Honour and reason: competing ideals of debating in nineteenth-century Europe

Velde, H. te

Parliaments, Estates & Representation
Parlements, États & Représentation

Parliaments, Estates and Representation

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rper20

Honour and reason. Competing ideals of debating in nineteenth-century Europe

Henk te Velde

To cite this article: Henk te Velde (2024) Honour and reason. Competing ideals of debating in nineteenth-century Europe, Parliaments, Estates and Representation, 44:1, 21-33, DOI: 10.1080/02606755.2024.2308344

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02606755.2024.2308344

Published online: 02 Feb 2024.

PARLIAMENTS, ESTATES & REPRESENTATION
2024, VOL. 44, NO. 1, 21–33
https://doi.org/10.1080/02606755.2024.2308344

Honour and reason. Competing ideals of debating in nineteenth-century Europe

Henk te Velde

Institute for History, Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In around 1900 debating rules came under attack. This special issue examines debates in parliaments as well as popular meetings. Changes in parliamentary ideals and the rise of democracy put the rules of parliamentary debate under pressure. This article considers the question whether there existed an alternative ideal to reasonable parliamentary debating. As a competing ideal for political debates, this contribution discusses the agonistic notion of honour. Honour is the claim to be respected by significant others. Honour is competitive, gendered, public and theatrical, and ought to be defended in a fair fight. Honour is local rather than universal, i the exclusive code of a certain community, a relevant 'honour group'. Using examples from Britain, France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands and from parliaments as well as political popular meetings, this article argues that honour helps us to understand public and parliamentary meetings in around 1900.

KEYWORDS

Honour; reason; parliaments; popular meetings; 1870–1914; deliberative democracy; agonism; orality

In this special issue, different forms of debates in parliaments as well as popular meetings are analysed and also contrasted. The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century stands out as a period when debating rules came under attack. Changing parliamentary ideals and the rise of democracy put the formal rules of parliamentary debate under pressure. What was the use of reasonable debating and reasonable decision making if a large part of the population remained excluded? Was reasonableness more than an ideal of the social elite which excluded the lower classes? How should politicians and citizens try to solve the tension between procedural fairness and reasonableness, on one hand, and accessibility of political debates in and outside parliament, on the other? The formal rules for parliamentary debating could be presented as emanating from an ideal of exchange of reasonable arguments with the purpose of reaching common decisions in the general interest. In the 1980s, political philosopher Michael Walzer described what he called 'the rule of reasons': 'Citizens come into the forum with nothing but their arguments. All non-political goods have to be deposited

CONTACT Henk te Velde h.te.velde@hum.leidenuniv.nl Institute for History, Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, Netherlands

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

outside: weapons and wallets, titles and degrees'.[1] Such formal argumentation rules seem to be egalitarian, but they promote reason rather than access to democratic politics. The spectacular and often somewhat unruly popular meetings of the turn of the century, on the other hand, appear to have been open, accessible and in a certain sense democratic, but also more prone to disturbances of the free exchange of arguments. Was their accessibility more than the absence of parliamentary rules or even all reasonable rules of debate? Did popular meetings actually present a different *ideal* rather than just a different, and less organized *practice* of debating? In this contribution, I will discuss ideals of debating and consider the question whether there existed a real alternative to reasonable parliamentary debating around 1900. In an attempt to discover a competing ideal for political debates, I will dwell on the notion of honour. The empirical material presented in this contribution should help in the discussion of such a competing ideal rather than pretend to offer a complete overview or an in-depth case study.

In a recent interdisciplinary edited volume about honour in the modern world, philosopher Dan Demetriou proposes to study democratic debating from the perspective of agonistic honour.[2] As theorists of democracy have been arguing,[3] democracy is not only about harmony, consensus and agreeing to disagree, but also about really fighting for your opinions – and many opinions are just irreconcilable. Therefore, the honour of battle, agonistic honour, should be considered as a part of democratic politics, and more in particular democratic debating, Demetriou says. He describes a 'standard model of civil discourse' aiming at open-mindedness, using various viewpoints and verified information, appreciating professional knowledge and avoiding fallacies and manipulation, and then contrasts it with 'agonistic civil discourse'. Agonistic civil discourse takes a different point of departure. According to the perspective of agonistic civil discourse, it is not realistic, and perhaps not even desirable, to assume that the outcome of all or even most political debates will be a reasoned agreement. It makes much more sense to aim for 'respectful and meaningful contest'. Debaters are champions of their cause who seek status, and who therefore respect the champions of other causes and might adopt a sports mentality which respects public norms of fairness. In such a perspective, ideological disagreement is neither upsetting nor immoral. In debates, opponents will normally not be convinced; therefore in political fights at least a sporting spirit should prevail. This works best if honour is the central value. The honourable approach requires contenders to pick on someone the same size, or a bit bigger.

Demetriou is not a historian and he uses his two models as a starting point for a proposal to ameliorate the quality of current public debate, formal political debates and the media in the United States. It is not difficult to see, though, how the two models could be used to analyse late nineteenth-century debates, in parliaments as well as popular meetings. At first glance, it may seem most appropriate to use the 'standard model' to study parliaments and the agonistic model for popular meetings, but I will argue that the honour codes of the

[1] M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice. A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York, 1983), p. 304. On the same page, Walzer mentions 'inclusiveness' as a democratic ideal.

