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Taru Haapala

Political Rhetoric in
the Oxford and
Cambridge Unions,
1830–1870

palgrave
macmillan

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For my parents

PREFACE

It is undeniable that the Oxford and Cambridge Unions had an important role to play in nineteenth-century British political culture. Despite that, or perhaps for that very reason, they have received very little scholarly attention from the field of political studies. It has been generally accepted that the Unions were, and to a large extent still remain, training grounds for statesmen. But what kind of training did the Unions offer? And what was the mechanism through which their members became knowledgeable of the parliamentary way of doing politics? These are the questions this study seeks to answer.

In previous literature the Unions' debates have been considered more as curiosities of parliamentary history rather than sources for political research in their own right. The book does not aim at being a work on political or associational history. Rather the innovation here is to combine the study of politics as well as the analysis of rhetorical practices to research on historical documents. The Unions are treated as models of deliberative assemblies that have adopted parliamentary rules of debate. The study uses Unions' records as primary research material in order to find new ways to make sense of their deliberative rhetoric.

The contribution of this book is twofold. First, it is a study on the debates of the Union Societies of the two oldest English universities that became considered parliamentary training grounds during the nineteenth century. The book includes the first comprehensive analysis of the debating practices in the Unions. And, second, it offers a rhetorical reading and conceptual tools to understand debate in deliberative assemblies. It creates typologies of rhetorical commonplaces in the Union debates as

well as in their internal disputes over procedure. They can be used both for comparative studies on parliamentary cultures and other deliberative assemblies as well as to understand their internal political struggles.

The original idea for the study was inspired by my interest in British political culture and its rhetorical tradition. As a postgraduate at the University of Jyväskylä I became fascinated with studies that had previously shown how indebted the political culture was to Renaissance humanism. Under the supervision of Kari Palonen I became familiar with the work of Quentin Skinner with whose rehabilitation of Renaissance rhetoric I thoroughly sympathise.

The initial steps for this study were taken when I was visiting The Centre for the Study of the History of Political Thought at Queen Mary University of London as an associate research student in 2008–2009. At the time I became increasingly interested in the nineteenth-century British political culture. After discussing my interests with Professor Skinner I became convinced that they were worth pursuing. Without his encouragement this book would probably never have been written.

While staying in London I was mostly working at the British Library whose helpful staff kindly assisted me with finding all the relevant literature I needed for my study. Above all else, however, I would like to extend my most sincere gratitude to the Oxford and Cambridge Union Societies who gave me the kind permission to use their original records for my study. I am also grateful for the help of the staff at the Cambridge University Library and the Oxfordshire History Centre in Cowley, which hold the Union archives.

Professor Palonen's Academy of Finland research project, *The Politics of Dissensus. Parliamentarism, Rhetoric and Conceptual History* (2008–2012) at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, provided the ideal environment for conducting my study. Together with the Department's Centre of Excellence in Political Thought and Conceptual Change (2006–2011), with which I was also affiliated, it organised international conferences and workshops for PhD students that became especially valuable for further learning and testing out my ideas. The cooperation with other international research projects, especially *The Rhetorics of Democracy* (FFI2008-00039) and *The Civic Constellation* (FFI2011-23388) directed by Professor José María Rosales, University of Málaga, both funded by the Spanish National Research Plan, offered many occasions for discussions and revision of my thesis.

For helpful comments and suggestions regarding my work I would like to especially thank Alan Finlayson, Claudia Wiesner, Cornelia Ilie, Pasi Ihalainen, Jussi Kurunmäki, Rosario López, Hanna-Mari Kivistö and Evgeny Roshchin. I would also like to thank the Kone Foundation for a postdoctoral scholarship (2013–2014) and the Academy of Finland Distinguished Professorship research project Transformations of Concepts and Institutions in the European Polity (TRACE) directed by Professor Niilo Kauppi.

In the book I have used online databases and resources that have become available in recent years. They have offered me the opportunity to find digitalised sources and reference books which otherwise would have been hard or even impossible to locate in Finland. For example, the *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers* database has been crucial for the collection of sources. Likewise, the nineteenth-century alumni records of Oxford and Cambridge Universities are now available online, which have provided me relevant background information for Union members.

For me, writing this study has been a journey into British parliamentary culture and a learning process in coming to understand the connection between rhetorical strategies and the rules of debate. I have attempted to show the extent to which nineteenth-century Union training contributed to the entire culture of debate. However, it has been equally important for me to illustrate the individual performances of political agency. And, therefore, some parts of the book include detailed investigations into the politics practised in the Unions. It has also been my intention to accentuate the fact that not all Union members became professional parliamentarians. According to my view, they all became more or less exposed to the parliamentary way of acting politically as the Unions adopted House of Commons terminology and procedure. Although the Unions did not turn all their members into professionals, they certainly gave them sense of what kinds of skills were required of a politician to operate in any kind of deliberative assembly of the period.

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