture of the ruler as the breath of life which holds the commonwealth together, and he continues to elaborate on the details:

> Compare the way in which the body is entirely at the service of the mind. It may be ever so much larger and more impressive. The mind may remain hidden and tiny, its very location uncertain. Yet hands, feet and eyes do its business. The skin that we see protects it. At its command, we lie still. Or else we run restlessly about, when it has given the order. If its avarice masters us, we scan the sea for material gain. Its lust for glory has long since led us to thrust our right hand into the flame or plunge of our own free will into the earth. In the same way, this vast multitude of men surrounds one man as though he were its mind, ruled by his spirit, guided by his reason; it would crush and shatter itself by its own strength, without the support of his discernment. (132-3)

In the aftermath of classical antiquity, the metaphor went on to enjoy a healthy life and to inform political thought for centuries to come. Throughout the medieval period, various

political philosophers made use of the concept, rendering it more refined and nuanced in the process. In a widely-known treatise of the twelfth century (*Policraticus*), John of Salisbury elaborates on the various duties of individual parts of the body politic. He describes the tasks of the senate as matching that of the heart, and he likens the roles of treasurers and record keepers to those of the intestinal tract (cf. Harvey 14-5). Kings, in particular, are frequently cited as examples: not only are they invoked as heads of state, but they are expected to represent an indivisible unit of two bodies themselves, "each being fully contained in the other" (Kantorowicz 9).[1]

The concept has proven so fruitful, well-established and vivid that, paradoxically, we call it a dead metaphor today (Harris 1), which simply means that its ubiquitous role disqualifies it from being considered metaphorical anymore—so unshakeable is the degree to which it has become interwoven with common parlance as we talk about *heads* of state, or *members* of parliament. Although this article offers no room to deliver a detailed account of how the concept evolved and why some periods drew more heavily upon it than others—aspects of which have been addressed in a number of studies, including Ernst H. Kantorowicz's seminal work, *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), and the more recent volumes by Jonathan Gil Harris and A. D. Harvey—it is worth pointing out that the idea of the body politic gained proper momentum in Early Modern England. Amongst other developments, William Harvey's account of the circulation of blood (*De Motu Cordis*, 1628) provided the perfect foil against which "early modern fears of pathological infiltration and strategies of 'cure' or containment" could be developed (Harris 13), and this applied to the social organism as well. Hence Thomas Hobbes likening the government's problems to raise tax revenues to the veins having their blood supply cut off (Harvey 31; Bertram 305-11).[2] Throughout the Elizabethan Age, the concept grew even more refined, with all of the individual parts of the body beginning to gain a commonly accepted connotation within the metaphorical field. Each internal organ would have carried a sufficient number of salient features to allow the

Elizabethans to interpret it accordingly—the liver would have represented the high treasurer, and the tongue, symbolizing deceitfulness, would have stood for unruly women, witches, or even Catholics (Harris 2; Bredekamp 2006, 80). Many references to the body politic feature in the works of Elizabethan authors, particularly William Shakespeare, whose tragedies and history plays portray kings and political advisors negotiating the future of the state. Coriolanus, Rome's unloved soldier, at one point is advised by Volscian commander Aufidius to pour war "[i]nto the bowels of ungrateful Rome" (*Cor*. 4.5.127). The list of Shakespeare's contemporaries who were well-read in classical philosophy—maybe even more so than Shakespeare himself, who was famously ridiculed by authors such as Robert Greene for never having set foot in a university—includes William Averell (author of *A Mervailous Combat of Contrarieties* (1588), a dialogue between various parts of the body that are led astray by a treacherous tongue) and Edward Forset, who adds the idea of the four humors to the equation in his *Comparative Discourse* (1606) and suggests they be understood to represent different types of citizens such as the yeomen or the learned (cf. Bertram 299-305).

But in spite of this multifacetedness, there is also a visible gap; for whilst the index of those studies dealing with the body politic will mention the head, eyes and ears, legs and feet, a back and a belly, a nose and a tongue, pores and nerves, and even the anus—a region mostly invoked to articulate fears of infiltration and alleged diseases brought in from abroad—the body politic is lacking in the genital region. It thus appears that the body politic is not only, to quote Edmund Plowden's 1816 *Commentaries*, "utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to" (qtd. in Kantorowicz 7), it is also conceptualized as a counterpart to the pleasure-seeking body private, which means that it is "proscribed a variety of pleasures" (Bertram 296). Its purpose, as Benjamin Bertram observes in his analysis of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, is "[to create] a sense of national unity based on the prohibition of unproductive pleasures" (308). We find this form of sublimation embodied in the historic example of Elizabeth I, or reflected in

tragedies of the Jacobean age (cf. Horlacher), many of which recount variations of the same story: how the body private must be sacrificed on the altar of political power-play. A similar, unspoken agreement still seems to be at work when it comes to the public perception of politicians: mere moral objections against adulterers cannot account for the sheer amount of outrage surrounding politicians that were caught *in flagrante*, as it were. Case in point: the fall of CIA director David Petraeus, following an affair with his biographer (cf. Schwanebeck 141-2).