[2] D. Demetriou, 'Fighting Together. Civil Discourse and Agonistic Honor', in D. Demetriou and L. M. Johnson (eds), *Honor in the Modern World. Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Lanham, 2016), pp. 21–41.

[3] Demetriou, 'Fighting Together', p. 40, endnote 1. Cf. among other things S. Chambers, 'Behind Closed Doors. Publicity, Secrecy, and the Quality of Deliberation', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, (2004), pp. 389–410; C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York, 2009) and other work by the same author; I. M. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 36–51.

second model as well as some elements of the standard model were omnipresent in debates, wherever they took place. I am not only interested in what actually happened, but also, and perhaps first and foremost, in the existing and prevailing ideals and norms.

Parliamentary rules

Around 1800, Jeremy Bentham wrote the first authoritative theoretical reflection about the ideals of parliamentary debating. Bentham drew his ideal rules from the British parliament, because 'the very rules that suggested themselves as necessary to every assembly, turned out to be the very rules actually observed' in British Parliament: 'never was the accord more perfect between reason and experience'.[4] Around 1800, disagreeing in public about political matters was something new and disturbing for most of Europe. In early modern Europe, public harmony was the norm, and even the British Parliament which, of course, was a forum for debate, just connived at publicity and only officially allowed newspaper reporting at the end of the eighteenth century.[5] During the nineteenth century, on the other hand, public debating had become a normal and prestigious practice, and the social elite learned how to debate at the Oxford Union and the universities, in societies and parliaments.[6] A, perhaps first and foremost British, debating ideal had developed of discovering the truth and deciding crucial issues for the country in a witty and entertaining aristocratic tournament. When the new revolutionary French National Assembly wanted to learn how to debate in public around 1790, they looked at the British Parliament for guidelines, and asked Jeremy Bentham for guidance. The philosopher and theoretical jurist then wrote the treatise which was much later published, in a different and extended form, under the title *Political Tactics*. British practice demonstrated that you needed rules in order to ensure that discussions would be cool and orderly instead of resulting in personalities or 'ineffectual struggles'. Rules were also needed to reduce the 'seductions of eloquence and ridicule'. These seductions were also the reason why 'females' should not be admitted; otherwise 'everything would take an exalted tone' and 'brilliant or tragical excitement' would be omnipresent.[7]

It was also important to shield parliamentary discussions from the direct influence of the general public. Fortunately, in a representative system the people would mostly *read* 'the speeches of the orators' in the newspapers, 'a medium which cools them', instead of listening to 'the passionate harangues of a seditious demagogue'. Bentham warned against passions, seductions and excitement. At the same time, he rejected 'written discourses', because a parliament was not – and should not be – 'a society of academicians'. Instead, a parliament was 'a large assembly of enlightened men who animate and excite each other, who attack without sparing each other'.[8] Wit and repartee were important in parliaments, Bentham felt. Within reason, he seems to argue, excitement was good for a parliament. How to strike a balance? In another study, Bentham analysed the tricks used

[4]J. Bentham, *Political Tactics*, M. James, C. Blamires and C. Pease-Watkin (eds) (Oxford, 1999), p. 1.
[5]For example, P. D. G. Thomas, 'The Beginning of Parliamentary Reporting in Newspapers, 1768–1774', *The English Historical Review* 74, (1959), pp. 623–36.
[6]For example, T. Haapala, *Political Rhetoric in the Oxford and Cambridge Unions, 1830-1870* (London, 2016).
[7]Bentham, *Political Tactics*, pp. 73 and 64, respectively. Cf. K. Palonen, 'Parliamentary Procedure as an Inventory of Disputes: A Comparison between Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Erskine May', *Res Publica. Revista de Filosofía Política*, 27, (2012), pp. 13–23. See for context, among other things, C. Blamires, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Benthamism* (Houndmills, 2008).
[8]Bentham, *Political Tactics*, p. 132.

by the elite of insiders to win parliamentary debates,[9] and he rejected the privileges of the 'ins' and the accompanying crude class bias. However, during the first half of the nineteenth century it was quite a common idea that British parliament and its debates were the product of an aristocratic society, and were dependent on an aristocratic culture of civilized and experienced gentlemen.[10]

Bentham was referring to two features of parliamentary debates as they appeared in British Parliament: on the one hand, attempts at reaching decisions and even discovering the 'truth' according to procedures which removed undue pressure and created a level playing field; on the other, debates as games one wanted to win – prestigious, gendered and aristocratic pastimes with rules of their own. Discussing these two faces of parliamentary debating, helps us to discover the different and sometimes conflicting ideals that are at stake in parliaments, and allows us to see parliamentary debates as belonging to the same category as debates in popular meetings, though perhaps at opposing ends of a more or less continuous line.

