Willibald Steinmetz

"A CODE OF ITS OWN"

Rhetoric and Logic of Parliamentary Debate in Modern Britain¹

In 1932 Virginia Woolf, the novelist and member of the Bloomsbury Group of intellectuals, published an article in a journal called *Good Housekeeping* in which she dealt with a very special public house, the British House of Commons.² Turning first to the inside of the place she described it as being "not in the least noble" but rather "ugly". "It is," she wrote, "an untidy, informal-looking assembly. Sheets of white paper seem to be always fluttering to the floor." And as if that was not enough to shock her female readers, she went on to dwell on the unseemly behaviour of this almost exclusively male society.³ Men were sprawling around on benches and putting their legs on the table, the "occasional toe" touching the precious insignia of the State, the mace and chests of brass laid out there. Dozens of men constantly went in and out through swing doors, behaving as if they were in a Pub or a saloon bar, "gossiping and cracking jokes over each other's shoulders".

Could this be, Virginia asked, the very assembly where the destinies of the world were altered, where Gladstone fought, and Palmerston and Disraeli? Yes, she said, it was indeed. And it was because there existed in the House of Commons some kind of invisible order which governed this whole body of unruly men and gave it, as it were, a "certain character". The Commons, Virginia wrote, had existed for centuries and thereby developed "its own laws and licences."

"It has somehow a code of its own. People who disregard this code will be unmercifully chastened; those who are in accord with it will be easily condoned. But what it condemns and what it condones, only those who are in the secret of the House can say. All we can be sure of is that a secret there is."

In my article I wish to explore a bit more thorougly some aspects of that secret code of the British House of Commons from the late eighteenth century to the period of the Second Reform Act (1867). What makes that code an object worth studying is that on the strength of it several hundred men and, after 1919, a few women were able to govern Great Britain and its Empire by way of discussion. The unwritten rules of behaviour hinted at by Virginia Woolf formed only part of that code. Other elements were written precedents and standing orders, the spatial arrangements of the sessions, certain rituals and, above all, the formal and informal rules of speaking in the House, in other words: the changing rules of what could be said and what could not be said. It is these linguistical aspects of the code that I will be concerned with in the following remarks.

Analyzing Parliamentary Debates: a Few Words on Theory and Method

Institutional codes can be looked at from two different angles. On the one hand, attention may be paid primarily to those features which guarantee an institution's identity over time and make communication between its members possible at all. When this line of enquiry is followed, codes are regarded as structures providing a certain degree of consensus, stability and continuity. On the other hand, we may be more interested in conflicts and discontinuities within an institutional setting. In that case the main emphasis is put on moves and shifts whereby individuals or groups can challenge or even change established codes of language and behaviour, and yet leave the institution itself largely intact.

Whether we privilege the first or the second approach depends of course on the questions we wish to answer. In principle both aspects

should be kept in mind, but in practice most works dealing with languages or codes in institutions prefer either the one or the other.

A good example of the first approach is Thomas Mergel's recent work on the Weimar Reichstag, the German parliament between 1919 and 1933. 4 Mergel clearly propounds a revisionist view of the Weimar Republic in general and the Reichstag in particular. Arguing against those who see the Republic and its parliament doomed to failure from the beginning he claims that the Reichstag, at least during the 1920s, had a code of its own enabling its members to fulfill their tasks as legislators tolerably well. To show this, Mergel takes notice of a whole range of structures, discursive as well as non-discursive, which allowed Weimar politicians to co-operate even if they hated each others' political views. Thus, among other features, he identifies certain languages, such as, for example, a language of responsible statesmanship and another, closely related language which advocated reliance on hard facts (Sachlichkeit) instead of ideology and emotion. According to Mergel, both languages contributed to maintain a wide alliance ranging from the Social Democrats (SPD) on the left to the German Nationalist Party (DNVP) on the right and thus made sure that the Reichstag could be kept going at least until the end of the 1920s. In Mergel's study, then, languages, among other sign-systems, are seen as structures which bind people together and permit meaningful communication in an otherwise chaotic and aggressive environment.

As for the second approach, let me refer to my own book *Das Sagbare und das Machbare*, in which I dealt with linguistical codes in the British Parliament from the 1780s, the age of Pitt and Fox, to the 1860s, the age of Gladstone and Disraeli. Here the focus was not so much on co-operation and continuity but on conflict and discontinuity. I wanted to describe the moves and shifts by which changes, especially electoral reforms, were made possible at all, given the fact that the British Parliament before and after 1832 consisted of a socially cohesive elite of men who acted within an established and comparatively uncontested institutional framework. How could it happen that twice in a generation, in 1832 and 1867, these men consented to a reform of the very institution they were sitting in so comfortably themselves? Why did they open up Parliament for new members elected by new social classes, the middle and working

classes, whose political allegiances were at best doubtful; new members who would, in addition, bring into Parliament hitherto unheard of arguments and thus, perhaps, disrupt the existing codes of language and conduct even further?