Fig. 1: The frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (Abraham Bosse, 1651)

If one considers how much emphasis is placed upon negating the body politic's (and, by implication, the politician's) sexuality, then it would appear as though it would have its most fitting and iconic illustration in the frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651). Horst Bredekamp has dedicated numerous detailed interpretations to this powerful image (2001; 2006), yet not even he gives an account of the image's gendered implications. As is well-known, Hobbes chooses the Leviathan as the title for his book in order to highlight one of the key tenets: that a political system of checks and balances is needed to protect mankind from annihilation, in order to avert the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. To achieve this end, men must choose a sovereign "for fear of one another, and not of him whom they institute: but in this case, they subject themselves, to him they are afraid of" (Hobbes 132). Although the Leviathan image manages to convey this idea of monstrosity, its very iconic visual representation—which managed to find a place in the collective memory—hardly qualifies as a faithful illustration of what Hobbes writes about. His idea of the Leviathan is more that of an automaton, a collective body that holds all those contracts and agreements which Hobbes' political theory is well-known for. The Leviathan as drawn by Abraham Bosse (fig. 1),[3] however, cites the tradition of the composite body, since it consists of the bodies of more than

300 people, thereby paradoxically suggesting that the body politic is made up of the very same people who are supposed to subject themselves to it (Bredekamp 2006, 15). Moreover, Bosse's Leviathan carries the insignia of both secular and spiritual power (a crown, a sword, the crosier), and it is both mythical in origin as well as contemporary in its allusions.[4] Though Hobbes's allegory is linked to the entity of the state more than to the body of the individual ruler, various sovereigns (such as dictators Joseph Stalin and Benito Mussolini) have eagerly adapted the Leviathan in order to lend themselves a striking corporeal image (cf. Bredekamp 2006, 132-57). The image of the strong, bearded, masculine figure invited these adaptations—in spite of the fact that the Leviathan's genitals remain invisible, hidden behind the landscape that the Leviathan is presiding over.

My subsequent discussion of a contemporary representation of the body politic challenges the received notion of the body politic as an asexual, genderless entity. I will suggest that the body politic may, in fact, not so much depend on its head and vital organs, as it does on the assumption of a fully erect penis.

"Welcome to the Men's Room": *The Thick of It* (2005-2012)

Armando Iannucci's *The Thick of It* premiered on BBC Four in 2005 and went on to win numerous BAFTAs during its seven-year run, including the prize for Best Situation comedy twice (in 2006 and 2010, respectively). In the course of its four series (comprising of 21 episodes and two specials),[5] the focus of the show has been on the inner workings of British politics, depicting the struggles of spin doctors and back-benchers who desperately hold on to their jobs while trying to avoid media debacles. *The Thick of It* thus very much follows in the footsteps of seminal Britcoms *Yes, Minister* (1980-1984) and *Yes, Prime Minister* (1986-1988), respectively, yet it is also indicative of several paradigm shifts, not just in the British media and comedy landscape, but also within the political sphere, which made the show an

important precursor of similarly themed programs like *Alpha House* (2013-) and especially *Veep* (2012-), Iannucci's own (transatlantic) follow-up project.

Renowned for its sharp writing and an amount of swearing unrivaled in contemporary TV, *The Thick of It* is set at the fictional Department of Social Affairs (later renamed into Social Affairs and Citizenship), a department so insignificant it is frequently mocked as the "Department of Stuffed Anuses" (2.5). Even its boss, secretary of state Hugh Abbot (played by Chris Langham), wonders what he is actually doing: "Social Affairs? What the fuck does that actually mean? You know, it's so vague. 'Hello, I'm Hugh Abbot, the minister for, I don't know, stuff'" (1.3). The show's use of faux documentary *mise en scène* aims to deliver on the titular promise, and though the viewers are not led to believe that they are, in fact, watching a documentary format (a common occurrence in the contemporary comedic landscape since Ricky Gervais' and Stephen Merchant's groundbreaking series, *The Office*, 2001-2003), the hand-held camera is intrusive and sometimes fails in its attempt to track cabinet ministers and political advisors behind the scenes of the political game. As most of the episodes focus not so much on actual policy-making and parliamentary debates, but on the characters' disastrous encounters with the media, the fiercest battles are fought in front of (intradiegetic) cameras or against snooping reporters. The question whether something was said *on* or *off* the record can potentially destroy a whole career; one aspiring policymaker ruins his political future when sweating and stuttering in front of a TV camera (*RoN*). As soon as the microphones are off, so are the gloves, and the Tourette's-like stream of expletives serves to characterize the scenery as a genuinely Darwinist battleground. As is explained to us in one episode: "We are in a prison drama and this is the fucking *Shawshank Redemption*, right? But with more tunneling through shit and no fucking redemption" (3.6). Just like in a prison drama, the milieu is a homosocial, hostile environment, a man-eat-man world of aggressive bullying where the threat of anal penetration never seems far off. The latter amounts to loss of power, as becomes clear in assertions like: "I am unfuckable! I have never

