
Summary:

This paper discusses the Cambridge and Oxford Unions as a part of the British parliamentary culture of debate that emerged due to the strengthening of the powers of the House of Commons between the 1832 and the 1867 parliamentary reforms. I focus on transfers of parliamentary procedure and the idea of debate within the culture with special attention to the continued relevance of the classical rhetorical tradition. The effects of the pre-revolutionary humanist educational programme on modern British political culture have remained largely unnoticed despite clear signs of it in parliamentary procedure. For example, the adversarial character of Westminster politics is rooted in the humanist ideal of political debate. I compare nineteenth-century deliberative rhetoric shaped by parliamentary politics with English humanist rhetorical training and analyse their similarities and dissimilarities. From a wider perspective, the paper offers a theoretical approach that uses historical sources to make sense of political activity related to parliamentary-styled debate. My analysis of the Union debates provides a typology of political activity in the context of mid-nineteenth century Britain, but I argue that it can be used as a theoretical tool to understand debates in any deliberative assembly.

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Introduction

In the current discussion on democracy parliaments are criticised and evaluated as elected assemblies of representation. Theories of deliberative democracy, which constitute a powerful research paradigm in contemporary political theory, consider parliaments legislative assemblies that should integrate popular inputs to their decision-making.\(^1\) It is assumed that parliamentary processes should be intervened by inputs from outside in order to make the arguments more representative of the views of the voters. Consequently, and more strikingly, parliamentary politics is considered secondary to extra-parliamentary deliberation, as the concept of deliberation tends to be disconnected from rhetorical genres and from the practices of debating *pro et contra*. I propose to contribute to the discussion from the opposite angle and look at parliaments as paradigms of political and rhetorical practice.\(^2\) Besides seeing them as representative assemblies of legislation and decision-making, I emphasise the role of debate as a distinctive characteristic of parliamentary politics.

Most proponents of ‘deliberative democracy’ have turned the attention from political debate to conversation as the primary example of political communication. Deliberative democrats tend to associate rhetoric with manipulation and coercion and, therefore, opt for consensual conversation instead of debate as a public form of speech suitable to political arenas.\(^3\) This tendency has contributed to the neglect of the study of deliberative rhetoric in arenas of political debate, of which parliament serves as an example *par excellence*.

Debate, or speaking *pro et contra*, is a distinct feature of the British parliamentary political culture. It is a rhetorical paradigm that has evolved over centuries of political practice. In the nineteenth century parliamentary debate became constitutionally important, as the significance of the role of the House of Commons grew. Parliament was seen primarily as a debating arena, not a legislative assembly. This is shown, for example, in Bagehot’s description of the House of Commons in 1867 as a ‘true sovereign’ that governed

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\(^1\) As an effort to solve the dilemma of representation, some deliberative democrats have embraced the idea of ‘mini-publics’, e.g. R. E. Goodin and J. S. Dryzek, ‘Deliberative Impacts: The Macro-Political Uptake of Mini-Publics’, *Politics and Society*, 34 (2006), pp. 219-44; M. E. Warren and H. Pearse (eds.) *Designing Democratic Renewal: The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly* (Cambridge, 2008).

\(^2\) This approach has recently been considered, e.g., in S. Soininen and T. Turkka (eds.) *The Parliamentary Style of Politics* (Helsinki, 2008).

the country in the form of a public meeting.⁴ The idea has also been embedded in many British parliamentary procedure treatises which have underlined the idea that a parliamentary body is an assembly of which the primary function is not to legislate, but to debate according to certain rules.⁵ Based on this view, I highlight that there are also other ‘parliamentary bodies’ that deserve further study in the field of political science. More generally, my aim here is to propose that we should revisit parliamentary history to find new ways to make sense of deliberative rhetoric in any parliamentary-styled assembly. Thus my main argument is that the historical role of deliberative rhetoric in parliamentary politics serves to improve our understanding of democratic politics today.

The tradition of parliamentary rhetoric, especially its connections to ancient rhetoric, has been an object of study for a number of scholars who have studied early modern political thought.⁶ Peltonen, for example, has recently shown that the teachings of ancient Roman rhetoricians on deliberative rhetoric were rehabilitated by sixteenth-century English schoolmasters.⁷ The established rhetorical culture penetrated the political language of the time. The Ciceronian view that deliberative oratory was the primary model of political speech became the rhetorical paradigm.

According to Cicero and many other Roman authors, politics is a matter of persuading audience of one’s own case and of defeating the opponent. In other words, deliberative rhetoric aims at a practical end, not at answering to any abstract questions.⁸ This republican view emphasises the role of public debate and emotional appeals to audience. Thus it accepts factional strife and controversy as fundamental elements of democratic politics.⁹

In this paper my aim is to look at nineteenth-century British parliamentary political culture with a special focus on the continued influence of classical rhetoric, and

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⁸ Remer, ‘Political Oratory and Conversation’, p. 41.
show how the culture of debate was translated in the debating practices of the Union Societies at Cambridge and Oxford. I will argue that the _topoi_ of deliberative rhetoric advocated in early modern period continued to be part of the nineteenth-century political culture, even though there were some adaptations to the prevailing circumstances. I will first discuss the nineteenth-century political context in which the Union Societies became included in the British parliamentary culture of debate. I will then present examples of the Unions’ debating practices with a special focus on the adoption of parliamentary procedure. Finally, I shall present my thoughts on the continued relevance of debate and deliberative rhetoric in current discussions on democracy and parliamentary politics.