My basic proposition put forward in the book was that, within the realm of politics, what can be done (*das Machbare*) is to a large extent dependent on what can be said (*das Sagbare*). Therefore, the rules or usages of parliamentary language had to change for a parliamentary reform to become feasible.

This is the reason why I felt justified in concentrating on linguistical elements of the code, or if you prefer: on languages (in the Pocockian sense), rather than dealing, as Thomas Mergel does, with the complete range of structures ordering the inner life of parliaments. Being interested mainly in change, I treated elements such as the formal ordering of parliamentary business, the spatial arrangements, the social life in the lobbies and tea-rooms, the opening ceremony and other rituals as more or less constant variables. Had I written a book on the stability of British political institutions, these elements would have been highly important, for even in times of crisis they secured the regular working of the House. They could assume that stabilizing role precisely because they changed very little during the whole period from the late eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century.

With regard to the order of business, for example, only the prolonged obstruction of Irish members in the Home Rule debates of the 1880s brought about a few alterations. A time-limit for speeches was introduced to enable the government to get through at least with some of its legislative business. Apart from minor changes such as these, the non-verbal codes governing the internal life of the House of Commons remained remarkably stable until the First World War and beyond, especially if compared with the troubled history of parliaments on the European continent and in particular in Germany.

What did change dramatically between 1780 and the 1880s, however, were the rules of what could be said inside the House of Commons and the way in which parliamentary language reacted to, and fed back into, public discourses outside Parliament. Parliamentary debates, first of all, reflected, but also produced conceptual change in the narrow sense, that is: change in the meaning and use of certain single concepts, such as for example 'middle class' which be-

came restricted in its meaning during the debates on electoral reform in 1831/32.7

Changes also occurred, more significantly perhaps, in the ways in which entire arguments (propositions) were put together to form specific discourses, either for a reform or against it. Tracing these changes in whole clusters of argument, not just in single concepts, was my main concern in *Das Sagbare und das Machbare*. Of course, in doing so I had to describe undisputed, self-evident languages as well, because it is only against such a background of commonplaces that new vocabularies and arguments can be identified as new. My first step, then, was to map out what could be said in certain historical situations.

Mere descriptions of such semantic maps, however, are not enough. Speeches in parliament, or more precisely: each single utterance or sentence within a speech, have to be regarded as actions. Speaking was, indeed, more or less the only form of action available to politicians. Therefore, when politicians succeeded in changing the rules of what could be said (*das Sagbare*), they at the same time changed their actual rooms of manouevre in the situation (*das Machbare*). In other words: In addition to just describing semantic change, I ventured to show how the realm of political action changed in the language and through the languages used by British politicians. Or again in Koselleck's terms: I treated language as an indicator and a factor of political reality.

Let me proceed to another point. Much of what is said in any kind of institutionalised communication belongs to established languages and is uttered without being carefully reflected upon by either side. This is true of everyday conversation and for parliamentary debates as well. Now, with regard to parliament, even semantical innovations were rarely introduced intentionally, and even more rarely as part of a coherent strategy. The idea that there is a person called 'author' who deliberately sets out to challenge an established concept or mode of argument, or indeed a whole language, does not capture the normal practice of speaking in parliament, at least as far as the British experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is concerned. In that period, there are only rare examples of British politicians who consciously applied what Quentin Skinner calls the "technique of rhetorical redescription", that is: a technique whereby someone

reformulates a given description in rival terms that sound no less plausible, but put the event or action under discussion in a different moral light. ⁹ If there was rhetorical redescription, it happened unconsciously.

Partly responsible for this were certain conventions of how a speech had to be delivered. In eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain speeches in Parliament, although they could be prepared at home, had to be delivered as if they were improvised during the actual debate. Reading one's speech from a paper was absolutely taboo. Most speeches indeed were more or less improvised. This was one reason why speeches normally turned out to be an inconsistent potpourri of commonplaces with - perhaps - one or two new twists and turns mixed up with it. Therefore, most semantic shifts in British parliamentary debate passed by unnoticed at first, because they appeared jumbled together with arguments already heard a thousand times. Innovations were only recognized later, when other speakers – again unconsciously – had taken up the new word or phrase and repeated it time and again, until finally somebody woke up and realized that the firm ground from which he used to argue had somehow disappeared.

