CHAPTER ONE

BRITISH AND SWEDISH PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES IN A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLITICAL VOCABULARIES

Historians have traditionally used the records of eighteenth-century parliamentary and estate debates to write the political history of the respective states and representative institutions. Particular speeches have occasionally been summarized in analyses of political thought and action.\(^1\) However, there have been few analyses of eighteenth-century parliamentary debates as such. As Christopher Reid has pointed out:

Parliamentary discourse—by any reckoning one of the central elements of British political culture—has never been systematically surveyed. Most studies of British political history make extensive reference to parliamentary debates, without paying much attention to their formal and rhetorical qualities.\(^2\)

Peter Jupp has pointed out likewise with reference to interaction between print culture and Parliament:

The impact on the substance of parliamentary debate of the flowering of political and moral philosophy, the increased public knowledge of parliamentary speeches, and the exponential growth of information about all aspects of actual or potential policy has never been the subject of the research that it deserves.\(^3\)

Relations between the printed literature and Parliament are, however, a field that has recently gained increasing attention among historians of political culture.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Christie 1962; Pole 1966; Dickinson 1977; Goodwin 1979; Morgan 1988; An earlier version of this chapter has been published in Ihalainen 2008.

\(^2\) Reid 1985, 96–98. The strategy chosen by Reid for studying Edmund Burke’s selected parliamentary speeches is that of dramatic criticism, paying attention not only to the text but also to the conditions and conventions governing its production, in the same way as the stage, the prevailing styles, the expectations of the audience and so on govern a dramaturgical text. See also Reid 2000.

\(^3\) Jupp 2006, 207.

\(^4\) Peacey 2007, 2.
It is evident that parliamentary records constitute much more than mere documents recording the actual actions of certain leading politicians. They provide an extensive record of the practical language of politics in the past, and a contextual analysis of the language of parliamentary debates enables an understanding of long-term continuities and changes in the meanings of key political concepts at the macro level of each political culture. This concerns particularly concepts that were frequently used in representative institutions and which actually constituted part of the justification for the existence of these institutions in the first place. For this kind of analysis, the parliamentary and estate records provide hundreds of instances of how leading political speakers and decision-makers used concepts in the most respected political forum of each country. At the same time, they reveal a number of individual speech acts in both their long-term and their temporary contexts.

Furthermore, parliamentary debates provide us with sources that are directly comparable and which can be used to write comparative long-term histories of key political vocabularies in emerging parliamentary regimes. Such simultaneous case studies make it easier to reveal both common European trends in the development of political cultures during the modernization process and the context-related features peculiar to each political culture. Even though there were considerable differences in the procedure, content and recording of parliamentary debates, similar questions were discussed and the concepts used in them were interrelated. It is possible to carry out analyses of nearly simultaneous debates or debates involving parallel conceptual changes in different national contexts. Such analyses increase our understanding of both universal European and specific national conceptual developments. More particularly, they add to our knowledge of the language of politics 'below' abstract political theory, in the practical everyday use.

Records of parliamentary debates provide us with sources which permit a considerable degree of contextualization of individual uses of key political terms—or of the performance of speech acts—within specific debates and particular arguments. The political context of the speaking situation, the background of the speakers and the potential reactions to the speeches expressed in the published literature are reasonably easy to reconstruct on the basis of existing research. The presence of the reactions, counterarguments and conceptual moves of the other speakers in the chamber make it possible to reconstruct the