**The Union Societies and the British parliamentary culture of debate**

The Union Societies were formed by university students in early nineteenth century. The Cambridge Union was founded in 1815 and its sister organisation in Oxford in 1823. Both Unions struggled to establish themselves without financial or any other kind of support from the universities. They promoted debate at a time when it did not play a key role in the university curriculum. University authorities considered political debate suspicious due to the difficult political situation that was stirring in the country. After the Napoleonic wars a strong demand for reform rekindled and inspired various public gatherings. The government was trying to keep in control a number of extra-parliamentary movements demanding for universal suffrage, secret ballot and shorter parliaments that were considered radical demands at the time.

The political crisis finally subsided due to the passing of the Reform Act in 1832. In the nineteenth century Parliament’s constitutional role, especially the influence of the House of Commons, grew particularly strong. The idea of popular sovereignty was perceived to realise itself in the practice of ‘parliamentary government’ that gradually became the dominant constitutional arrangement after the 1832 parliamentary reform. Compared to earlier or later periods, parliamentary and popular sovereignty were not seen opposite to each other.\(^\text{1}\)

There were roughly three types of political associations relating to the parliamentary culture of the time. The extra-parliamentary movements of the 1830s and

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\(^{11}\) As an example, see the criticism against parliamentary sovereignty in late 1700s in P. Ihalainen, *Agents of the People: Democracy and Popular Sovereignty in British and Swedish Parliamentary and Public Debates, 1734-1800* (Leiden, 2010).
1840s demanding parliamentary reform attracted thousands of adherents. Such political associations — the best example of which was the Anti-Corn Law League — relied on platform oratory instead of parliamentary-styled debate.\(^\text{12}\) While these radical clubs and associations had an important role as pressure groups, they did not remain active after the Parliament started to enact the reforms they called for. Thus these movements did not pose a serious threat to the constitutional arrangement during the period. Rather, their aim was to increase parliamentary representation.\(^\text{13}\)

Second, there were a number of private political clubs that had conspicuous parliamentary connections. The most famous are the Carlton and Reform Clubs. Conservatives established the Carlton Club after the fall of the Duke of Wellington’s government in 1830, and it became the political headquarters of the Conservative party until 1853.\(^\text{14}\) The Reform Club was founded in 1836 with the intention to organise the Whigs and Radicals for the cause of reform.\(^\text{15}\) They have traditionally been described as the first political clubs, due to their connections with the formation of party organisations. This view is rather narrow and can be challenged for at least two reasons. First of all, there had previously existed political clubs formed around leading parliamentarians, such as the various Pitt Clubs. Second, what is termed ‘political’ in connection with the clubs of the time fails to take into account those that were not directly tied to party politics.

The Unions belong to a third kind of political association that had a very special relationship to parliamentary culture in Britain during the period. Unlike the two other forms of political association, i.e. extra-parliamentary movements and political clubs, these societies were not organised around any specific policy or party political agenda. Rather, they promoted debate instead of advocating platform oratory.\(^\text{16}\)

At first, the Unions functioned as debating clubs with a rather limited membership. In its early years the Oxford Union elected new members by blackballing which meant that even a single member could veto the election of a candidate. At Cambridge the Union moved to the election proceeding by ballot with a three-fourths’ majority needed for entry in 1824. By late 1840s both Unions became more open to all university students and,


\(^{13}\text{Ostrogorski, Democracy and the Organization, p. 69.}\)


\(^{16}\text{Nineteenth-century platform oratory is discussed, e.g., in J. S. Meisel, Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone (New York, 2001); G. J. Holyoake, Public Speaking and Debate. A Manual for Advocates and Agitators, new edition (Boston, 1897).}\)
thus, a growing number of undergraduates had the opportunity to participate in the Union debates and other activities.

It is perhaps no surprise that the Unions became later known as ‘training grounds’ for parliamentarians, as they were operating in an environment that had strong connections to Parliament. Since early seventeenth century the old English universities had held seats in the House of Commons. But what really distinguished the Unions from other political clubs and associations of the period was the way they used parliamentary rules and procedure in their debating practices. In the period after the 1832 Reform Act the Unions started gradually adopt parliamentary procedure in their debating practices. By the 1850s the Union Societies had grown significantly in membership and their debates attracted outside attention. At Oxford it was common to invite visitors to attend debates. Additionally, a number of newspaper announcements of the issues debated in the Unions were published accompanied by the voting results.

In the university environment Unions’ debates enabled students to get into contact with parliamentary politics. University students became knowledgeable in parliamentary procedure, which was not possible only through reading newspaper reports and magazines. In contrast to the generation of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, members of the Union Societies were professionalising in parliamentary-styled debate. This increased the number of candidates as well as their competence both as campaigners and as MPs before entering Parliament. The Unions’ minute books show, for example, expert use of parliamentary-styled motions, amendments, and adjournments. This further explains why the contemporaries considered the Unions training grounds for parliamentarians in an age when the number of contested elections was increasing due to the reforms abolishing the ‘rotten boroughs’.