The standard model: deliberative democracy

What Demetriou calls the standard model is, in fact, a short summary of 'deliberative democracy'.[11] From the 1990s through the 2010s several versions of deliberative democracy were the most prominent normative theories of democracy, tantamount to a kind of standard model of democratic politics. Based on the theoretical work about the principles of politics and political communication of, among others, the philosophers John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, a large number of political theorists contributed to the discussion.[12] They wrote about democratic deliberations in general and were mostly interested in present issues and in democratic government. According to deliberative democracy, the core of democratic government – to quote one of the more influential definitions – is 'free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify[ing] decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible', and that are based on 'mutual respect', in short: 'the idea that citizens or their representatives owe each other mutually acceptable reasons for the laws they enact'.[13]

Reasonable democratic discussion is not an easy matter, of course. It is, according to an empirical study, 'a communicative process in which participants are considered equals, open to having their preferences shaped and transformed through reflective public reasoning', and which needs a 'deliberative capacity', consisting of at least 'diversity of viewpoints and openness to preference shifts'.[14] If everybody is agreed beforehand

[9]Later, in a different form, published as *Bentham's Handbook of Political Fallacies*, H.A. Larrabee (ed.), (Baltimore, 1952).
[10]British aristocratic government was allegedly in decline, which is why the famous conservative Friedrich Julius Stahl in his *Die gegenwärtigen Parteien in Staat und Kirche. Neunundzwanzig akademische Vorlesungen* (Berlin, 1863), pp. 160–2 (text from 1850 to 1851) thought that parliamentary government which had only proven to be really successful in Britain had had its day by the middle of the nineteenth century.
[11]See the in-depth overviews of deliberative democracy in A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, and M. Warren (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford, 2018). An accessible short introduction is to be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deliberative_democracy#:~:text=Deliberative%20democracy%20or%20discursive%20democracy,decision%2Dmaking%20and%20majority%20rule.
[12]See the overview in A. Floridia, *From Participation to Deliberation. A Critical Genealogy of Deliberative Democracy* (Colchester, 2017).
[13]A. Gutmann and D. Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, NJ, 2004) p. 7, chapter 2, and passim.
[14]C. M. Hendriks, J. S. Dryzek, and C. Hunold, 'Turning Up the Heat: Partisanship in Deliberative Innovation', *Political Studies* 55, (2007), pp. 362–83; esp. p. 366. This is an example of practical research and of the direction deliberative democracy has more recently been taking.

or if they are not open to being convinced, there is no real deliberation. Another important element in these definitions is that discussions are a matter of *public* reasoning; they should be 'generally accessible'.

Both pluralism and publicity belong to the almost self-evident qualities of not only today's liberal democratic politics but also of the liberal representative system in the period before electoral democracy, as for instance, the work of the French doctrinaire-liberal leader and historian François Guizot demonstrates.[15] Deliberative theorists have tried to soften the potential detrimental effects of pluralism and publicity by advocating mutual respect instead of enmity or aggressive antagonism, and quiet reasonableness instead of theatricality or playing to the gallery. It proved to be quite difficult to get the right conditions for such mutual respect and quiet reasonableness in a public debate. Deliberative theorist Jon Elster famously wrote a comparative study of debates during the American and French revolutions, to test the effect of publicity. He argued that the debates behind closed doors about the American Constitution ran the risk of leading to *bargaining* instead of *arguing*, but he thought the debates at the Federal Convention were of high quality, free from cant and grounded in rational argument. The public discussions in the French National Assembly of 1789 were characterized by theatrical rhetoric, demagoguery and ideological overbidding, but public deliberations tended to have 'more equitable outcomes'.[16] Demagoguery, theatricality and unrestrained antagonism were seen as risks. But were they only risks or problems? As mentioned above, critical theorists have argued that deliberative democracy ignores or underestimates the indispensable positive qualities of agonism, in the sense of a stylized and regulated conflict.

Empirical deliberative democracy research has paid more attention to mini-publics of ordinary citizens than to parliaments as an institutional deliberative environment. In fact, early theorists of deliberative democracy such as Jürgen Habermas were interested in civil society and other forums and disregarded parliaments. The few studies that exist suggest that parliaments are poor in deliberative quality, because of their polarized debates, their lack of mutual respect and their extreme competition, which often preclude protagonists from changing their preferences during debates. More often than not, arguments are hardly exchanged, but just presented.[17] Was it any different in the nineteenth century? Since at least Carl Schmitt's *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*,[18] scholars have often assumed that the nineteenth century was a period of 'real', reasonable debates, not subject to party dictates or extreme polarization, but was it? Bentham wrote that parliaments were 'a large assembly of enlightened men who animate and excite each other, who attack without sparing each other'. This was not only true in practice; Bentham praised it as an ideal. Whereas deliberative democracy's ideal comes close to a civilized and rather consensual conversation, parliamentary debates are orderly and follow procedure, but they are organized on the basis of pro et contra reasoning, not consensus.

[15]F. Guizot, *The History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe* (Indianapolis, IN, 2002), first French edition dates from 1851.
[16]J. Elster, 'Arguing and Bargaining in two Constituent Assemblies', *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law* 2, (2000), pp. 345–421; different versions of this study exist.
[17]B. Dolný, 'Possible Application of Deliberative Democracy in Parliament', *Human Affairs* 21, (2011), pp. 422–36.
[18]C. Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, Ellen Kennedy, trans. (Cambridge MA, 1988; original publication 1923).