Much of the verbal warfare going on in Parliament was of this kind: It remained, as it were, below the surface of recognition for a considerable period of time. And it usually took much more time until new words and phrases were turned into concepts (begriffen in Koselleck's terms), and were politicized or transformed into an ideology (politisiert and ideologisiert in Koselleck's terms). This is what distinguishes parliamentary debates and other forms of oral communication from the high levelled written exchanges between political theorists which Quentin Skinner analyzes.

Let me repeat, then, my second point: Parliamentary debates, at least in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain, were a specific kind of oral communication involving several hundred people, a communication which was to a large extent improvised and inconsistent, which relied mostly on commonplaces with only rare occasions of consciously prepared linguistic policies. When devising a method for analyzing parliamentary debates these specific features have to be taken into account. In other words: We should not read reports of parliamentary debates as if they were texts of political theory.

As a third point, I would like to explain very briefly the method which I applied in my book on Das Sagbare und das Machbare. Although inspired by Koselleck's Begriffsgeschichte as well as by Skinner's and Pocock's historical analysis of languages I claim that my approach differs from both, Koselleck's as well as Skinner's and Pocock's. It differs for the very reasons which I just mentioned. Neither Koselleck's Begriffsgeschichte nor Skinner's and Pocock's sophisticated reconstruction of languages of political theory seem an appropriate way of dealing with parliamentary debates. Both approaches, though different in some respects, are similar in others. They are similar, first, in that attention is turned almost exclusively to certain highly politicized, abstract key concepts, all of them nouns, such as 'public opinion' or 'constitution' or 'virtue' or 'property' or 'representation' or whatever. And both approaches are also similar in that they are far removed, too far removed for my purposes, from ordinary day-to-day political struggles.

The differences between Koselleck and Skinner/Pocock are less important and, I think, not of a fundamental character. Rather, there are two perspectives involved which do not necessarily exclude each other. Whereas Koselleck in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* prefers to isolate individual concepts (or the nouns referring to them) one by one and traces their shifts of meaning over long periods of time (diachronically), Skinner and Pocock take clusters of these concepts and describe their figurations and refigurations in shorter periods (synchronically) and within certain intellectual contexts. When thus putting 'ideas in context', however, Skinner and his school as well as Pocock never really descend to the level of actual political struggle. They remain on the high plains of political theory; much more so, in fact, than Koselleck to whom the same reproach has been made time and again.

Now, contrary to both Koselleck and Skinner/Pocock I propose to leave the abstract key concepts (nouns) aside and conduct the investigation on the level of entire propositions or sentences (verbal constructions) instead. What kind of propositions are chosen as a starting point depends of course on the historical question we wish to answer. In the case of my book on British parliamentary politics, for example, the historical problem I wished to explore was the way in which politicians' conceptions of their own room of manoeuvre changed in and through the debates on electoral reforms from the 1780s to the 1860s.

Thus, in order to get closer to these conceptions, I defined certain types of basic propositions which are so inconspicuous that they are bound to appear in everyday political language and reveal the speakers' notions about the realm of politics even if the speakers are not explicitly referring to that subject. Altogether, I defined nine types of such propositions or sentences, but here it may suffice to name only three to illustrate how I proceeded.

First, I filtered out of the texts all sentences, even trivial ones, where speakers declared something to be 'impossible'. Also included in this category were simple phrases like 'we can't do this or that'. The reason for collecting such allegations of impossibility was that they contain implicit notions about the limited competence of political action. Taken together these sentences circumscribe, as it were, the borders of the realm of politics, but politicians use such expressions of impossibility without being aware that at the same moment they make a statement about their concept of politics.

In the same way, secondly, I collected all sentences where politicians affirmed that something was 'necessary' or 'inevitable'. Also included here were simple expressions like 'we must do this or that'. Here, again, the result was a large corpus of seemingly trivial phrases which, nonetheless, contained notions on the limits, in this case the constraints, of political action. And here again, most of these utterances were made with other purposes in mind than expressing an abstract concept of political necessity.

Next, thirdly, I listed all sentences where politicians assumed reponsibility or guilt or ascribed it to other identifiable politicians: 'I am responsible', 'you are responsible', 'I promise that I will do this or that' etc. Here, then, I made a collection of positive statements, again most of them implicit, on the assumed (or wished for) capacity to act.

In addition to these three sentence-types I made six other collections of sentence-types, some of them also circumscribing the realm of politics in a quasi-spatial dimension, others defining the time-horizons in which political action was to take place. But here again, with regard to time-horizons, I did not look for prominent nouns, such as 'progress', 'revolution' or 'ancient right', but for inconspicuous propositions in which politicians motivated their actions either by expressing a wish, or by pointing to a fear, or by alluding to some-

thing that had existed before, or by saying that now it was the right time or the wrong time to do something.