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18 Both Union Societies banned publication of their debates. Despite the restriction some members of the Societies informed the meetings to newspapers. Once the Unions established themselves in academic life rules concerning visitors became less strict. The Oxford Union started to publish its proceedings of debates in 1856. At Cambridge members of the Union were given right to publish the subject of debate, the result and the names of speakers in 1868.


20 The abolition of the rotten boroughs is described in detail in C. Seymour, *Electoral Reform in England and Wales: The Development and Operation of the Parliamentary Franchise, 1832-1885* (New Haven, 1915), pp. 7-76.
The Unions’ proceedings and the significance of procedure

The ‘parliamentary government’ functioned on the authority of well-established statesmen and their skills to form party alliances, as governments became dependent on the consent of the majority of the House of Commons. Hence, by mid-nineteenth century, a parliamentarian’s reputation was dependent on his oratorical skills, and debating societies became instrumental in providing training. But the most important skill of all was the knowledge and use of rules of debate in order to get a message across in a parliamentary assembly. The debating practices of the Union Societies recorded in their minute books and rule compilations show that the procedural forms by which the debates were guided were in a key role in how the Union members understood political action.

In terms of proceedings, the Unions made a distinction between private and public meetings. The private ones largely dealt with the organisation of the societies, whereas the public debates were about topics that did not concern the Unions directly. Here I concentrate on the public debates. In the following, I will present two examples, one from each Union Society. They are shown here in the same format as they are found in the original records. Both motions are related to the same Peel government but with a rather different formulation. In Example 1, the debate topic is formulated: ‘That Her Majesty’s Ministers are unworthy of the confidence of the country’. The second example from Oxford Union presents the debate topic ‘That Sir Robert Peel’s Government has forfeited the confidence of the country’.

EXAMPLE 1: Cambridge Union public debates

Tuesday, February 24th, 1846
Mr. J. Baird, Trin. Coll. President in the chair.
Mr. E. S. Cayley, Trin. Coll, moved.

That Her Majesty’s Ministers are unworthy of the confidence of the country.

Affirmative Negative

24 Giffard, motion presented in Oxford Union, 17 April 1845, Oxford Union Society Minute Book, vol. VI.
25 The minutes provide official documentation about the debates; their topic, when the debate took place, about who had been for and who against, and, finally, what was the result. After the names of each speaker, the records will also mention the colleges they are representing.
At half past nine pm on the motion of Mr. C. Bristed, Trin. Coll. the Debate was adjourned until Tuesday the 3rd March.

Mr. Bristed in possession of the House.

**Tuesday, March 3rd, 1846**
Mr. J. Baird, Trin. Coll., President, in the chair.

Adjourned debate from Tuesday the 24th Feb.

That Her Majesty’s Minister’s [sic] are unworthy the confidence of the country.

Speakers in the negative only
Mr. C. Bristed, Trin. Coll.
Mr. A. Garfit, Trin.
Mr. W. Hale, Trin. Hall.

The Honourable Opener having replied the House divided
Ayes 50
Noes 70
Majority 20.

**EXAMPLE 2: Oxford Union public debates**

**Thursday, April 17, 1845.**
Wyatt’s Rooms.
Mr. Pott, Magdalen, President, in the Chair.
Mr. Giffard, Merton, moved:

That Sir Robert Peel’s Government has forfeited the confidence of the country.

Speakers
In the Affirmative. In the Negative.
Mr. Giffard, Merton. Mr. Wodehouse, Ch. Ch.
Mr. Higgin, St. Mary Hall.
Hon. P. Smythe, Merton.
Mr. Blackett, Ch. Ch.

Mr. Chermside, Exeter, moved an Adjournment, which was carried.

**Thursday, April 24, 1845.**
Wyatt’s Rooms.
Mr. Pott, Magdalen, President, in the Chair.

Adjourned debate.
Rev. J. F. Mackarness, Exeter, resumed the Debate.
Speakers
In the Affirmative.
Mr. Blackett, Merton.
Mr. Chermside, Exeter.

In the Negative.
Rev. J. F. Mackarness, Exeter.
Mr. Plumptre, Brasenose.

Mr. Pakington, Ch. Ch., moved the Adjournment of the Debate, which was carried.

Friday, May 2, 1845.
Wyatt’s Rooms.
Mr. Cazenove, Brasenose, President, in the Chair.

Adjourned debate.
Mr. Pakington, Ch. Ch., resumed the Debate.

Speakers
In the Affirmative.
Mr. Field, Exeter.
Mr. Cholmondeley, Oriel.

In the Negative.
Mr. Pakington, Ch. Ch.
The President.
Rev. D. P. Chase, Oriel.

Mr. Pott, Magdalen, moved the Adjournment of the Debate, which was carried.

Thursday, May 8, 1845.
Wyatt’s Rooms.
Mr. Cazenove, Brasenose, President, in the Chair.

Adjourned debate.
Mr. Pott, Magdalen, resumed the Debate.

Speakers
In the Affirmative.
Mr. Gladstone, Magdalen Hall.
Mr. Stanton, Balliol.