been fucked" (3.7). Inevitably, the prisoners (i.e. the political staff) of *The Thick of It* share a feeling voiced by the character of Glenn (James Smith): "I'm in a therapy group run by my own rapist" (3.3).

It is certainly no coincidence that, within literary history, the most famous usage of the titular idiom occurs in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, maybe *the* quintessential tale of aggressive manhood. In this novel, the hero Allan Quartermain is advised to kill as many natives as possible before the final battle: "[T]he slaughter will be awful, and as we have a reputation to keep up, we shall have to be in the thick of it" (124). What *The Thick of It* presents is indeed the political arena as a massacre, where it is men leading women (and allegedly effeminate men) to the slaughter, and where the Leviathan principle proves terrifyingly intact: Here, man is literally wolf to man, and none more so than the show's infamous main character, foul-mouthed spin doctor Malcolm Tucker (played with immense relish by Scottish actor and director Peter Capaldi), who at one point knocks at a minister's door with the words, "Little pigs! Let me come in!" (3.2), thus also channeling Jack Nicholson's manic performance in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). The wolf analogy is a fitting one, as Jacques Derrida's posthumously published seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009) suggests, for the relationship between beast and ruler indeed points to a "fascinating complicity" (Derrida 17). Just like the wolf, when evoked as "a mythological, fabulous, and non-natural monstrosity" (25), the ruler as epitomized by Tucker's almighty manipulator represents a type of what Derrida calls "being-outside-the-law" (17), so much so that "the face of the beast [can be perceived] under the features of the sovereign" (18).

Tucker emerged as the unlikely cult hero of the program, his determination and ruthlessness marking him out as a highly charismatic arch-villain, and his Scottish accent underlining his street credibility.[6] By now, not only are there an iPhone app and a book (Iannucci et al.) dedicated to his shenanigans, but he was also promoted to the main player of the movie version, got his own newspaper column in the run-up to the UK general election in

2010,[7] and earned his performer the prestigious role of another British icon: *Doctor Who*. Tucker is at least partly based on Tony Blair's former director of communications and strategy, Alistair Campbell, though the creators have been eager to fend off that comparison since the program's launch.[8] Nevertheless, Campbell's Scottish descent, his media connections and his reputation for having a bit of a temper—even Tony Blair, in his memoir, likens Campbell to "a mad axeman" (589) and admits that his major reason for hiring him was to get "a hard nut" (75)—speak for themselves, as does the fact that the show more or less directly adapts several incidents and scandals from the Blair years.[9] Tucker's immense cult-appeal, however, cannot solely be explained through the keyhole aspect. The "Gorbals Goebbels" (3.5) serves, after all, as the antagonist in the course of the series, a kind of foul-mouthed Iago whose conspiracies and media interventions occasionally sabotage the work of his own employer. Like the Leviathan, Tucker embodies the idea that human society must work on the basis of fear, "the only effective way of cowing and subduing the vainglorious" (Wood 316). Every member of the government is afraid of his severe bullyings: "Get over here, now! Might be advisable to wear brown trousers and a shirt the color of blood" (3.2). Memorable lines like these ensure that Tucker goes by monikers such as "bad Gandalf" (2.4), "the Scottish Simon Cowell" (3.3), or even "white Mugabe" (3.1). His prominence bears several implications which are also crucial for an assessment of the body politic: First of all, unlike former BBC comedies such as *Yes, Minister*, *The Thick of It* does not foreground the elected political players (secretaries of state, the prime minister), but emphasizes that it is those pulling the strings in the background who *make* politics. Unlike a seminal show like the BBC's *House of Cards* (1990) or its successful US remake (2013-), the plots of the episodes stress the politicians' inability to act, that is, to do more than just sell little Pyrrhic victories to the media. The rise of the spin doctor narrative across a variety of genres in recent years[10] is indicative of this paradigm shift.