Not only the practice of parliamentary debating, but also its ideal, involves confrontation of opposing views, in particular in the British case.[19]

Parliaments aim at public reasoning by exchanging arguments in debates, and they cherish at least some ideals of deliberative democracy. Does another model of public arguing, centred on honour, throw some additional light, not only on the practice of parliamentary and public debating, but also on its ideals? Let us now turn to a discussion of honour as an ideal.

Debating, honour and parliaments

The concept of honour helps us to understand the practices and ideals of debating, even though it is an elusive concept, used in many different contexts by many different disciplines.[20] Its use as a modern scholarly concept started in anthropology, where it was used to characterize mainly Mediterranean masculine codes. It was subsequently adopted by historians in order to analyse the culture of European society of the early modern age. Since then, the growth of individualism, ideas about human dignity, and disillusion with modern warfare had allegedly led to losing a great deal of the motivational force of honour in the modern age, in particular after the First World War.[21] It has often been assumed that honour was first and foremost an aristocratic and gentleman's code which had its last real revitalization during the Victorian age. Seen from this perspective, debates in nineteenth-century parliaments, and in particular in the rather aristocratic British Parliament, could be interpreted as battles over honour, but to my knowledge such an interpretation does not really exist.

According to an often-quoted definition, 'honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society'.[22] It is a 'right to respect',[23] a claim to be respected by significant others. Honour is for public use; it is competitive and theatrical. Honour is based on codes that should be kept, honour is fragile and its codes ought to be defended. Insults and other infringements on your honour should be countered; they should not go unpunished. Honour is distinctly gendered, to the extent that it often barred women from freely participating in public politics. Honour is local rather than universal and part of a face-to-face culture; it is not a universal code, but the exclusive code of a certain community, a relevant honour group. Honour is social: conflicts within an honour group might be compared to quarrels in the family; they do not break but rather reinforce or even constitute social relations.[24] Last but not least, honour

[19]As Kari Palonen has convincingly argued in numerous publications, mainly on the basis of the British Parliament, for example, K. Palonen, *Parliamentary Thinking. Procedure, Rhetoric and Time* (London, 2019); cf. my review of the book in *Parliaments, Estates & Representation* 40, (2019), pp. 372–3.

[20]For a first orientation, see for instance C. Stewart, 'Honor and Shame', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2nd edn, Elsevier, 2015), pp. 181 ff.

[21]J. Bowman, *Honor. A History* (New York, 2006) is a quite recent example of this idea (p. 7: 'Today, cultural honor survives only in a degraded form (…) among urban gangs and the hip-hop culture'). P. Berger, 'On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor', *European Journal of Sociology* 11, (1970), pp. 339–47, is the classic reference for a modernization approach to honour.

[22]J. Pitt-Rivers, 'Honour and Social Status,' in J.G. Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago, 1966), quoted in, for example, F. Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago and London, 1994), p. 13; A. Welsh, *What is Honor? A Question of Moral Imperatives* (New Haven, CT and London, 2008) p. 9; P. Olsthoorn, *Honor in Political and Moral Philosophy* (Albany, 2015) p. 8.

[23]Stewart, *Honor*, p. 21. Probably the most quoted study of honour in the last decades.

[24]T. Sommers, *Why Honor Matters* (New York, 2018), pp. 17, 90.

competitions are supposed to be fair and chivalrous.[25] Fair play assumes explicit or implicit rules. Until the First World War, duels were fought as ritualized fights over honour, and more in general, tournaments were the ideal-typical combats about honour.

If the House of Commons was just a theatre of reason for the exchange of rational arguments, it could be assumed that the nineteenth-century House was ruled only by the norms of deliberative democracy. Then it becomes hard to explain, however, why it was so intolerable 'to lose the game' or that 'quick retaliation on a victorious adversary' was inevitable if one wanted to retain one's position, that deprecating jokes with sexual innuendo were so successful and that it was a common strategy to rise in the pecking order of the House by personally attacking its leaders.[26] This type of behaviour is much easier to explain if we consider the House of Commons as an honour group with its own masculine honour code. The competitive, public and theatrical aspects of nineteenth-century parliamentary politics gave honour an important role, also because parliaments were more often than not rather closed face-to-face communities. One must retaliate if attacked personally; one could not let attacks pass, at the risk of losing one's reputation or honour as member of the prestigious group of MPs. Of course, parliaments were a forum for debates and involved in political decision making and therefore much more than just honour groups, but it could be illuminating to look at them that way, too.

In the rather closed nineteenth-century parliaments, male bonding played its part. That was true not only for British Parliament, but even for a small and very sober parliament such as the Dutch one, which consisted in the nineteenth century of sixty to hundred members. The Dutch Parliament was internationally regarded as an example of civilized, though slightly dull discussion.[27] Even in the Dutch Parliament though, dull members could become the laughing stock of their colleagues and become a victim of a schoolboyish sense of humour and of sexual innuendo. One day, a very well-mannered, rather pedantic old member who was always assisted by a valet, was fooled by telling him that he had a hole in his coat. Somebody else jokingly said that that was still better than having a coat in his hole.[28] The old member was offended, his 'eloquence suddenly stopped'. If you know that the Dutch word '*jas*' or coat was a byword for a manservant, the meaning of the apparently silly joke is obvious. Humiliation and male honour were at stake.