In the Negative.
Mr. Pott, Magdalen.
Mr. Nowell, Brasenose.
Mr. Simpson, Oriel.

Mr. Giffard replied.

Division
Ayes 39
Noes 63
Majority against 24

Both examples show that the argumentation for and against the proposed motion has not been written down at all. Rather than showing the actual words having been uttered, Unions simply recorded the proceedings without the argumentation.\(^{26}\) What it tells us is that the recording of the proceedings was taken very seriously. In other words, the proper following of proceedings was important.

\(^{26}\) This was actually a practice that was used in other debating societies as well, e.g. in the University College London Debating Society.
In both cases the original proposals have remained the motions to which the members spoke. In public debates amendments or adjournments to the original motions were commonly proposed, which gave the members opportunity to get time to know more about the topic before joining the debate. Adjournments, in particular, were proposed in order to gain more time, or, indeed, supporters to secure a majority when the house voted on the motion. Especially in Example 2, we can see that there are three adjourned debates on the same topic, which shows that efforts were made to ensure longer treatment of the matter.

In the Union Societies the agendas for public business meetings were set either by members themselves or by their standing committees. At Cambridge it was the tradition to decide among all the members present in a ‘public’ meeting after voting on a debate what questions would be debated next. In the early days of the Union, members were each in turn required to participate in formulating debate topics: ‘Every member shall open a debate in his turn, unless he provide a substitute; but a preference shall be given to the proposer of the question chosen.’ However, only two years later the rule was amended so that ‘any member may propose a subject for debate, […] but if no question be proposed, it shall be incumbent on the Treasurer and Secretary each to submit one to the choice of the Society’. The obligation to submit questions for debate was thereby transferred to the elected officers of the Society. But choosing the topics remained in the hands of the full meeting, not a committee.

At Oxford the committee (later known as the ‘standing committee’) was mainly in charge of the debating agenda. However, any member could propose a debate topic by delivering a written notice of it to the standing committee. Debate topics were, at first, chosen and announced three weeks before they were put before the meeting. The rule was, however, later changed and thereafter the announcement was required only five days before the debate, leaving less time to get acquainted with the subject. After the selection of topic was made, the question was put in the form of a motion at the next public business meeting.

Cambridge was somewhat slower in their parliamentarisation of the rules. From very early on, however, both Union Societies had already adopted the Westminster parliamentary rule.

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27 The Union Societies used the term ‘standing committee’ to mean the board or the head committee of the society. Compared to the House of Commons, they had more resemblance to cabinet government than to the actual parliamentary standing committees. While standing committees were formed as permanent committees to go through the details of bill proposals, in the cabinet government members are held responsible for their policies to the majority of the house. In this sense, the ‘standing committees’ of the Unions, which included e.g. the president, treasurer and secretary, corresponded to governments in their role and function.
31 Rules and Regulations, 1856, p. 36.
that limited members to speaking only once on the same topic, which also applied to plenary sessions of the House of Commons.\textsuperscript{32} In the debates the speakers could only speak for or against the motion proposed to the house.\textsuperscript{33}

The examples I discussed here show just a glimpse of the more consistent adoption of parliamentary procedure in the Unions’ debates. The meetings were also affected by parliamentary vocabulary and rules. The Unions used terms such as ‘house’, ‘division’, ‘motion’ and so forth. Moreover, their rules indicate the adoption of parliamentary procedure by the late 1840s. All of this suggests that the Union Societies were keen to adopt parliamentary rhetoric and put it into use in order to learn more about politics in the national level.

The Unions’ agenda setting and elements of classical rhetoric

The debating practices of the nineteenth-century Union Societies were deeply affected by the parliamentary culture of debate, which was also shown in the agenda setting of their public meetings. The setting of the agenda in the Union Societies was limited by a rule that a subject that had already been debated upon during one term was not allowed to be discussed again. That rule is also part of parliamentary procedure.\textsuperscript{34} Adopted since seventeenth century, a question once put and decided upon was not allowed to be re-introduced during the same session ‘but must stand as a judgment of the House’.\textsuperscript{35} The rule was applied with the aim of minimising surprises and unresolved questions before the House.

To follow the parliamentary style, I will focus on the formulations of motions presented in the Union Societies through a categorisation of the topoi most commonly seen in the resolutions of their debates. Rhetorically the setting of political agenda refers to \textit{inventio}. In a parliamentary setting \textit{inventio} is translated precisely as the necessity to debate either for or against an issue, where the speakers use the commonplaces particular to the debate themes to persuade their audience. In classical rhetoric commonplaces, or topoi, refer to conventions that are learnt and used in appropriate circumstances.

\textsuperscript{32} This change shows in the Cambridge Union laws in 1824 and the Oxford Union’s rules in 1837.
\textsuperscript{35} J. Hatsell, \textit{Prece

...ents of proceedings in the House of Commons; under separate titles, with observations}. In four volumes, vol. II: Relating to members, speaker, etc., fourth edition (London, 1818), p. 125.
The Union Societies debated on various themes, including political, historical and literary subjects. If we go through the topics of both Unions between the 1830s and the 1860s, we notice that, in an increasing degree, the emphasis was on daily politics. According to my interpretation, the *topoi* of the resolutions of the Unions’ debates can be divided into four categories: *vote of confidence*, *principle*, *expediency* and *character*. While making this typology, I assumed that the formulations of the debate topics were directed towards certain resolutions: the speakers of each debate spoke for and against the given motion before voting on them. Thus the typology provides a tool for understanding what kind of resolutions the debates were aimed at.