Moreover, Tucker's popularity also points to the persistence of the Machiavellian type of politician. Whereas traditional conceptions of the body politic in ancient political philosophy advise their readers to beware of deceitful enemies and the evil powers of their tongues (which are accused of "lying, slander, and sedition", Harris 43), the Machiavellian conception of the prince acknowledges that the tongue may very well be the body politic's biggest asset. After all, Machiavelli emphasizes that a successful ruler does not necessarily have to exhibit virtue, as long as he is "sufficiently prudent that he may know how to avoid the reproach of those vices which would lose him his state" (22). Machiavelli argues that a prince does not necessarily have to be of a virtuous disposition and possess good qualities, "but it is very necessary to *appear* to have them" (25, emphasis W.S.), so as to come across as "merciful, faithful, humane, upright, and religious" (ibid.). Tucker adapts these Machiavellian strategies, twisting the truth whenever he can—at one point, he inflicts so much semantic confusion that Abbot is unable to distinguish 'yes' from 'no' (1.1). However, such is the popularity of "Malciavelli" (2.4) that it is very easy to overlook the conceptualization of the political figure at the heart of the character, behind whose Mephistophelian appearance, brilliant rhetoric and formidable swearing sprees the gendered implications can go undetected.

The show's diction leaves no doubt that it acknowledges the metaphorical tradition of the body politic and that the audience is presented with a bleak view of the political state of affairs, with Tucker emerging as the personified body politic, most notably in the episodes depicting his downfall in the third and fourth series. Here, the rhetoric frequently resorts to corporeal metaphors, with Tucker asserting that he considers himself "the heart of the government . . . , the ventricles and the fucking aorta" (3.7), whilst admitting to minister Nicola Murray (Rebecca Front) that "[w]e are a dying government. Our hair's falling out and we're coughing up blood, and our kids are asking us to change the will" (3.7). His grand speech in the show's final episode acknowledges that Tucker has paid a high prize for his political career, the decay of his body natural:

> This job has taken me in every hole in my fucking body. Malcolm is gone! You can't know Malcolm, because Malcolm is not here. Malcolm fucking left the building fucking years ago. [*pointing to his body*] This is a fucking husk. I am a fucking host for this fucking job. . . . [This life] grow[s] inside you like a parasite. Getting bigger and bigger and bigger until it fucking eats your insides alive and it stares out of your eyes and tells you what to do. (4.7)

This is very much in line with the traditional view of the social organism, but if *The Thick of It* teaches its viewers one lesson, it is that the body politic is far from a gender-neutral corporeal zone. It is not only a masculine space, but one which proves incredibly obsessed with its own genitals and its phallic nature in more than one sense.

In *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell dedicates a few remarks to the social organization of masculinity and concludes that "[p]ublic politics on almost any definition is men's politics. Men predominate in cabinets, general staffs, the senior civil service, political parties and pressure groups as well as in the executive levels of corporations. Leaders are recruited to office through men's networks" (204). Connell goes so far as to declare the state a genuinely "masculine institution", one that employs "a gender configuring of recruitment and promotion", as well as of "policymaking, practical routines, and ways of mobilizing pleasure and consent" (73). By implication, political power becomes a measure of masculinity. Political advisor Glenn Cullen's meltdown in the episode "Spinners and Losers" is a fitting illustration of that claim. When Cullen is informed that there will not be a place for him following the cabinet reshuffle ("You're like a spare prick at a wedding"), he erupts into a furious tirade, shouting "I am a man" no less than three times. Glenn's fate illustrates that the political arena is a place where manhood can be affirmed or negated. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that the traditional body politic should exhibit a significant gap in the

place where we should expect to find its penis and scrotum. To simply equate masculinity with the respective genitalia may suggest a questionable, almost primordial and Freudian view of masculinity, yet the show's rhetoric affirms this view (as do some iconographic examples from ancient Greece which were conveniently forgotten during the early modern period[11]). In an environment where a threat to political power amounts to an immediate attack on the genital region—"you'll be lucky if you're left with one bollock between the three of you" (2.5)—and where, according to Derrida, getting elected always means "[e]lection to the erection" (216), it appears tempting to dedicate a closer observation to the phallic rhetoric at work.

"Just another day at the fuck office": Phallic Rhetoric

As a series which has become widely-known for its swearing quota and which features numerous characters who constantly draw attention to their "not inconsiderable balls" (*RN*), *The Thick of It* seems to insist on the phallic configuration of the political process. This mainly applies to its rhetoric, which presents the viewer with at least two different ways of looking at the political arena as a thoroughly phallic sphere, with Tucker as the major phallus in its center.