This method of reading reports of parliamentary debates has something mechanical about it. It is like a 'screening' of texts, no hermeneutic intuition being involved in the process of gathering the data-base. As a result of this reading-technique, I got nine large corpora, each containing several hundreds of propositions in which politicians claimed that something was either 'impossible', or 'necessary', or to be done because it had always been so, or not to be done because this or that would happen in the future, and so on. Once I disposed of such large collections of certain propositions it became much easier to identify old and new modes of speech, usual and unusual arguments, undisputed and disputed languages, commonplaces and innovations.

Another considerable advantage of this reading-technique is that key concepts of political discourse (the nouns) are not – as in Koselleck's as well as Skinner's and Pocock's case – defined in advance, by intuition or a certain feeling for what may be important, but that certain nouns prove to be key concepts because they appear again and again at key positions in such verbal constructions. Significant moves of these key concepts in the web of propositions can then easily be interpreted as indicating a change in their meaning.

I claim, therefore, that the method I am proposing here and have demonstrated in my book is a way out of that eternal difficulty all conceptual historians have, namely the difficulty of deciding in advance what the key concepts (the *Grundbegriffe*) really are. In my book, key concepts of political discourse appear at the end, as a result of an empirical, verifiable reading process. And indeed, certain concepts of which I (at least) would never have thought in advance turned out to be of prime importance when British politicians declared their minds about things possible and impossible, necessary and unnecessary, and so on.

Most notably, this was the case with the concept of 'character' and its semantic field including such nouns as 'honour', 'consistency', 'principle', 'promise' and 'pledge'. This cluster of concepts proved to be decisive, for example, in the reform debates of 1831/32, when it came to the deadlock between the House of Lords dominated by the anti-reform Tories, and the Commons dominated by the pro-reform

Whigs. In this situation, recourse to 'character' and 'consistency' allowed both parties, and the King, a way out of the crisis. Let me explain this point by an exemplary excursion which may also serve to illustrate what may be found in a more elaborate form in Das Sagbare und das Machbare.

Character, Public Opinion and Party, 1780-1867 – a Case Study in Semantical Change

The semantic field around 'character' in British parliamentary discourse has to be seen in close relation to another one, turning around the concept of 'public opinion'. This second field includes terms such as 'people', 'the press', 'associations', 'movements' and the like. The basic connection linking the two semantic fields was as follows: As soon as a politician had publicly engaged his honour by promising to do something, he was in principle bound by his words. The fact that he had committed himself openly made it difficult for him to retract without damaging his character.

Now, looking first at the semantic field around 'public opinion' in a diachronical perspective from the 1780s to 1832: Here, a striking result of my reading is that the concept of 'public opinion' etc. changed its position in the web of my nine types of propositions. The politicians of the 1780s normally spoke of public movements ('constituents', 'people', 'associations' and the like) as if these were prompted by the politicians' own speech-acts. Movements outside Parliament needed verbal impulses emanating from leading persons within. In late eighteenth century parliamentary discourse the public appeared as something that could be controlled as long as the politicians did not stir up expectations too recklessly. In short: politicians saw themselves in charge of managing the public.

This discourse had changed completely by 1831/32. Now, 'public opinion', the 'people', the 'political unions' and so on were presented in debate as if they were anonymous and self-acting agents, as if they were a 'natural' force that could not be resisted, as if they were powerful movements, 'impossible' to control. Almost everyone, even a large majority of Tories, agreed that government could not be con-

tinued against public opinion or without the confidence of the classes that shaped it – the 'middle classes' as they were called since the 1820s. This shift of discourse reflected and supported the effective emancipation of a large politicised public since the end of the eighteenth century.

While the semantic field around 'public opinion' thus moved in a remarkable way in the web of propositions, the semantic field around 'character' and 'honour' held a stable position. No significant shifts occurred here between the 1780s and the 1830s. Throughout, the speakers declared it to be a point of honour to preserve their 'character as public man'. It was the common rule that political opponents allowed each other to keep their promises and stand firm to their principles once they had committed themselves in public. To act consistently was seen as a prime 'necessity' for all agents in the 1780s as well as in 1831/32. A considerable part of all utterances concerning things 'impossible' or 'necessary' belonged to the semantic field around 'character' and 'honour'. This stable position of 'character' in parliamentary discourse reflected and helped to enforce aristocratic codes of behaviour in the British political elite at least until 1832.

