EDITORIAL

PARLIAMENTS AND THE RHETORICAL LANGUAGES OF POLITICS

Several of the contributions in this volume refer to rhetoric. Marcus Llanque presents a fresh look at the link between rhetoric and republican politics, Jodi Dean offers a study in the specific American genre of presidential rhetoric, and Suvi Soininen attributes an increasing insight into the rhetorical dimension of parliamentary politics to Michael Oakeshott and his conversational paradigm of politics. Her study provokes me to reflect upon the historical relationship between parliaments and rhetoric in more general terms.

A few years ago, I began to wonder why there have been no studies that connect the histories of rhetoric and parliaments, although parliamentary politics is *government by speaking* (Macaulay) or *government by discussion* (Bagehot) *par excellence*. The histories of parliamentary government or parliamentary handbooks almost never make any references to parliamentary rhetoric. One gets the impression that speaking plays no political role at all in the parliaments of today.

Similarly, parliamentary eloquence is conspicuously absent from the recent histories of rhetoric, unlike the rhetorical literature of the nineteenth century. If, however, we understand rhetoric as an umbrella concept for a distinct type of languages of politics, its history cannot be separated from that of parliamentary eloquence. My point here is to highlight moments of European parliamentary history that have given a new twist to rhetorical political languages.

Since what point have we been able to speak of "parliaments"? In a famous study from 1905, *Recht und Technik des Englischen Parlamentarismus*, Josef Redlich identifies the invention of the legislative "bill"

and the subsequent procedural reforms in fifteenth and sixteenth century England as a decisive moment in distinguishing parliaments from older type of assemblies. According to Redlich, the process of deciding upon a parliamentary bill is connected with other procedural innovations, such as the freedom of speech of MPs, their parliamentary immunity and the system of three readings, which allows time for reflection. The procedure was politicized in the struggle between the Parliament and the Tudor and Stuart kings and as a result of the rise of the rhetorical culture of argumentation *in utramque partem*, an aspect which Quentin Skinner and others have emphasized in their recent studies.

The rhetorical style of speaking *pro et contra* became institutionalized through parliamentary procedure. *The key unit of parliamentary politics is a procedure that connects two speeches, one for and the other against a given proposal*. There are always good reasons to speak for and against any proposal. The adversity in the audience is incorporated into the procedure of parliamentary politics as a precondition of working of the parliament itself.

The role of parliamentary eloquence forces us to reconsider the alleged decline of rhetoric since the seventeenth century. Feudal parliaments, for example in France and in the Spanish and Austrian empires, lost their political powers. However, the parliament survived, for example, in the Netherlands, and even increased its powers in Britain after 1688 and in Sweden in the "Age of Liberty" (*frihetstiden*) from 1718 to 1772. Within these parliaments a rhetorical political culture was maintained in an age when rhetoric was declining in schools, universities and contemporary literature.

Although a wide range of lively studies on rhetoric is conducted in the Sweden today, we seem to know next to nothing about the parliamentary rhetoric in the powerful four-estate Swedish *Riksdag* during *frihetstiden*. The Riksdag was based on a combination of intra-estate deliberation and inter-estate negotiation, a constellation that might also have cultivated the development of extraordinary forms of rhetoric. We hardly know anything at all about the specific rhetorical strategies, tactics and techniques applied in the "party" contest between the Hats and Caps.

There have been plenty of studies on British parliamentary eloquence. The late eighteenth century has a reputation for being the golden age of parliamentary eloquence, with such orator-politicians as the Pitts, Fox, Sheridan and Burke. In this view, parliamentary speaking is mainly judged in terms of its aesthetic qualities. The small

number of clever politicians connected their speeches with a classicist revival in Britain, which allowed the leading MPs to use ancient analogies for contemporary phenomena and even to use Greek and Latin quotations when addressing to the parliamentary audience.

In his *Modern Parliamentary Eloquence* (1913), Earl Curzon clearly understands that the process of democratization also changed rhetoric, for example by insisting on the superiority of the actual audience in parliamentary speaking over the readers and historians. In 1838, as a young MP, William Gladstone emphasizes the "mood of the moment" as being the distinctive criterion of parliamentary eloquence, as opposed to the Aristotelian view on the future-orientation of deliberative rhetoric. Similar remarks on the shifting criteria of parliamentary speaking can be found in the nineteenth century French literature on parliamentary eloquence, which insists on the shift from prepared speeches to improvisation and the preparedness to present a quick response.

The changing political institutions and practices thus have an immediate impact on rhetoric. The increase of parliamentary powers, the democratization of the electorate and the professionalizing of the MPs all contributed to the formation of a new temporal orientation, to the primacy of the present over both the past and the future. All this was also connected to both the procedural changes regulating the times of speaking and the role of improvisation and replies in the debate. This orientation toward the present is a lasting legacy of the parliamentary style of politics that deserves to be revaluated.

In *The English Constitution* (1867), Walter Bagehot idealized the parliamentary practice of dismissing governments in the middle of an electoral term. In Britain, this practice was quickly abandoned, although it prevailed in the French Third Republic. In the textbooks on the topic, the Third Republic has, similarly to the Swedish "Age of Liberty," served as a notorious example of political instability. Nicolas Roussellier's *Le parlement de l'éloquence* (1997) has challenged the conventional view and emphasized the role of the Third Republic as a regime in which speaking to the parliamentary audience was politically significant. The short duration of the governments did not necessarily imply political instability, because the same *ministrable* MPs served in slightly different combinations from one government to another. The Third Republic is thus in urgent need of reappraisal as a rhetorically innovative regime, although it notoriously failed especially in the non-enfranchisement of women.

The contemporary critics tend to see parliaments as powerless and the role of parliamentary speeches as marginal, and they often opt for referenda and other forms of direct citizen participation. From a rhetorical point of view, such tendencies appear rather questionable. Above all, like the platform oratory of the nineteenth century, the politics of parties, organizations, movements or networks tends to operate with an inclusive "we" and locate opposition and adversaries outside the sphere of their present audiences.

In my view, we should revaluate and revitalise the rhetorical role of parliaments. Their main advantages are the presence of adversaries in the same audience, the procedure of speaking pro et contra and the chances to persuade others or become persuaded by them. From this perspective, for example parties concentrating on elections may offer better chances for independent parliamentarians than membership in parties with strict organizational or ideological coherence. Perhaps we might even detect in the notorious personalization of politics the presence of occasions for a more rhetorical style of politics that has the potential to emphasise the independent judgment of the MPs. Nonetheless, procedural revisions aimed at actualizing the parliamentary powers of opposition and contestation would still also be needed.

Max Weber's paradigm of the citizen as an "occasional politician" also includes the chance to revaluate the parliamentary style of politics. Weber provokes me to invert the relationship between citizens and parliamentarians. *Instead of regarding the MPs as a mirror or a voice of their voters, we should, rather, consider the voters as election day MPs.*

In this sense, voting requires us to imagine ourselves as MPs. Instead of blaming "the politicians" we should imagine ourselves as politicians, although only for election day. How would I act politically if I were to sit in the next parliament? To whom shall I give my vote, if I regard myself as an election day MP? In terms of Frank Ankersmit's aesthetic concept of representation, we should not vote for someone, whose career, background and views most closely resemble our own. We should acknowledge a distance between the electorate and the parliamentarian and vote instead for a candidate whom we consider able to use independent and well-informed political judgement even in new, unexpected and critical political situations.

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