The first one becomes clear if one turns to Jacques Lacan's line of argument in "The Signification of the Phallus", according to which the phallus is associated with the symbolic order and the realm of language; it is "the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire" (Lacan 136). To call the language in *The Thick of It* phallic would then be tautological, for in a Lacanian sense, language is always phallic, as it is associated with the law of the father and the realm of the symbolic. Lacan stresses that the phallus designates a signifier and must not be confused with the penis, for it is "the ultimate *point de capiton*. . . . The phallus is present beneath every signifier as the signifier that has

been repressed, and as such every signifier in effect is a metaphor substituting for the phallus" (Lee 66-7). It goes without saying that the real penis is but a disappointing substitute for the utopian promise granted by the phallus, this elusive "symbol of plenitude and completeness" that "structures gendered meaning" (Rutherford 83), this "simulacrum" that seems to promise "the penis in permanent erection" (Derrida 222).

The language employed by the show's alpha-males takes Lacan's dictum just a tad more literally, which is what earns *The Thick of It* its unique reputation, one that is also fed by rumors such as the producers' alleged hiring of a swearing consultant to come up with all the colorful expressions. In addition to the realm of the scatological and the anus—two areas that the traditional body politic also invokes—the source domain of the majority of the show's unique idiom is located in the genital region of the body. By implication, the penis is identified as the creative center of the political mind, which once again emphasizes that to join the political game, you need the right genitalia. Repeatedly, politicians are told that they must show a "[c]ock like a caber" (*SL*), "get wood" (3.3), or "rub [their] dicks together" (3.4) if they want to gain access to Downing Street 10 or, in the show's diction, into "the lair of the white worm" (2.5)—the latter an intertextual nod to the Bram Stoker novel of the same name, the 1988 movie version of which Peter Capaldi starred in. Those who show weakness are threatened with having their "nuts [stuck] in a book and squeeze[d] . . . so hard they come out like pressed fucking flowers" (*RN*); whereas those who have made it to the center of power are congratulated for having entered "the VIP lounge. You're a fucking Kennedy. You've got the gold card, you've got the complimentary drinks, you've got the fucking hard-on" (*IL*).

Threats and rants are directed at the genital area as well. In nearly every episode, Tucker makes detours into the realm of hate-speech, threatening to crush somebody's balls or to "snap [their cocks] off" (3.7). As studies in sociology and cultural history demonstrate, the tradition of hate-speech manifests itself not only in adolescents as part of male peer group rituals, it also carries political dimensions, as it is rooted in some of the same rhetorical

traditions which have shaped the history of the body politic, including the works of Cicero (Poole 171-5). Christopher M. Fairman may be right in pointing out that, generally, the derivatives of the word 'fuck' are not obscene per se, as they mainly serve as intensifiers without intrinsic meaning (11). Yet the pragmatic use of these intensifiers in *The Thick of It* (not to mention cinematic examples from allegedly 'masculine' film genres such as the gangster film) suggests that the context is not to be so easily dismissed. When Tucker announces that he will "fucking rip [somebody's bollocks] off, I'm going to fucking paint eyeballs on them and I'm going to stitch them onto a fucking sock and use that as a mouthpiece" (3.3), the threat of castration is directly aimed at the symbolic center of power.

Furthermore, *The Thick of It* challenges the traditional conceptualization of the body politic, as Tucker is presented as the personified phallus, not just in the Lacanian sense. He is frequently likened to a penis himself, most memorably in a key scene of the film version, *In the Loop*. Having mocked his adversary, US General Miller (James Gandolfini), as a "fucking armchair general" who has never killed anybody, Tucker is, in turn, ridiculed by Miller: "You know what you look like? A squeezed dick. You've got a little blue vein running up the side of your head. See, that's where I'd put the bullet. But I'd have to stand back, cause you look like you'd be a squirter." Thus, the special relationship is not just portrayed as a duel of alpha-males (a notion supported by the casting of actors who come with their own history of TV personas: Tony Soprano himself, James Gandolfini, in the role of Miller, and former *Sledge Hammer!* star David Rasche as secretary of state, Linton Barwick), but it is rendered a literal duel of penises—Miller compares himself to a "giant ball-sac" in another scene of the film.[12] It is not just the throbbing vein of anger on Tucker's forehead that supports his phallic appearance; his very demeanor links him with the realm of genitals. Amongst the "Westminster Rumours about Malcolm Tucker" gathered in the 2010 book, *The Missing DoSAC Files*, one can read that Tucker allegedly "once badly beat up a female Minister with his erect penis" (Iannucci et al. n. pag.). Tucker embodies the seemingly impossible, the

(political) center of power in the sense of the Lacanian phallus, that which everybody seeks and "want[s] to *be*", yet which no one can have (Lee 67). As long as Tucker occupies this center, he is "sweating embryos" (3.6), but when removed from it, "[i]t's like he's been to the vet and had his knackers done" (3.8).

