

Politics and Talk: the Final Debate in the 2018 Swedish Elections

JAAKKO TURUNEN & INGA BRANDELL

Politics does not always contain talk. Demonstrating in the streets with banners, slogans or songs is a political act which itself does not include talk. The same goes for repression by the police of demonstrations considered unlawful. Nor does the political act of *exit*, such as for example refusing to pay taxes or simply emigrating and leaving the polity to which one belonged necessarily include talk. And, of course, in the case of using those "other means" of politics, as war was defined by Clausewitz, talk is mainly absent. In an ordered, peaceful democratic parliamentary setting, however, politics is very much about public talk.

Now, talk in a democracy includes many different conditions and contexts, from being part of a social chat outside any formal setting to very organized debates in elected assemblies. It can be difficult to draw a line between talk and exchange by means of texts posted on internet chat sites or Twitter or sent out for comments to any of the many institutional and bureaucratic settings that constitute the structure of a modern polity. Central among these places where talk takes place is the parliament. With the rise of parliamentarism, free and unhindered talk became in fact institutionalized and has formed thereafter the bedrock of democratic politics. Institutionalized talk in the parliament has a number of connected aspects. It is the primary medium for debating and forging laws that come to legislate daily life in the polity. Talk has a deliberative function in the legislative process. However, talk in the parliament is also the medium of sovereignty to the extent that it materializes the link between the members of the parliament and their constituencies. Further, talk in the parliament also informs and enlightens the public and thus takes part in the ongoing discussions in the public sphere. Talk has thus a perlocutionary function.

Public talk during election time is yet another context, which, within the structure of both ancient and contemporary democracy, constitutes the linchpin of rule by the people. It is here that both its basic values and its practical functioning are unfolded: the freedom of speech and assembly as fundamental values, and the possibility for voters to make an *informed* and hence, based on their ideological or other preferences, *rational* choice of a political party or politician when casting their ballots. The final televised debate, whether between the two candidates for the presidency, as in France or

the United States or between party leaders during parliamentary elections in other countries, is often the climax of public political talk. It engenders popular and mass media comments and is sometimes also considered to be decisive for the results of the election.

The dramaturgical and aesthetic aspects are also relevant in face-to-face debates involving several participants. So is the role of the mediator(s), i.e., the journalists who steer the debate. Scholars invested in mass media research have of course investigated both the content and the impact of the format on political talk. Here we will dive into such an exchange, the televised final debate in the 2018 Swedish parliamentary election, in particular one sequence of it. Our purpose is a bit different. We will discuss and test some contemporary approaches to public talk, thereby at the same time contributing to the analysis of current politics.

The final debate in the 2018 elections

The leaders of the eight political parties represented in the Swedish parliament gathered on September 7, 2018 for a “Final Debate”, organized by the state-funded Channel 2. Sweden, with its long history of Social Democratic dominance, had since 2014 been ruled by a minority government led by this party. With good reason, the coming election was considered unpredictable, and forming a government was expected to be difficult. The party leaders’ view of this coming process was one of the five selected topics for the debate. The others were the crisis in the health care system, climate politics, integration politics and the economy.

The question concerning government coalitions had become pressing as the election campaign progressed. The traditional “blocs” in Swedish politics—the Alliance on the right, which included the Moderates and three small parties (the Centre, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats), and the Red-Greens on the left, which formally included the Social Democrats and the Greens and informally also the Left, were both undermined by the rise of the populist Sweden Democrats, who were predicted to score anything between 15 and 25 percent of the vote. The opinion polls indicated that neither bloc would be able to form the government alone and would need to gain support from the other bloc, as both blocs had renounced the SD as a potential coalition partner. In addition, polls indicated that the small parties from both blocs—the Greens, Liberals and Christian Democrats—were all on the verge of falling below the electoral threshold and thereby out of the

parliament, something that rendered the election outcome unstable and unpredictable. This created a double dynamic in the debate. On the one hand, the blocs had to show their unity. On the other hand, the smaller parties had to point out their distinctiveness within the blocs. In principle, then, the conditions for a great deliberative performance were set: pressure to forge a common will, willingness to argue for different courses of action, a common enemy, and an audience waiting to learn about the formation of a common will, possible future courses of action, and to make up their minds as to which party they would vote for.

One of the five topics, climate politics, is particularly interesting, and we will focus on an extract from it. Being in a sense the “least” political of the topics, it offers good ground for digging into the nature of deliberation in Swedish politics. Climate policy is not only a technocratic question for the experts and politicians, but involves broad public opinion building. This double bind—decision-making inside institutions and public opinion formation in society—captures the nature of deliberation as the complex idea developed by Jürgen Habermas in his book *Between Facts and Norms*, to which we will return below. On the one hand, deliberation in this understanding is a desired mode of talk within the representative institutions; on the other hand, it is a way to form public opinion that can also to be used against those in power. A TV debate like the one discussed here captures both aspects of deliberation. It is a showcase of politicians talking to one another. At the same time, the real audience of the debate sits at the other end of the TV signal and is tuned to make an informed opinion on the basis of the different political views presented on the matter.