In a completely different setting, honour also played a part in the much larger French Parliament. At the end of the nineteenth century, scenes of incredible chaos were seen in the parliament of the French Third Republic. On a number of occasions, hundreds of parliamentarians were shouting and calling each other names. Complete battles were fought between the right and left, not as parliamentary tournaments but as actual fist fights. When during debates about Dreyfus socialist leader Jean Jaurès was accused of belonging to a Jewish conspiracy, Jaurès called his rightwing opponent a rogue and a

[25]For example, Bowman, *Honor*, pp. 311, 324; Olsthoorn, *Honor*, p. 27.
[26]John Morley about Palmerston, quoted by P. S. Meisel, 'Humour and Insult in the House of Commons. The Case of Palmerston and Disraeli', *Parliamentary History* 28, (2009), pp. 228–45; esp. p. 235. Sexual innuendo: Canning vs Hobhouse and Hobhouse vs Canning, M. Bevis, *The Art of Eloquence. Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 79–80.
[27]A. Reynaert, *Histoire de la discipline parlementaire,* 2 vols (Paris, 1884), vol. I, pp. 286, 323–8.
[28]J. Turpijn, *Mannen van gezag. De uitvinding van de Tweede Kamer 1848-1888* (Amsterdam, 2008) p. 162; D. van Eck, *Politieke herinneringen van een enfant terrible*, C.A. Tamse (ed.), (s.l., 1975), p. 111; personal communication from Professor Wessel Krul, Groningen.

coward. His opponent then started hitting Jaurès and kicking his legs. Jaurès tried to return the favour, but succeeded only in throwing his sweaty handkerchief at him. The whole parliament turned into a state of frenzy. On other occasions, Jaurès fought two pistol duels with parliamentary opponents.[29]

Jaurès was a great orator and a great parliamentarian. He also lived by a code of honour which led him and others to exchanging more than just reasonable arguments. The transgression of parliamentary rules was definitely the result of polarization, and could be interpreted as just a failure to live up to the parliamentary ideal, but the incidents also show competing sets of ideals. Besides reasonable deliberation, manliness was important and should be defended as part of an honour code that included open and theatrical competition. When asked why on earth he as a socialist would engage in a duel, Jaurès responded that he simply could not bear all the insults any longer – in other words, he apparently felt that he had to react as a man of honour.[30]

Honour in popular political meetings[31]

Highlighting the honour side of parliaments can help us to see them as part of a continuum that includes different kinds of meetings. One of the things meetings have in common is that they revolve around people who are actually present. Studies of the history of communication suggest that honour tends to play a role in face-to-face groups[32] – which may also be an explanation why parliaments partly resemble popular meetings in this respect, since they are at least partly also face-to-face communities. At the opposite end of this continuum electoral meetings and other popular political meetings can be found. Exchanging reasonable arguments was important there, too, but honour perhaps even more. Fair play and chivalry were crucial in these public meetings, and they go a long way to explain why rough manners seldom led to real violence and why occasional violence never deteriorated into permanent battles.

Public meetings have not often been analysed from the perspective of honour either. At the end of the nineteenth century, popular debating meetings were in vogue in a number of countries. They could vary from almost consummate copies of regular parliaments to much more boisterous gatherings which sometimes ended in fist fights. The popular mock parliaments in Britain which staged debates in parliamentary style in front of sometimes huge audiences of more than a thousand people, were examples of the first variant.[33] The participants and audience often belonged to the lower classes,

[29]H. te Velde, *Sprekende politiek. Redenaars en hun publiek in de parlementaire gouden eeuw* (Amsterdam, 2015), pp. 229–31; T. Bouchet, *Noms d'oiseaux. L'insulte en politique de la Restauration à nos jours* (Paris, 2010), pp. 131–50; H. Fayat, 'Bien se tenir à la Chambre. L'Invention de la discipline parlementaire', *Jean Jaurès. Cahiers trimestriels*, 153, (2000), pp. 61–89; J.-M. Guislin, 'Parlementarisme et violence rhétorique dans les années 1870', *Revue du nord*, (1998), pp. 697–728; E. Chamontin, *Essai sur la discipline parlementaire dans les assemblées législatives principalement en France, de nos jours* (Marseille, 1903), pp. 148–51.

[30]M. Gallo, *Le grand Jaurès* (Paris, 1984) pp. 161, 227–8, 378–9.

[31]This is admittedly a rather vague term. I focus on the 'contradictory meetings' with debate, and more in particular, though not exclusively, on electoral meetings.

[32]R. Schlögl, 'Kommunikation und Vergesellschaftung unter Anwesenden. Formen des Sozialen und ihre Transformation in der Frühen Neuzeit', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 34, (2008), pp. 155–224; esp. pp. 216–17.