That the scrotum is more than just an integral part of this fully erect body politic is emphasized in numerous scenes. Before offering the job of secretary of state to Nicola Murray (i.e. resorting to the last available candidate: a woman), Tucker complains that "the only other candidate is my left bollock with a fucking smiley face drawn on it" (3.1). The viewer is thus repeatedly reminded that those who appear as the representative faces of the political process are, in fact, emasculated and powerless, and that the distribution of power does, in fact, resort to a primitive practice, which puts women in a no-win situation. Ultimately, in spite of its grotesque imagery, which is occasionally reminiscent of the frank exhibition of grotesque *phallos* props in Old Comedy, *The Thick of It* offers a very thorough reflection on the gendered framework of the political arena. For, as the show stresses repeatedly, in spite of the emphasis which is placed on the sublimation of the pleasure-seeking body, and in spite of traditional political philosophy hardly ever explicitly stating that the ruler has to be male, women are constantly put at a disadvantage when it comes to the distribution of power. Machiavelli's classic treatise, for instance, may include examples of female rulers such as Dido or the Countess of Forlì, yet to him, it goes without saying that leadership qualities are found exclusively in men. Machiavelli sees fortune as the major threat to the ruler, and personifies it as female: to him, she is "one of those raging rivers, which when in flood overflows the plains, sweeping away trees and buildings, bearing away the soil from place to place; everything flies before it, all yield to its violence, without being able in any way to withstand it . . ." (35). Putting it even more bluntly, Machiavelli goes on to declare that

> fortune is a woman, and if you wish to keep her under it is necessary to beat and ill-use her; and it is seen that she allows herself to be mastered by the adventurous rather than by those who go to work more coldly. She is, therefore, always, woman-like, a lover of young men, because they are less cautious, more violent, and with more audacity command her. (36)

According to this classic dictum, then, those who succumb to fluidity (i.e. femininity) are weak rulers, an underlying conception that would later serve as the basis for the seminal work done by Klaus Theweleit in his analysis of male fascist body conceptions: Theweleit argues that fascism teaches its male subjects that "anything that exited, entered, became moist, or flowed" is "not only 'forbidden,' but lethal", and that the soldier acknowledges that if a (female) stream were to enter him, "I will dissolve, sink, explode with nausea, disintegrate in fear, turn horrified into slime that will gum me up, mire that will suffocate me, a pulp that will swallow me like quicksand." (Theweleit 427-8)

The contemporary political arena as depicted in *The Thick of It* remains very faithful to this framework and its contradictory demands, advocating celibacy on the one hand, but requiring proof of virility on the other. Though the show indicates that both male and female politicians are prone to failure, especially when it comes to reconciling the body politic with the body private—Abbot hardly ever spends any time at home, Glenn sees the story of his special-needs son exploited during Abbot's attempt to save face during an educational debate (2.6) and later excuses himself for his yearly "annivorcery [sic] dinner for one" (3.6), Nicola Murray's private life collapses in series three and four—female politicians and political advisors act even more haplessly than their male counterparts and, in addition, are considered liabilities. As though to illustrate Theweleit's claim that fascism conceives of woman as the embodiment of contamination (385) and of man as the one who must build a dam to keep "the adversities of the outside world" (263) at bay, civil servant Terri Coverley (Joanna Scanlan)

goes by the moniker of “leaky Terri” (3.4), Judy (Gina McKee) is ridiculed as “the leaky fucking minge-box” (*IL*), and Malcolm’s right-hand man, Jamie Macdonald (Paul Higgins) refuses to confide in female colleagues, considering them as about “as secure as a hymen in a South London Comprehensive” (*SL*). This is the fraternal social contract put in practice, the “body politic of civil society” based on the exclusion of women from the realm of power (Pateman 126).