But although the semantic field around 'character' remained constant, the practical use to which concepts belonging to that field could be put in debate had changed considerably by 1831/32. The same insistence on keeping one's 'character', which had been an effective argument *against* reform in the 1780s, proved to be the most effective argument *in favour* of reform in the crisis of 1831/32. Why? Let me explain this very briefly:

In the 1780s it turned out to be disadvantageous to reformers in Parliament, such as William Pitt or the Earl of Shelburne, that they had given public pledges for reform to significant groups outside the House. The reform associations, people like Christopher Wyvill, needed such public engagements of ministers to get up meetings and petitions at all. Encouraging signals 'from within' were necessary to mobilize pressure 'from without'. But within Parliament these signals were counterproductive. William Pitt's phrase, according to which he would support reform "as a man and as a minister", which was meant as an encouragement to groups outside, was interpreted by his opponents in the House, Charles James Fox and Lord North, as a threat that illicit means, so-called 'influence', would be used by

Pitt to induce members to vote with him. This was against the code which Pitt himself (and his father, the elder Pitt) had upheld for years. Thus, with his public promise, Pitt had violated the rules of what could be said inside Parliament in the 1780s. To escape, Pitt felt compelled to disavow as unauthorized the publication of his pledge. In doing so, Pitt himself contributed, of course, to demobilize the pressure from without he needed so much and, at the same time, made those of his supporters in the House who did not like his reform plans believe that he would not be sorry about a defeat. In the 1780s then, the code of the House was such that pressure from without could not be translated into rhetorical power within, whereas the rules of discourse in the House could be used by opponents of reform to discourage the forces outside.

By 1831/32, the situation was completely reversed. It was now a commonplace that the public chose its agenda quasi-spontaneously and that it could effectively bind MPs to promote them. All politicians admitted that, once they had pledged themselves in public, they could not retract from their position. The accelerated transmission of news helped to enforce consistency in the House. This new situation proved to be advantageous for reformers. Earl Grey and his ministers had only to announce their intention of introducing a plan of reform in Parliament in order to produce sufficient manifestations of support outside. These manifestations in turn could be translated back into prognoses of imminent revolution to impress wavering ministers and the reluctant King, William IV. Thus, the Whig reformers of the early 1830s had no need to violate the codes of parliamentary speech, as William Pitt had done in the 1780s, with a view to stimulate public activity outside.

On the other hand, the continuous validity of traditional concepts of 'character' and 'honour' prevented the Tory Lords around the Duke of Wellington to take over the government in the crisis days of May 1832. The Tories' previously declared principles made it impossible for them to introduce any kind of reform, although at that stage Wellington and his colleagues themselves had begun in secret to ventilate their own schemes of reform which, in some points, were more radical than that of the Whigs. But the Tories could not dare to utter their secret thoughts in Parliament. The mere hint that a Tory-reform might be considered raised a cry of indignation in the

House of Commons. In 1832, then, only those politicians could successfully continue in office who had publicly engaged themselves for a reform before the crisis had started.

Moving on from 1832: The rules of what could be said in the House changed again significantly in the following thirty-five years. In 1867, when Disraeli brought in his electoral reform proposals, a new semantic field turning around the concepts of party loyalty and leadership had to a large extent taken over the place once occupied by the language of 'character' and 'honour' in the web of sentence-types. This altered constellation in the parliamentary code allowed Disraeli to do what could not even be hinted at by the Duke of Wellington in 1832, namely: to bring in a scheme of reform almost identical to that introduced a year earlier by a liberal government, led by Gladstone and Lord Russell. And because of the replacement of 'character' by 'party loyalty' in the discursive hierarchy determining political action, Disraeli, could go even further: He could tolerate his reform to become even more radical during the course of the debate against all his previously declared principles.

These brief remarks may suffice here to illustrate how I proceeded when describing semantical shifts and moves and their practical consequences in parliamentary debate.

Discourse Analysis or Rhetoric?

Let me conclude with one more theoretical point and a few examples. Having explained how my method relates to conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), you may as well want to know how it relates to Rhetoric, the other discipline alluded to in the title of our conference on "Rhetoric and conceptual change". I could give an easy answer and claim, that what I have been doing in *Das Sagbare und das Machbare* is indeed nothing else than an exercise in rhetoric. I have identified typical forms and figures of speech in eighteenth and nineteenth century parliamentary debates; I have described those forms and figures as actions in the respective situations, evaluating their practical functions and effects; I did not concentrate on individual words, but on entire propositions, on chains of argument, even on whole sequences of speeches. What, after all, is this if not rhetoric?