Ways to analyze political talk

Given the centrality of talk to democratic politics, political science has actively worked on the question of how talk takes place or should take place in politics. Each of the aspects of talk described above—deliberative, representative, and perlocutionary—has its own traditions of inquiry.

In most studies of deliberation, political scientists more or less versed in Habermas’s work often make two claims. Deliberation is seen as a way of debating that adjusts and coordinates conflicting interests so that a consensus based on the facts may emerge. The other claim is that deliberation, being rational by nature, always brings about a better solution to concrete problems. Both claims rest on the argument that deliberation is about the truth that is transmitted in talk. Perhaps the best example of this tradition comes

from the study of the Discourse Quality Index, a tool designed to assess the deliberative quality of argumentation in politics.¹ The Index is designed to construct the truth value of an argument as the proxy of its deliberativeness. In other words, the most deliberative talk is supposed to be that which proceeds logically from true premises to true conclusions.

The researchers behind the DQI hold that this assumption is derived from Habermas's communicative action and the validity claims—the claims for truth, normative rightness and truthfulness—he held to be universal to any adult interaction. Such a clinical view of deliberation is, however, questionable if we look at Habermas's work as a whole. In his habilitation thesis, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas traces the history of how the exchange of information through speech was able to establish a general public opinion that challenged the position of the monarch and paved the way for social emancipation.² A different view on deliberation emerges in his *The Theory of Communicative Action*, which puts more emphasis on the mode of talk than on its power in society.³ However, these two ideas find one another in his later work *Between Facts and Norms*,⁴ where the transformatory critique developed in *The Structural Transformation* finds its place in autonomous civil society, and the discursive rationality as a critique of public communication developed in *The Theory of Communicative Action* is placed within the institutions of democratic governance. In this sense, Habermas's view on deliberation is grounded in the ability to build public opinion on facts and to use that power against both the authority of the *ancien regime* and any attempts to use power to steer individuals. Hence rationality for Habermas was never reduced to an apt description of reality, but is a communicative property for questioning power and coercion in society.

Political talk understood as rhetoric

Thus, Habermas's view on deliberation did not lack considerations of power relations in society. However, his examples, especially in his earlier works, still very much relied on debates that are best characterized as concerning factual questions. Such debates rarely take place in real politics, not even in Sweden. Instead, political talk is rhetorical, understood in a broad sense. For Christian Kock, rhetoric is concerned with the domain of deciding between different courses of action.⁵ Politics in his view then appears as debate or

deliberation over new courses of action, where different participants deliberate over them, represent different sides of the polity and try to persuade their listeners—the three aspects identified earlier in talk in politics.

Deciding on different possible courses of action is different from the epistemic concern about the truth value of the argument developed, for instance, in the DQI, as well as from the common view that rhetoric is just about persuasion everywhere and always.⁶ For Kock, rhetoric is not about resolving conflicts by retracting or modifying opinions. Nor is it about establishing the validity of different positions. It is about discussing different options. And that which belongs to the domain of talk—choices to be made in politics, economics, education—affects the kind of rhetoric that is used. Politics as legislative business, or, more generally, matters concerned with the prevailing order in polity, is about legislating how the world should be; it is rarely just about telling how it is. Indeed, more rhetorically oriented political scientists commonly speak about the future orientation of political actions emanating from the conflicts that characterize politics.

To follow Kock's reading of Aristotle, rhetoric was not a universal art of persuasion, but was limited to a specific domain of debate (*bouleuometha*) where we—and he quotes *Nicomachean Ethics*—"deliberate, take counsel or make a decision".⁷ Aristotle, Kock further points out, limited deliberation to the practical and political capacity of the people concerned. Consequently, it was not for the Athenians to deliberate on matters having to do with India or how to square a circle, "for the first are not in *our* power, the second is wholly beyond the power of action".⁸ Kock argues that deliberation is limited to the practical concerns of polity, where different choices can legitimately exist, but which nevertheless fall under the power of human action and the sovereignty of the polity. On matters relating to a good life, many possibilities can coexist. It is here that deliberation is needed. Practical reasoning that aims at deciding on the preferable course of action proceeds from the good value *backwards* to different actions that can help bring about that good. This contrasts sharply to an epistemic logic that proceeds from a true proposition and attempts to *maintain* the truth conveyed by the proposition. Deliberation in this sense does not necessarily bring about consensus, but it forges a will to which one either freely consents or under the prevailing circumstances acquiesces. From this view, rhetoric—and deliberation as its crowning jewel—should be understood as actions carried out in the public sphere.