The later series see back-bencher Nicola Murray promoted to Minister of Social Affairs and Development and later to opposition leader more or less by accident, and the audience witnesses her various failed attempts at escaping her reputation as “Mrs Sour Power Vinegar Tits sucking on a lemon” (3.3). Tucker’s welcome to her, “You are now built and owned by the state” (3.1), provides an overture to a comedic chain of disasters, in the course of which Murray will ruin her private life, make a fool of herself in front of TV cameras, and fail to launch any political initiative. Murray is the screwball in this comedic scenario, the anti-hero turned into an object of ridicule. The actual political decision-making process is not in her hands, as Tucker comments at one point: “I know that she’s in the cabinet, but look, that’s like being disabled at a football match, . . . she’s very close to the action but hardly likely to score a goal” (3.6).

Evidently, women are faced with a double-bind: In an environment where, to quote Todd Reeser, “power is so closely linked to masculinity that it may appear as inherently masculine” (133), their only chance of joining the political game is to make “exceptional use of men’s networks, not women’s” (Connell 204), and to adapt the phallic rhetoric that surrounds them. Murray soon has to work “her fucking lady bollocks off” (3.2), talking about her “big bum dildo of vengeance” (3.4), or describing herself as rock-hard, “like a sailor’s wang on shore-leave” (3.8). Tellingly, most of the women who feature in the show’s first series—Terri Coverley, Robyn Murdoch (whom minister Hugh Abbot unknowingly thinks to be someone’s male secretary), or Malcolm’s assistant Sam—carry gender-ambiguous names

and are merely defined by their relation to men, a basic axiom of the symbolic order according to Lacan. Inevitably, they are mocked for adapting to these phallic standards, and are either monikered as "the woman from *The Crying Game*" (*IL*), or demonized as bearers of 'female masculinity' (Halberstam).[13]

However, without the seemingly integral signs of masculinity such as "penis, testicles, or other corporal markers", women are deemed "unable to have masculinity fully" (Reeser 138), and, one might add, unable to obtain political clout and to beat Tucker at his own game, this "big match of testotethon" (*SL*). The show's setting supports this subtext by framing political negotiations not just in the corridors of power, but in its bathrooms, maybe *the* "space of homosocial interaction" (Halberstam 368), where deviants are swiftly sorted out. The making and destroying of careers is swiftly carried out next to urinals, access to which is prohibited for women.

Conclusion

The question of whether *The Thick of It*'s blunt rhetoric provides an inappropriate representation of the body politic can only be answered in the affirmative if one takes issue with the show's portrayal of the political game as a massive dick-waving contest that favors satirical straightforwardness over complexity and nuances.[14] However, news items like the ones quoted in the introduction point to the contrary. Iannucci and his writing staff envision Downing Street 10 as a place where the employers, rather than bidding each other a good morning when showing up for work, rely on battle-cries to rival the rhetoric of war movies ("Wake up and smell the cock", *SL*) but even they would have trouble keeping up with the hilarious cock-fights which politicians continue to produce, as they struggle to appear in line with the ascetic nature of the body politic on the one hand, and to emphasize the phallic power structures they inhabit on the other. No matter if one turns to Berlusconi, Zuma, or

Trump, it is the demeanor of the political players themselves which suggests that the body politic does not so much depend on the interaction of various dependable factors and absolute sublimation as it does on the exhibition of manhood. Unearthing the subtexts of classical political writing and of political rhetoric, as well as studying the gendered connotations of political iconography throughout the ages will help us come to terms with the contradictory demands of the body politic and show that it may not be as void of genitalia as many sources—including the posthumously released doodles of male torsos done by US President Ronald Reagan ("Thatcher-doodle-do")—would have us believe, and as the public seems to expect. *The Thick of It*'s government minister Abbot voices his anger about the demands leveled at him thus: "They should clone ministers, so we're just born at 55, with no past . . . and no genitals" (1.3).[15] Though the enthusiastic reception of *The Thick of It* and Tucker's rise to cult status suggest otherwise, the creators of the show present a much more critical outlook on the kind of masculinity performed in politics, as becomes apparent in Tucker's subsequent fall (his removal from power in the third series is followed by his arrest for perjury in the fourth), not to mention the female vendetta enacted in the finale: Tucker is brought down by a woman during the inquiry, Mary Drake (Sylvestra Le Touzel) takes over the position of Tucker's opposite number Stewart Pearson (Vincent Franklin), and Emma Messinger (Olivia Poulet) establishes herself as chief advisor of new DoSAC minister Peter Mannion (Roger Allam), outsmarting her colleague Phil (Will Smith), a man-child obsessed with outdated references to popular culture.

It is left to the viewer's imagination whether the foul-mouthed rhetoric and the phallic-aggressive masculinity performed in the political game ultimately stress hidden potency or the exact opposite. Chances are that the Leviathan, cowering behind the hill, is not hiding an erection, but a lack.