[33]J. van Rijn, *De eeuw van het debat. De ontwikkeling van het publieke debat in Nederland en Engeland 1800-1920* (Amsterdam, 2010), ch. 5; J. Davis, 'Working-Class Make-Belief. The South Lambeth Parliament (1887-1890)', *Parliamentary History* 12, (1993), pp. 249–58; B. Jerrold, 'On the Manufacture of Public Opinion', *The Nineteenth Century* 13, (1883), pp. 1080–92.

but they conformed to the established norms of parliament, and perhaps wanted to join that world. The mock parliaments showed the will of the people to participate in reasonable political debates. They also demonstrate that parliaments and their rules influenced popular debating styles, and that there often was a trickling-down effect of political rules. There was a gap between the classes, but that did not mean that working and lower-middle classes as a whole were more unruly or more violent than middle and upper classes. People from the lower classes often preferred quiet deliberative and consultative practices, sometimes including elaborate formal rules.[34]

The electoral and other boisterous public meetings provide instances of the second variant of meetings of a more violent and unruly nature. In Britain, they had already existed for a long time and there they dominated perhaps most. Boisterous meetings also occurred in France, Germany, Belgium and other countries, including the Netherlands – even though the country had not known large meetings, let alone violent ones for much of the nineteenth century. Did these public meetings present not only different practices but also different ideals, based on the prominence of honour?

One of the distinguishing features of late nineteenth-century public political meetings is the vogue of meetings with debate. Even if one particular political group was organizing a certain public event, members of the audience who held different views assumed that they would get the opportunity to 'have their say', as Jon Lawrence has put it.[35] Even though the French thought that these contradictory meetings ('meetings contradictoires') were a peculiarity of the French – with deplorable consequences of mayhem and occasional violence – and Margaret Anderson who studied these meetings in Germany thought that 'shipping the best debaters to *opponents*' rallies' was a German peculiarity, you could find these contradictory meetings everywhere.[36] Due to differences in laws, institutional framework and mores, the periodization varied a bit, but everywhere their heyday was probably somewhere between 1870 and the First World War. Often the set-up was more or less the same. In France, the law required that the meeting be chaired by a president and a 'bureau' responsible for order and a fair distribution of time among the debaters. In Germany the audience held more or less the same principles. 'Bureau-Wahl!' (election of a chairing committee!) was a common cry from the audience, which could even result in a hostile take-over of the meeting by another party which had shown up in huge numbers.[37]

The audience claimed their right to contribute to the debate. They also came to the meeting to be entertained and they felt entitled to judge how a politician defended his views against critics. They would cheer, yell, boo, and sometimes throw things at the protagonists. The rough treatment at electoral meetings could be a 'humiliating'[38] experience

[34]See the contribution to this issue by Josephine Hoegaerts for more detail, examples, and the ambiguities when it came to women and people from the colonies.

[35]Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, passim; cf. M. Schoups, *Meesters van de straat. Collectieve actie en de strijd om de publieke ruimte: Antwerpen (1884-1936)* (University of Ghent, PhD thesis, 2022), p. 60: '*faire entendre leur voix*'.

[36]P. Cossart, *Le meeting politique. De la délibération à la manifestation (1868-1939)* (Rennes, 2010), pp. 94–5; M. L. Anderson, *Practicing Democracy. Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), p. 295 (Dutch socialists such as Louis Hermans and Johan Schaper did the same). T. Jung, 'Streitkultur im Kaiserreich. Politische Versammlungen zwischen Deliberation und Demonstration', in A. Braune, M. Dreyer, M. Lang and U. Lappenküper (eds), *Einigkeit und Recht, doch Freiheit? Das Deutsche Kaiserreich in der Demokratiegeschichte und Erinnerungskultur* (Stuttgart, 2021) is a recent overview, comparing Germany to Britain and France.

[37]Cossart, *Meeting*, pp. 96–7; Anderson, *Practicing Democracy*, p. 300.

[38]For example, Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, pp. 1, 5, 10 etc.

for electoral candidates, but the public thought that it was a completely acceptable test. Politicians accepted the ordeal as part of their job description, and sometimes actually liked – or pretended to like – the rough and tumble or at least the vivacious debates. They did not initiate the pro et contra aspect of the meetings, but they accepted it, because the audience appeared to want it. If the orator did not give an opportunity for questions or debate, the audience could get angry and the orator risked being called a coward.[39] To deny the audience the opportunity to interfere was often felt as an insult.[40] The audience felt entitled to have a lively exchange of views. They did not exactly aim for what current-day deliberative democrats do when they organize 'mini-publics' and let the public deliberate themselves. In late nineteenth-century Europe, popular audiences did not want to discuss political issues amongst themselves, but with orators and politicians. And they preferred the periods leading up to elections, when they could have a decisive influence in the choice of candidates. At electoral meetings, the candidates should be present in person. In a case when they failed to show up in a French meeting, the participants shouted '*Vive la République! À bas les candidats!*' (Long live the Republic! Down with the candidates!), and the meeting broke up.[41]