And yet, I feel uneasy in using that term, rhetoric, as a description of what I have been doing. I would be much happier, if you would call it discourse analysis. This would, first of all, more properly reflect the intellectual genealogy of my method. For, when looking for inspiration at the beginning of my work, besides learning a lot from Koselleck and the Skinner/Pocock schools, I turned to the French school of historical discourse analysis, especially to the early experiments made by the French historian Régine Robin. 10 It was from her way of close reading the remonstrances of the old French Parlements in the Ancien régime, that I first learned how to reduce the endless variety of utterances in a speech to a small number of basic propositions. It was her example, and similar experiments made by Rolf Reichardt in his Bastille-project, which helped me to put my reading-technique on a firm empirical, if necessary quantifiable, basis.11 Although I did not, as Reichardt and the French did, use quantification in my book, I insist that the 'mechanical' process of screening which I used to gain my data-base owes very much to the French concept of discourse and very little to the discipline of rhetoric.

On a more abstract level, the advantage of discourse analysis over rhetoric lies for me in the total exclusion of hermeneutics from the first reading of texts. My first reading of texts, what I call the 'screening'-process, happens at the surface of the texts alone and takes no notice at all of supposed intentions or motives of speakers or authors. My first reading thus takes language in its material form, its *matérialité*, as Foucault declared it to be necessary for discourse analysis.¹²

However, where I differ from French discourse analysis and where rhetoric comes back in, is the point where I move on to the second stage of my analysis. In that second stage I describe utterances, arguments and whole speeches as having certain practical functions and effects in the situation. At that stage, individual speakers (authors) come back into the picture. ¹³ Although it is true, as I said, that British politicians, most of the time, did not choose each and every word they said consciously, there are instances of tactical uses of arguments and sometimes even carefully planned linguistical strategies.

People in general and politicians in particular may not be free in the choice of what they say. Grammar and syntactical structures, established uses of vocabulary, special codes of what can be said and what cannot be said in institutions: all this puts certain limits on the linguistical room of

manoeuvre. So far Foucault's concept of discourse as being a power is right. And yet, there is still such a room of manoeuvre in each institutionalized communication. There is a room which is open for a variety of utterances, and some of these utterances, some of this variety, may consist of consciously prepared tactical moves.

When it comes to identify and classify these speech acts, especially those planned in advance, the discipline of rhetoric becomes highly useful indeed. However, for my special field, parliamentary speech, classical rhetoric, the ancient authors from Aristotle to Quintilian are less useful than certain modern authors who wrote special treatises or comments on rhetoric with a view directly to influence parliamentary practice. In eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain, there is a long chain of prescriptive and commenting texts on how to speak properly and effectively in Parliament.

The series begins in the early seventeeth century with an anonymous tract called *Policies in parliaments*¹⁴ and with collections of commonplaces, maxims and fallacies to be found in the work of Francis Bacon. The series continues in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with precepts for effective speech by people such as the Marquess of Halifax or Lord Chesterfield and with further collections of commonplaces, for example Richard Tickell's *Commonplace Arguments against Administration*, a pamphlet dating from 1780 which listed standard phrases and tactical moves of the then opposition against Lord North, the author's declared aim being to put ridicule on speakers who continued to use such trite arguments and all too obvious tactics.¹⁵

To put ridicule on certain modes of speech was one purpose of this kind of literature. Besides making noises, coughing and ironical cheers, laughter was one of the most effective means of reducing opponents to silence and thus narrowing their linguistical room of manoeuvre. Another purpose of that kind of literature was to prepare inexperienced, young members for their maiden speeches on the one hand, and to arm them with prefabricated answers against standard topics of opposing parties on the other. The early nineteenth century saw a rapid succession of pamphlets, articles and books of this kind, addressed to politicians, the aim of which was to intervene directly into the code of parliamentary debate. The most famous of these publications were William Gerrard Hamilton's *Parlia-*

mentary Logick (1808) and, as an answer to this, Jeremy Bentham's Handbook of Policial Fallacies (french 1816, engl. 1824).¹⁷

The struggle for parliamentary reform and the arguments used on both sides in this struggle were the focus of Hamilton's as well as Bentham's books and other similar publications of the 1820s and 1830s. Bentham's *Handbook* in particular was an effective example of applied rhetoric. Bentham gave expressive names to typical arguments of anti-reformers (for example: the Hobgoblin-argument or the Chinese argument), thus making these arguments recognizable and therefore potentially less useful in debate. Thus, Bentham's *Handbook* was, I think, an important antidote which helped to undermine the force of those hitherto dominant arguments, which relied on precedent, antiquity, prescription and so-called 'ancient rights' in the struggle for parliamentary reform.