The vote taken after the debate is the moment when a motion turns into a resolution. This is called a ‘division’ which has a very special rhetorical meaning. It entails the use of deliberative rhetoric instead of conversation, as it suggests that the debates are aimed at decisions to act as opposed to open-ended discussion. The proposing of motions and voting in a parliamentary manner instead of simply raising questions for discussion was one of the key elements that defined the Union Societies as deliberative assemblies. The regular, weekly debates during academic terms ensured that adversaries for any motion would be present in the audience. Thus the Unions experienced factional strife that put the interests of the majority against the minority, which is characteristic to any deliberative assembly.

In Westminster debates political alternatives are moved by means of amendments rather than completely different motions or simple rejections of the original motion. In the course of the Unions’ public debates, original motions were amended and additions to them were moved. The amendments show that the contents of the motions were sometimes challenged during the argumentation. In short, there was competition over defining the contents of subsequent resolutions.

The motions indicate a systematic, repetitive use of certain expressions. My categorisation of the resolutions of the Union Societies public debates should be considered as abstractions of the debates, not representations of their substance. For example, a ‘vote of confidence’ directs attention to a course of action. At the same time, it refers to the actual

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36 A more detailed discussion is provided in Haapala, “That in the Opinion of This House”, esp. ch. 4.
37 The categories represent an application of the classical *topoi* of deliberative rhetoric to the parliamentary politics of nineteenth-century Britain. In debates their use is not mutually exclusive.
39 Compared to parliamentary debate, the idea of addressing the adversary is not primarily presupposed in platform oratory. See Holyoake, *Public Speaking and Debate*, p. 155.
question of political representation: whether or not the actions of elected representatives merit approval. For example, in the event that a motion was formulated ‘That Her Majesty’s Ministers are unworthy of the confidence of the country’ (Example 1), the debate for and against most probably included arguments either supporting or opposing the government in office. The object of debate, therefore, and ultimately the resolution, was a vote of confidence. Another instance of ‘vote of confidence’ is represented by Example 2: ‘That Sir Robert Peel’s Government has forfeited the confidence of the country’. It is fair to assume here that the debate on the resolution was about whether or not Peel’s government did hold the confidence of the country.

The rhetorical aspect of ‘vote of confidence’ is best illustrated by debates that included an additional motion, such as a rider or an amendment.\(^{41}\) As an example, on 9 June in 1836, the Oxford Union Society debated the motion ‘That the present ministry are undeserving of the confidence of the country’, \(^{42}\) to which a rider was moved ‘That our want of confidence is occasioned by their cowardice in shrinking from the obvious duty of destroying the present Church Establishment in Ireland, and of adapting generally the institutions of the country to the inevitable progress of Democracy’. \(^{43}\) Had the rider gained a majority of votes, it would have been added to the original motion. Rhetorically riders increased the argumentative power of resolutions. Those who would have been in favour of the original motion in the first place would, however, have to be persuaded that the reasons expressed in the rider for the disapproval of the ministry would have been the most convincing. The house was then adjourned and the debate resumed on 11 June, when a competing rider was moved:

> That our want of confidence is grounded as well on the degrading alliance with O’Connell, as on the miserable experience which the English people have had of genuine Whig policy, the supporters of which have consulted the interests of a faction at the expense of a nation, have preferred tortuous paths to an honest and straightforward course, availing themselves of temporary expedients, instead of relying on fixed principles, and have ever been found the ready tools for measures, the disastrous consequences of which they were not sagacious enough to foresee, or too unprincipled to regard.” \(^{44}\) (emphasis added, TH)

In this rider, the Whig policy in general is rhetorically portrayed as unreliable, whereas in the first one the disapprobation is directed against only one incident of which the Whig

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41 The difference between a rider and an amendment is that a rider is an addition to the original motion, while an amendment always proposes a new formulation to the original. In the event that an original motion is accepted by a majority of votes, it will be again put to the vote together with the rider. Amendments were not allowed to be in complete opposition to the original, but they present a modified alternative to the kind of resolution the original motion would have resulted in.

42 Fowler, motion presented in the Oxford Union, 9 June 1836, *Oxford Union Society Minute Book*, vol. IV.

43 Hussey, rider presented in the Oxford Union, 9 June 1836, *Oxford Union Society Minute Book*, vol. IV.

44 Cornish, rider presented in the Oxford Union, 11 June 1836, *Oxford Union Society Minute Book*, vol. IV.
government was responsible. Here the formulation is more elaborate and, thus, shows to which direction the debate was going.