All these meetings had in common that the audience did not want to be lectured or talked down to, but desired to be taken seriously. They wanted to participate on an equal footing. Audiences preferred to be seduced rather than to be educated and expected to be entertained. Politicians reflected on the sort of language that was appropriate for that type of occasion and tried to refrain from a pedantically didactic style.[42] Candidates should fight an open battle for their cause; devious methods were considered disgraceful and dishonourable. Newspaper reports of the most violent public meetings of late nineteenth-century Netherlands render the invectives that were used. It is striking that opponents were often called 'dishonest' or dishonourable.[43] The Dutch word '*eerlijk*' used to mean honourable, but had acquired the denotation of honest in the nineteenth century. In the reports the older meaning still shimmers through. The same is true for the word '*ridderlijk*', chivalrous, which had acquired the meaning of open, frank and honest, unashamed, but still retained a bit of the older meaning of courageous and 'noble'. Oddly enough, socialist newspapers used the old-fashioned and aristocratic word without hesitation. You should challenge your opponents openly, chivalrously and with honourable means, socialists wrote; according to them, the capitalist oppressors used methods without honour and weapons which dishonoured them.[44]

Whether behaviour was 'honourable' and chivalrous or not was definitely a criterium by which orators and debaters in popular meetings were judged. Notwithstanding some conceptions of the time or overviews of the history of honour, honour was certainly

[39]For example, Cossart, *Meeting*, p. 99; J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People. Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 181 ('lack of pluck'). Angry: for example, Schoups, *Meesters van de straat*, pp. 62 ff.

[40]For example, for a region in the Netherlands, R. de Jong, *Electorale cultuur en politieke oriëntatie. Verkiezingen in Gelderland 1888-1940* (Hilversum, 2005) p. 43.

[41]Cossart, *Meeting*, p. 123.

[42]See, for the Netherlands, H. te Velde, 'Een aparte techniek. Nederlandse politieke acteurs en de massa na 1870', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 110, (1997), pp. 198–212.

[43]For example, 'De parlementairen in Constancia' [sic], *Algemeen Handelsblad,* 2 October 1894.

[44]Souvarine (= Alexander Cohen), 'Ontboezeming', *Recht voor Allen*, 23 March 1888.

not confined to the elite. Much literature about lower-class honour has concentrated on the early modern age,[45] but there is no doubt that conceptions of honour were still prominent at the end of the nineteenth century, and not least among socialist working classes. On the basis of his German sources about the socialist working classes, Thomas Welskopp comes on his own account to the same conclusions as current literature about honour (that he does not refer to). Honour – '*Ehre*' – is a claim to respect of the proud, rational, committed worker who lives a virtuous life, he writes. A man should fight for his honour, not least in the 'stylized duels' (Anderson) of public debaters in popular meetings.[46]

As in Germany, in the Netherlands honour was most prominent in the early years of socialism and social democracy, when edification was not yet valued very much and an oral culture of direct and personal exchange of views in rather informal meetings predominated. This changed when a well-organized social democratic party took over, which underlined the importance of procedure, rules and written comments and minutes, and eventually turned into more of an imagined community than an actual face-to-face group.[47] Initially, politics and meetings were still mainly a matter of local, mostly indeed face-to-face communities. Working men were proud to be poor and militant and to have done time for their cause. Early socialist methods of publicity involved charivari and publicly insulting and humiliating political opponents or the social elite. Socialists called the mayor of Amsterdam a traitor, a bastard and a cockeyed sodomite – terms of abuse related to sexuality and honesty. More often than actually using violence, they used violent language and disturbed public meetings as a means to promote their cause. For a short time, they were quite successful and succeeded in brutally obstructing the consensual meetings of the good working men of the moderate early liberal trade union.[48] It was a clear case of theatrically contrasting the noisy fight for the honour of the working classes to a reasonable discussion along the lines of a calm, bourgeois parliament-type meeting.

Obstructing or even violently breaking up meetings happened in many countries, but it was not the usual practice. Much more common were meetings with lively debates in a sphere of 'boorish masculinity' (Lawrence), and both parties trying to win with all vocal means at their disposal. This included a strong but rather rough sense of fairness and sportsmanship.[49] Debaters should show courage, and they had to create a sense of community with the audience. They often attacked their opponents with rather crude ad hominem language and with deprecating humour, trying at the same time to identify with their audience and winning them over to their side.[50] Notwithstanding the theatrical setting, the competition and the struggle, they had to defend their position with words. Noise was not enough, violence could not replace words, one had to reason and put forward arguments as well. Honour should also be upheld by words and language.

[45]For example, H. Roodenburg, 'Ehre in einer pluralistischen Gesellschaft. Die Republik der Vereinigten Niederlande', in S. Backmann, H.J. Künast, S. Ullmann and B.A. Tlusty (eds), *Ehrkonzepte in der frühen Neuzeit. Identitäten und Abgrenzungen* (Berlin, 1998); H. de Waardt, 'De geschiedenis van de eer en de historische antropologie', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 23, (1997), pp. 334–54; R. Walz, 'Agonale Kommunikation im Dorf der frühem Neuzeit', *Westfälische Forschungen* 42, (1992), pp. 215–51.

[46]T. Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vom Vormärz bis zum Sozialistengesetz* (Bonn, 2000), pp. 599–602 (Welskopp uses debates in popular meetings as a prominent example).