Coming back to theory: Publications such as Bentham's *Handbook* of *Fallacies* can help to assess practical functions and effects of arguments. Yet, I would not recommend to use such contemporary classifications directly as a tool for analyzing parliamentary debate. Of course you will find plenty of examples which prove that Bentham was an excellent observer, but you will find not much else and therefore not much which will come as a surprise. This, to me, seems to be a general disadvantage if rhetoric, whether classical or contemporary, is chosen as a starting point for analysis of languages or codes within institutions: When using rhetorical treatises you will only find what you know already. As an addition to your own reading-techniques, however, treatises on rhetoric may be highly useful.

One last point: There was probably no time in British history in which logic as a discipline was more closely related to rhetoric as applied to Parliament, than in the years between 1832 and 1867, the years between the two Reform Acts. 'Logic' had already appeared in the title of William Gerrard Hamilton's book of 1808 (*Parliamentary Logick*), which was, in fact, not much more than a collection of maxims and rules for effective speech. However, logic gained a previously unknown prestige in parliamentary debate, especially among front bench politicians, after 1832. Looking at my web of propositions, I can show that in parliamentary discourse concepts derived from logic between the 1830s and the 1860s to some extent took over the place that had previously been occupied by concepts like 'ancient right', 'precedent', 'antiquity', and so on.

WILLIBALD STEINMETZ

The fact is that debates on reform, especially in 1866 and 1867, turned very much around the concept of 'burden of proof', more precisely: around the question who should prove whether a reform was necessary or not, and who should prove whether the old system worked well or not. The concept of 'burden of proof' was of course an old concept, important especially in forensic rhetoric. But between the 1830s and the 1860s, through prominent speakers (and authors) like Thomas Macaulay, Richard Cobden, George Cornewall Lewis, Robert Lowe, and especially John Stuart Mill it moved right into the center of political debate. Even in caricatures, Logic was depicted as a kind of magic potion to be used when preparing for verbal warfare in the House of Commons. 19



Whether logical reasoning really was an effective means of persuading independent or doubtful members remains an open question. Contemporary voices differ in this respect. Whereas Disraeli ridiculed John Stuart Mills ratiocinations as bad oratory and called him a 'governess', other observers saw it differently.²⁰ They pointed to the profound silence and attentiveness of members while John Stuart Mill was speaking, and they claimed that he addressed himself successfully to the reasoning powers of the audience without needing any superfluous words.

What can be said with certainty is that John Stuart Mill's mode of speaking was recognized as unusual and as a challenge to established codes within the House. His intellectual authority at least made sure that one topic which had never been discussed seriously in the House before would, from 1867 onwards, be treated in earnest, namely the topic of votes for women. This, again, was reflected in caricature.²¹



In the long run, then, Mill's logical rhetoric had some effects. In the short run, however, and in the mainstream of parliamentary debate for years to come, Disraeli's and Gladstone's rhetoric, which appealed in the first place to party-allegiance and notions of leadership became the dominant code of language in the British Parliament.

To sum up my review of continuity and change in the map of languages dominating the parliamentary code: We have seen an overlapping succession of five dominant languages. First a language of 'antiquity' and 'precedent' which died out in the reform struggles of 1831/32; second an aristocratic language of 'character' and 'honour' which was still decisive for the debates in 1831/32, but lost in importance afterwards; closely linked to this, thirdly, a discourse on

'public opinion' and 'the people' which moved from something to be controlled to something impossible to control in the 1830s and beyond; fourthly, a language of 'reason' and 'logic' gaining prestige in a period of transition between the 1830s and 1860s, but never really becoming dominant; fifthly and finally, a language of 'party' and 'leadership' which has replaced the old language of 'character' and dominated parliamentary debate ever since the 1860s.

Notes

- ¹ This article is based on a paper given at the conference "Rhetoric and Conceptual Change", Tampere 28-30 June 2001. The character of an oral presentation has been retained; footnotes are kept to a minimum. For further references see my book: Das Sagbare und das Machbare. Zum Wandel politischer Handlungsspielräume England 1780-1867, Stuttgart 1993.
- ² The following quotes are from Christopher Silvester (ed.), *The Pimlico Companion to Parliament: A Literary Anthology*, London 1997, 569f.
- ³ There were only a few women members in 1932: Brian Harrison, Women in a Men's House. The Women MPs 1919-1945, in: *Historical Journal* 29/3 (1986), 623-654; Silvia Rodgers, Women's Space in a Men's House: the British House of Commons, in: Shirley Ardener (ed.), *Women and Space. Ground Rules and Social Maps*, Oxford 2nd ed. 1993, 46-69.
- ⁴ Thomas Mergel, Parlamentarische Kultur im Reichstag der Weimarer Republik. Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit 1919-1933, Bochum Habil. 2000.
- Willibald Steinmetz, Das Sagbare und das Machbare. Zum Wandel politischer Handlungsspielräume – England 1780-1867, Stuttgart 1993.
- ⁶ Still a good work for all questions concerning the Geschèon the 19th century: Josef Redlich, *Recht und Technik des Englischen Parlamentarismus*, Leipzig 1905.
- ⁷See Willibald Steinmetz, Gemeineuropäische Tradition und nationale Besonderheiten im Begriff der 'Mittelklasse'. Ein Vergleich zwischen Deutschland, Frankreich und England, in: Reinhart Koselleck u. Klaus Schreiner (ed.), Bürgerschaft. Rezeption und Innovation der Begrifflichkeit vom Hohen Mittelalter bis ins 19. Jahrhundert. Stuttgart 1994, 161-236; cf. also: Dror Wahrman, Imagining the Middle Class. The Political representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840, Cambridge 1995.