The frequent appearance of the *topos* of vote of confidence in Union debates is not surprising considering the political context in which the constitutional arrangement of ‘parliamentary government’ was dominant. In fact, its use seems to mark a difference between the nineteenth-century British parliamentary oratory and the classical theories and pre-revolutionary English humanist curriculum that did not recognise a similar *topos* of deliberative rhetoric. Dealing on whether or not the ‘house’ should give its confidence to a ministry, members of the Union Society were trying to persuade the audience of whether or not they should make a resolution for or against the party that held the confidence of the majority of the House of Commons. More generally, it reflects how parliamentary debates of the period could potentially pose a threat to ministries. This also helps to explain why the contemporary press was so keen to publish even the most minimal information about the debates in the Union Societies: the result of voting for and against the present ministry was considered important because it potentially affected and reflected opinion-building inside the universities.

The formulation of the second rider above shows two additional *topoi* of deliberative rhetoric in use: ‘principle’ and ‘expediency’. The Whig policy was claimed to resort to ‘temporary expedients’ and it was named ‘unprincipled’. As in this case, the two *topoi* are often used in opposition to each other in deliberative rhetoric.

In cases where a motion suggested that a course of action should be based on a certain theory or adopted view, it is here considered a resolution based on ‘principle’. It was the most frequently employed *topos* of the four in the public debates of the Unions, as it represents a form of opinion based on political preference in relation to a course of action. An example of it is provided by a Cambridge debate in 1852: ‘That it is desirable the British possessions at the Cape of Good Hope be abandoned’. The formulation here shows that, unlike in the House of Commons, the debate topics proposed in the Unions were at times rather abstract and did not necessarily provide information about the context to which is referred. To debate whether or not something is desirable was not a question of a practical judgment on a matter of urgency (or ‘expediency’), but rather a case in which the members had to rely on their own

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45 One instance, however, occurred in 1742, which is known as the Sandy’s motion. It seems to have remained an isolated case in British parliamentary history before 1835 when the royal prerogative was abolished. For more information about Sandy’s motion, see T. Turkka, *The Origins of Parliamentarism: A Study of Sandy’s Motion* (Baden-Baden, 2007).

46 L. Stephen, motion presented in the Cambridge Union, 26 October 1852, *Cambridge Union Society Minute Book*, vol. 15.
ideals or other adopted views (or ‘principle’) and convey them to audience. The focus, however, was more on persuading adversaries rather than providing counsel, which is shown in the amendment to the motion that was then proposed: ‘That all after the word ‘That’ be omitted, and the following substituted: “this House, considering the Cape of Good Hope, in its present state, a very unprofitable possession, is of opinion, that more energetic measures for subjugating the Kaffirs should be immediately adopted”’. In the original motion there seems to be no indication of the grounds for the argument, whereas in the amendment there is a reason provided for why the possession of the Cape of Good Hope should be abandoned. Although there was no immediate contextual reference in the formulation of the motion, they clearly suggest deliberative rhetoric. The motions that include some kind of principle suggest that, in order to pass them as resolutions, the debate had to include a judgment on conduct that was more speculative than based on immediate experience. Furthermore, debates with the intention to decide about a principle often had the qualities of deliberative rhetoric with an orientation towards future or present action. The following motion provides an example of that: ‘That the government of this country ought to use all its influence in order to secure the liberties of Poland; but it would not be justified in making war with Russia on behalf of that country’. It was followed by an amendment: ‘That all after the word ‘That’ be omitted, and the following substituted: “the Government of this Country ought to abstain from all diplomatic action for the settlement of the dispute between the Russian Government and the Poles, as worse than nugatory, unless they are prepared for the alternative of War”’. In this debate it also seems that the amendment specifies the matter to which the original motion is referring. Here both the topos of ‘vote of confidence’ and that of ‘principle’ are mentioned in relation to government policies. Although they both refer to certain policy decisions, they differ in orientation: a vote of confidence either approves or disapproves of an action, and ‘principle’ sets judgment on a course of action. In short, ‘principle’ is found especially in the formulations that imply a potential action without reference to a specific case.

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47 The use of abstract questions to support one’s own arguments is an oratorical technique that was known to Cicero and his contemporaries as well, which is mentioned in Remer, ‘Political Oratory and Conversation’, p. 46. In classical rhetoric the assumption is that the deliberative mode is used in assemblies such as advisory councils that do not make sovereign resolutions of their own like parliaments.

48 Carte, amendment presented in the Cambridge Union, 26 October 1852, Cambridge Union Society Minute Book, vol. 15.


Whereas ‘principle’ rather connotes de-personalisation, the topos of ‘character’ implies personalisation of political activity. To compare rhetorically, ‘character’ focuses the attention to certain political conduct and ‘principle’ takes distance from it. Most statements concerning ‘character’ in Union debates referred to individual conduct in the present: ‘That Mr. Gladstone’s political conduct since the General Election has been dignified, consistent, and patriotic’. Gladstone represented a direct link between the Union Society and Parliament. Therefore, resolutions of the society over his conduct had particular importance.