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1 On some of the bizarre consequences which this division occasionally yielded (cases such as that of King Charles I, on whose authority as sovereign the parliament acted in order to attack his body natural), see Kantorowicz 3f. and 21.

2 Benjamin Bertram discusses the example of Shakespeare’s beloved drunkard Falstaff, whose demeanor subverts this image. With Falstaff, “circulation is driven by the anarchic energy of pleasure that disrupts the centripetal political force of corporeal metaphors” (313).

3 Horst Bredekamp addresses the controversial question of who exactly drew the Leviathan, for the attribution to Abraham Bosse only came to be accepted recently (2006, 31-55).

4 On the choice of the Biblical sea monster as an allusion to England’s mighty fleet cf. Bredekamp 2006, 23.

5 I will give short references to individual episode numbers in my subsequent discussion (e.g. 3.5 for series 3, episode 5), and use abbreviations for the two specials (*SL* for *Spinners and Losers*, *RN* for *Rise of the Nutters*) and for the film (*IL* for *In the Loop*), which features some of the series’ characters but is, according to the director’s audio commentary, set “in a parallel universe to *The Thick of It*” (3.5).

6 The Scottish roots of *The Thick of It*’s political power players (Tucker and his colleague Jamie Macdonald) also mark an important shift in Westminster’s political elite, for it is the Oxbridge-bred public school type, represented by young Olly Reeder (Chris Addison),

that used to be in charge and is now subject to regular humiliation on behalf of "the Caledonian mafia" (2.1), i.e. the new bullies further up the food-chain.

7 Series writer Jesse Armstrong contributed a number of "election briefings" in Tucker's name for *The Guardian*.

8 Film critic Mark Kermode invited Campbell to a screening of *In the Loop* and asked for his comments. In the subsequent discussion, which can be watched on YouTube, Campbell admits to swearing a lot and to having coined some of the phrases Tucker uses. He does not contradict when Kermode suggests Tucker be read as a cipher of him, either.

9 In 1996, Blair allegedly got into an argument with Campbell over the fact that the latter wanted Blair's children to attend a regular comprehensive school, which the Prime Minister rejected on the grounds that the children "had enough to put up with as it was" (Blair 88). This story-line was turned into the first episode of the third series, as was the power struggle between Blair and Gordon Brown in the two series specials. Furthermore, Campbell played a major role in the release of the two dossiers which served as the main justification of the Iraq invasion. In the film, Tucker manages to tip a United Nations vote in favor of the Americans and the British by forging intel on weapons of mass destruction. The fact that Tucker is mocked as a "little poodlefucker" at one point provides a clear reference to Tony Blair's dubious reputation as "Bush's poodle."

10 Other examples include *Spin City* (1996-2002), *Wag the Dog* (1997), *The West Wing* (1999-2006), *Borgen* (2010-2013), and *Our Brand Is Crisis* (2015)..

11 The manufacturing of pottery with images of "victorious soldiers with erect penises getting ready to rape the losers" was a common practice in Athens (Ducat 7), as was the production of Herma statues (later to be found in Rome, too): sculptures initially dedicated to the Gods in order to celebrate their reproductive powers, but later also to outstanding men, such as politicians and war heroes. The Hermae merely consisted of heads and torso-

like stone pillars on which genitals (mostly fully erect penises) had been carved. According to ancient historian Thucydides, nothing ever shattered the national body in Greece as much as the sheer act of vandalism that occurred around 415 BC, when all the Hermae in Athens were castrated over-night, just as the mighty fleet was preparing its invasion of Sicily. In the sixth book of his *History of the Peleponnesian War*, Thucydides recounts that the mutilation of the Hermae was seen by some as part of "a scheme to overthrow the democracy." I am indebted to PD Dr. Michael Groneberg for drawing my attention to the Hermae.

12 How arbitrary it is to draw a link between the exhibition of brutality on the one hand and virility or masculinity on the other is suggested in an exchange between General Miller and Assistant Secretary of State, Karen Clark (Mimi Kennedy), for she accuses Miller of having no balls when he decides to go to war instead of opposing it.

13 The most well-known example would be the 'Iron Lady' Margaret Thatcher, the epitome of what Stephen J. Ducat calls the phallic woman in his case study of Hillary Rodham Clinton (129-49).

14 Amongst the show's proponents is the aforementioned Alistair Campbell, who voices some criticism in his conversation with Mark Kermode, arguing that *In the Loop* reduces the political process to a cartoon.

15 Similarly, Simon Foster (Tom Hollander), *In the Loop*'s protagonist, is advised to keep his crush on Keira Knightley to himself during interviews: "Pervert. Sex. Minister. People don't want to know."