- ⁸ Cf. for this aspect: Willibald Steinmetz, 'Speaking is a Deed for You.' Words and Action in the Revolution of 1848, in: Dieter Dowe et al. (eds.), Europe in 1848. Revolution and Reform, New York/Oxford 2001, 830-868 (German version 1998).
- ⁹ Quentin Skinner, Rhetoric and Conceptual Change, in: Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought 3 (1999), 60-73, 67f.
- Régine Robin, Histoire et linguistique, Paris 1973; id. and Denise Maldidier, Polémique idéologique et affrontement discursif en 1776: les grands édits de Turgot et les remontrances du Parlement de Paris, in: Jacques Guilhaumou et al., Langages et Idéologies. Le Discours comme objet de l'Histoire, Paris 1974, 13-80.
- ¹¹ For a comparative overview of various reading-techniques including Reichardts own see: Rolf Reichardt, Historische Semantik zwischen lexicométrie und New Cultural History. Einführende Bemerkungen zur Standortbestimmung, in: id. (ed.), Aufklärung und Historische Semantik. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte, Berlin 1998, 7-28.
- ¹² Cf. Peter Schöttler, Sozialgeschichtliches Paradigma und historische Diskursanalyse, in: Jürgen Fohrmann and Harro Müller (eds.), *Diskurstheorien und Literaturwissenschaft*, Frankfurt 1988, 159-199.
- ¹³A similar position, distancing itself from certain implications of Foucault's concept of discourse, is taken by: Gareth Stedman Jones, Anglo-Marxism, Neo-Marxism and the Discursive Approach to History, in: Alf Lüdtke (ed.), Was bleibt von marxistischen Perspektiven in der Geschichtsforschung?, Göttingen 1997, 149-209, 192: "Foucault treats individuals as the assignees of subject positions within discursive practices, but he ignores the extent to which these practices changed as effects of the changing utterances and activities of these same individuals."
- ¹⁴ Catherine Strateman Sims (ed.), "Policies in Parliaments". An Early Seventeenth-Century Tractate on House of Commons Procedure, in: *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 15 (1951/52), S. 45-58.
- ¹⁵ Richard Tickell, Common-Place Arguments against Administration with obvious Answers (intended for the Use of the new Parliament), London 1780.
- ¹⁶ Cf. P.J. Waller, Laughter in the House. A Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Parliamentary Survey, in: *Twentieth Century British History* 5 (1994), 4-37; many examples of techniques to silence members can be found in: Silvester (ed.), Companion to Parliament.
- ¹⁷ William Gerrard Hamilton, *Parliamentary Logick*, ed. E. Malone, London 1808; Jeremy Bentham, *Handbook of Political Fallacies* (1824), ed. H.A. Larrabee, Baltimore 1952. Cf. also Francis Jeffrey's Review of Hamilton's book in: *Edinburg Review* 15 (Oct. 1809), 163-175, and Sidney Smith's review of Bentham's book Bin: *Edinburgh Review* 42 (Aug. 1825), 367-

WILLIBALD STEINMETZ

- 389, with the famous 'Noodle's oration', a fictitious speech made up of various anti-reforming commonplaces available at the time.
- ¹⁸ The concept of 'burden of proof' was made popular among nineteenth-century politicians by: Richard Whately, *Elements of Logic*, London 1826 (9 editions until 1850), and id., *Elements of Rhetoric*, London 1828 (seven editions until 1846); it was taken up and further elaborated by George Cornewall Lewis, *A Treatise on the Methods of Observation and Reasoning in Politics*, 2 vols., London 1852.
- ¹⁹ See the caricature "Gladiators Preparing for the Arena", in: *Punch*, 2 Febr. 1867.
- ²⁰ Cf. Waller, Laughter in the House, 19; Silvester (ed.), Companion to Parliament, 329f.
- ²¹ Cf. the caricature "Mill's Logic; or, Franchise for Females", in: *Punch*, 30 March 1867.