In this particular instance the debate was adjourned three times. The first debate was adjourned and continued on 17 February when there appeared four amendments to the original motion. The first amendment presented was ‘That Mr. Gladstone’s position in the present ministry cannot as yet be sufficiently appreciated’. Hunt’s formulation here is more cautious than the one provided in the original motion. A more detailed formulation appears in the following amendment: ‘That we view with unmingled regret and disappointment the position assumed by Mr. Gladstone towards Lord Derby’s Government, and his subsequent coalition with the Whigs, as uncalled for by political exigencies, inconsistent with his whole past career, and tending to render permanent the disruption of the Conservative Party’. This amendment seems to be the most critical of them all regarding Gladstone’s conduct. It blames Gladstone for having secured his own political position by abandoning his party. Then the third amendment was proposed ‘That the general conduct of Mr. Gladstone deserved the support of the Members of this University at the last election’. The amendment here explicitly refers to the main reason why the debate was so interesting to the members of the society, which was due to the fact that Gladstone represented the University of Oxford in the House of Commons. The fourth amendment in the debate was ‘That Mr. Gladstone’s conduct in joining the present Government is honourable to himself and beneficial to the country’.

51 But in references to ‘national character’, which were common in mid-nineteenth century, it has been described as ‘a subtle move from participation to detached observation’. This involves an idea that a nation may learn from its own traditions. See S. Collini, D. Winch and J. Burrow, That Noble Science of Politics. A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History (Cambridge, 1983), p. 173.
52 Wetherell, motion presented in the Oxford Union, 10 February 1853, Oxford Union Society Minute Book, vol. VIII.
53 Hunt, amendment presented in the Oxford Union, 17 February 1853, Oxford Union Society Minute Book, vol. VIII.
54 Rogers, amendment presented in the Oxford Union, 17 February 1853, Oxford Union Society Minute Book, vol. VIII.
55 Fowler, amendment presented in the Oxford Union, 17 February 1853, Oxford Union Society Minute Book, vol. VIII.
56 Fremantle, amendment presented in the Oxford Union, 17 February 1853, Oxford Union Society Minute Book, vol. VIII.
country. In a way, it also reformulates Wetherell’s original motion, but accentuates the beneficial aspect of Gladstone’s actions. On 24 February, as the Society met again to discuss the same topic, another amendment was moved: ‘That Mr. Gladstone’s conduct in recognizing the necessity of a Liberal Government by joining the coalition has been eminently patriotic’.\(^{57}\) Here, too, the emphasis is on the benefit received from Gladstone’s conduct. The debate was disrupted and president adjourned the house. In the following meeting, on 28 February, Hunt withdrew his amendment. A vote was then taken on Rogers’ amendment, as it had been presented following Hunt’s. The majority voted in favour of it, which meant that all the other amendments and the original motion were never voted upon and, subsequently, considered lost.

The majority of the members present agreed with the formulation of Rogers’ amendment that, by joining his party together with the Whigs, Gladstone had acted contrary to his political ‘character’. Party political struggles were defining moments for gaining or maintaining a reputation as a statesman. It has also been argued that the requirement to gain certain reputation before being entrusted with political office is characteristic of English politics, in contrast to the American political system. That meant a show of skills, which, by the mid-nineteenth century, was judged by performances in parliamentary debate.\(^{58}\) In the Oxford Union debate, its resolution put Gladstone’s position into question, which, in this case, can also be interpreted as a vote of no confidence.

Finally, the *topos* of expediency refers to action that is concerned with solving a practical problem. As is the case with ‘principle’, ‘expediency’ is mostly used to argue for or against some future action. The two are often used in the same formulations: ‘That while we condemn the Norman Invasion, as in principle unjust, with reference to its effects we must pronounce it highly beneficial’.\(^{59}\) This type of formulation was traditionally associated with the Sophists: ‘Ought one to do what is expedient or what is just?’\(^{60}\) The same continues to appear in Roman rhetorical literature. In Cicero’s writings, for example, there appears a standard division between ‘honorable’ (*honestum*) and ‘expedient’ (*utile*) topics.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{57}\) Pearson, amendment presented in the Oxford Union, 24 February 1853, *Oxford Union Society Minute Book*, vol. VIII.

\(^{58}\) Grainger, *Character and Style*, p. 15.

\(^{59}\) Tackell, motion presented in Oxford Union, 20 October 1842, *Oxford Union Society Minute Book*, vol. VI.


In some Union debates ‘principle’ and ‘expediency’ were not put as opposites, but used to rhetorically complement each other. This type of formulation was presented on 13 November 1851 in the Oxford Union Society when it debated: ‘That the French Revolution of 1789 was justifiable, and has conferred the greatest benefits on mankind’. Here the first part of the motion introduces the topos of principle and the latter conveys the one of expediency. By using the expression ‘greatest benefits’, it is implied that the French Revolution was conducted with good intentions and, therefore, may be considered ‘justifiable’. Thus the proposer uses the topos of principle, not to contrast with, but to complement that of expediency. An amendment to the motion was proposed: ‘That a Revolution was necessary in France, but that it is premature to pronounce definitely concerning the good effects resulting from it, in consequence of the excesses in which the Revolution terminated’. The amendment is formulated in a way that it only accentuates ‘expediency’ because it focuses on considering the effects of the revolution. The rhetoric of necessity implies that revolution was the only available means to change the situation prevailing in France, though a cautionary remark concerning the assessment is added. Another amendment was presented when the meeting was reconvened a week later: ‘That the French Revolution has conferred the greatest benefits on mankind’. Unlike the original motion, where ‘principle’ was used to support ‘expediency’, here it has been altogether abandoned. The formulation of the second amendment seems to suggest that the practical outcome of the revolution itself should be commended.