[47]A. van Veldhuizen, *De partij. Over het politieke leven in de vroege S.D.A.P.* (Amsterdam, 2015).

[48]D. Bos, 'Verborgen motieven en uitgesproken persoonlijkheden. Eer en reputatie in de vroege socialistische arbeidersbeweging van Amsterdam', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 115, (2000), pp. 509–31.

[49]For example, Jung, 'Streitkultur', p. 110.

[50]See also the contribution by Martin Schoups in this special issue.

Conclusion

Taking into account the quite different context and the differences in culture and class, what happened in popular meetings was not such a far cry from what happened in parliaments at the same time. It is just as hard to imagine a popular meeting completely without argumentation as it is to imagine a parliament governed solely by 'the rule of reasons', without at least some elements of theatrical competition. Ironic and sarcastic humour and male bonding were important in both situations. Even though women made their appearance in popular meetings, they were the exception and did not determine the atmosphere. West European parliaments were still all-male until the First World War. Arguably, both parliaments and political popular meetings were honour groups. Honour is local and predominantly oral, the exclusive code of a particular group. Each honour group had its own code. Popular meetings were local and attracted a specific audience. Even if popular meetings never constituted the type of close-knit group a parliament could be, they still formed a group. Because this group was less stable, it demanded more constant infighting and the codes were rougher – also because of class cultures. The code of the group at popular meetings differed from the honour code of parliaments. More important, perhaps, is the difference in social position. At electoral meetings, the mostly lower (middle)-class public demanded from the mostly upper (middle)-class candidates that they abide by the popular code of the meeting, and in general that they show respect. In parliaments, respect from the audience was seldom explicitly coveted, and least of all from the lower-class spectators (except perhaps during revolutions, when the ordinary values were recalibrated). Normally, respect was demanded from peers or superiors, not from subalterns. Subalterns did not really matter from the perspective of honour; honour should be confirmed or even conferred by peers and superiors.

Electoral meetings belonged to the few occasions when members of the (higher) middle classes had to accept to be tested by local communities consisting of mainly lower (middle)-class people. Heckling and booing were the weapons of those who did not want to be edified or educated by middle-class politicians, but were proud of their own culture and their own class. In meetings, hecklers used plebiscitary means, often rising 'with one accord' (*als één man*) and preventing unwelcome orators from speaking by booing and making a lot of noise.[51] This was a plebiscitary way to claim the exclusive right to defend the honour of the group as a whole. Violence was sometimes used, but only as a means of last resort. As many authors have mentioned, popular meetings often witnessed scenes of theatrical competition, dominated by a rather rough sense of fairness. The debating competition was an honourable competition, and the question was who was going to win. Arguments counted but they should be shouted and performance was at least as important. Combativity was crucial in a 'highly polarized, agonistic, oral world of good and evil' which was 'emphatic and participatory rather than objectively distanced'.[52] These forms of agonism, polarization and emphatic participation were signs of a predominantly oral face-to-face culture which remained in existence

[51]D. Bos, *Waarachtige volksvrienden. De vroege socialistische beweging in Amsterdam 1848-1894* (Amsterdam, 2001) p. 272.
[52]W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), p. 45. The title of the book and much of Ong's work seems to assume a change from orality to literacy, but the development is not straightforward and in modern times the two cultures exist side by side.

after the rise of a written culture and regardless of the growing prestige of published texts. A parliament such as the male community of British Parliament bears signs of this.

Arguing is the very essence of deliberative ideals, but deliberative ideals have often sat uneasily with an agonistic attitude. Rather than a dispassionate discussion to solve a question, politics more often than not takes the form of a debate both sides or participants want to win, and also something like a game if you will. Seen from that perspective, the popular meetings of the end of the nineteenth century show an important aspect of politics. The concept of honour helps us to understand what is at stake in politics, not only in practice but also in terms of ideals of debating. The element of honour is easily overlooked or not appreciated enough if one exclusively concentrates on the reasonable exchange of arguments in formal meetings. Analysing honour helps us to understand public politics in late nineteenth-century Europe and perhaps more broadly. The honour struggle was most obvious in popular meetings, but parliaments can also be meaningfully analysed from this perspective. If we want to understand the way political debate and discussion work, it helps if we include the perspective of honour in our analysis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Statesman Thorbecke Fund Programme, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

Notes on contributor

Henk te Velde is Professor of Dutch History at Leiden University, The Netherlands. He is President of the Royal Netherlands Historical Society as well as of the (European) Association for Political History. In addition to the history of the Netherlands, his research interests include the comparative history of political culture, rhetoric and parliaments in Western Europe. His recent English language publications include *Organizing Democracy. Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the Nineteenth Century* (Cham, 2017), edited with Maartje Janse; *Democracy in Modern Europe. A Conceptual History* (New York & Oxford, 2018), edited with Jussi Kurunmäki and Jeppe Nevers; *The Ideal of Parliament in Europe since 1800* (Cham, 2019), edited with R. Aerts, C. van Baalen, M. van der Steen and M.L. Recker; *Civic Continuities in an Age of Revolutionary Change, c.1750–1850. Europe and the Americas* (Cham, 2023), edited with Judith Pollmann.