Whenever ‘expediency’ is the object of a debate the attention is on policy-making, the weighing of necessities and political consequences for future action. It is about persuading in terms of political circumstances, not just in the level of what is justified or not, but what seems to be necessary and therefore beneficial in a present context. The singularity of parliamentary-styled motions is that they are very concrete. In other words, the rhetoric of expediency in the formulation of motions in the Union Societies is strongest evidence that they were deliberative assemblies with connections to parliamentary politics.

Even though the topoi are not all-inclusive and may even overlap, they do indicate starting points for further analysis of how political agency was rhetorically conceived in the Union Societies. All of them belong to the field of deliberative rhetoric, but

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62 Göschen, motion presented in Oxford Union, 13 November 1851, *Oxford Union Society Minute Book*, vol. VII.
63 Butler, amendment presented in Oxford Union, 13 November 1851, *Oxford Union Society Minute Book*, vol. VII.
64 Nussey, amendment presented in Oxford Union, 20 November 1851, *Oxford Union Society Minute Book*, vol. VII.
representing different aspects of it. A ‘vote of confidence’ is evaluation of future action in terms of representation, and action based on ‘character’ is judged by the skills acquired by the actor and the action itself. ‘Principle’ refers to the desirability of political activity on some general grounds, and ‘expediency’ on the basis of necessity or utility.

The rhetorical topoi of expediency and principle can be found in classical rhetorical treatises. ‘Principle’ is close to the classic rhetorical topos of ‘honestas’ as opposed to the political convenience, or ‘utilitas’, that ‘expediency’ represents. These two topoi were systematically taught in early seventeenth-century English schools where schoolboys learned that the best arguments in deliberative rhetoric focused on the themes of honesty and utility. Peltonen’s study suggests that the pre-revolutionary English rhetorical education was not merely about repeating the classical instructions but about learning how to apply them to political and civil matters. The aim of this humanist schooling was to produce ‘leaders’ and ‘good Common-wealths men’. By eighteenth century this type of rhetorical education was lost. The eighteenth-century ‘grand style’ oratory of Chatham and Burke was more epideictic than deliberative. It was more oriented to the credibility of the speakers than to the motions on the political agenda they supported in debates. In Gladstone’s posthumously published essay on public speaking (1838) the absence of rhetorical education in the British educational system at the time was described both surprising and remarkable. While writing after entering Parliament, he maintained that a student of public speaking should particularly observe how oratory was practised in the House of Commons. This argument was not put forward for the first time, but he was actually echoing the views of the early modern writers who suggested that one should take note of parliamentary speeches in order to learn about rhetoric and speech-making.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have discussed transfers of parliamentary procedure and the idea of debate in British nineteenth-century debating culture. In doing so I have proposed that the study of

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65 It is worth noting that this evaluation is based on past experience which has to be conducted in the present. In that sense one might say that a ‘vote of confidence’ incorporates all time dimensions, the past, the present and the future.
parliamentary politics and democracy should take into account the role of debate. In contemporary political theory the concept of deliberation has been separated from the rhetorical genres to the detriment of failing to see the historical and political relevance of deliberative rhetoric in parliamentary politics. My aim here has been to show that it is important to consider the rhetorical practices in political theory if we want to make sense of the political activity that takes place in deliberative assemblies.

By looking at the debating practices in use at Union Societies we can conclude that they had similar forms of deliberative rhetoric than were available in the early modern period. During the nineteenth-century the Union Societies became known as ‘training grounds’ for statesmen. They were formed at a time when the university education did not cover the kind of rhetorical training that had been available in the early modern period when standard textbooks of rhetoric in pre-revolutionary grammar schools advised schoolboys how to make orations ‘for or against any legislative proposal’. In this paper I have shown that the parliamentary forms of proceeding do preserve rhetorical elements of the past. The classical topoi of utilitas and honestas are comparable to expediency and principle, and the use of them suggests that the Union Society debates had links to the rhetorical tradition followed by British parliamentary culture since Renaissance. The topoi of character and vote of confidence, however, did not appear in the early modern humanist curriculum, which makes them more characteristic to the political culture of the period.

The typology of political activity I have put forward in this paper provides tools, not only for finding the connections of the use of deliberative rhetoric of the past, but also for making sense of the practices of political debate in any deliberative assembly. The debate aspect of parliamentary politics directs the attention to the political practices available in deliberative assemblies guided by procedure. It would be a mistake to blame parliaments and the Union Societies for elitism and exclusiveness when, in fact, the Union debates show that parliamentary politics can be adopted by anyone. There are further examples of this in the British debating culture. In late 1880s it was reported that nearly one hundred mini-parliaments modelled after the House of Commons had been formed all over the country. They were formed to instruct anyone who wanted to learn about parliamentary debate and forms of proceeding. This phenomenon goes to show that the learning of procedure outside Parliament could be an alternative way of promoting democratic politics today. It would not

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71 Peltonen, Rhetoric, Politics and Popularity, p. 54.
only give a sense of equal opportunity to participate in politics but could also increase interest in the workings of local councils and other political assemblies including parliaments.