Back to the final debate

Let us now return to the debate and scrutinize an excerpt of it. The sequence below is introduced by an exchange of opinions between the Centre – “the greenest in the Alliance” – and the Sweden Democrats, whose climate consciousness had been questioned many times during the election campaign. The Centre Party begins by stating that climate change is the fateful question of our time. In contrast, the leader of the Sweden Democrats (SD), Jimmie Åkesson, begins with a confession: “I am convinced that climate change is a fact. I am convinced that humans affect climate change.” He thus places himself within the discursive consensus on climate change in Swedish politics. He continues less placidly by pointing out that Sweden stands for one per mille of the world’s CO₂ emissions and therefore the SD, Åkesson argues, will financially invest elsewhere, where emissions are higher than in Sweden. The reporter asks the Centre leader, Annie Lööf, if “it is more effective to diminish [emissions] abroad?” to which Lööf replies that “[n]aturally we will invest abroad, [...] but how can we assume the responsibility if we do not go first ourselves? The Sweden Democrats want in addition to leave international cooperation. You have declined the climate law, you have turned down zero emissions, [said] no to the Paris Agreement [...]. Jimmie Åkesson, you say no to the Paris Agreement, that global agreement that many countries have concluded in order to diminish emissions. You call yourselves Sweden democrats but in reality you are “somewhere-else-democrats”, that is, someone else should fix it. We have to assume the leadership...” Once Annie Lööf finishes, the mediators turn back to Åkesson with the question: “Can one do it somewhere else than in Sweden, Jimmie Åkesson?” to which Åkesson replies “No, and our politics is not about... it is about, we will in fact increase Swedish food production...” The fateful question of the world has thus effectively become a question of Swedish leadership and local food production. Åkesson does recognize in the end of his reply that this is not really the question that was originally put on the table, but it is too late now, for the argument about “climate leadership” is continued by the following speakers, the leaders of the Greens, the Moderates, and the Social Democrats.

The sequence is typical of televised political debate, where two (or more) politicians engage in an exchange with the TV reporters mediating it. In the quoted sequence, the politicians present their “good” and desired course of action. It is, as Kock pointed out when there are many desired courses of actions that deliberation can and does take place. The sequence is also typical

in that it creates a catchy phrase that is used to reproduce an image of the political position of the opponent. In this case, Annie Lööf turns the party name “Sweden Democrats” into a trope of “somewhere-else-democrats” to characterize the climate policy of the SD. This trope neatly plays into the hands of Lööf, whose argument was that Sweden should show “leadership” in the climate question, irrespective of the counterargument that the material effect of Swedish climate policy globally is negligible. The two different courses of action: leadership and reputation (or what Åkesson calls “symbolic”) in Lööf’s argument contrast with the material results in Åkesson’s argument. In fact, they never really meet because the trope of “somewhere else” is used to mediate the turns in the exchange. Perhaps this is persuasion. The mediators, at least, were persuaded by the vibe and sound of the trope and used it to steer the debate further.

Kock’s focus on rhetoric as belonging to a certain domain is relevant here, and his argument that its logic proceeds from the goal to the means to achieve it describes the reality of political talk more aptly than the logical exercise mapped in the DQI. But his approach is unable to capture the drastic reduction of complexity and contingency prevalent in the beginning of the debate, when climate change is presented as the Big Question, a wicked problem of the world necessitating action as well as awe, and Åkesson’s tactical but rational maneuvering between Sweden and somewhere-else. During a couple of turns of argument, the problem and the different positions proposed become a matter of territorially delineated “leadership”. There is a magnificent reduction of complexity achieved here.

How did the two party leaders end up there? Neither position as such could be considered wrong. Rather, as Kock argues, in the case of action, multiple different courses can be equally legitimate and reasonable. Nor can it be argued that Åkesson gave his “adherence freely”, as Kock describes the result of persuasion taking place in practical matters. It is equally problematic to argue that Lööf, with the wit of “ethos and pathos, topical selectivity, audience adaptation, presentational devices, and more,”⁹ persuaded him. Rather, Åkesson got trapped, but he did not give up his position or change his course of action, and the complex issue became a simple one. On a more serious level, it is the reduction of a complex question into something simple and manageable that poses the greatest threat to deliberation. On multiple occasions, Kock underlines the Aristotelian insight that a choice cannot be true or false; with choices there is always a plurality of actions and ideas. It is this plurality that has gone missing in the example from the televised election debate. There are at least two possible explanations of this reduction.

One lies within “discourse”, the other addresses the turn-taking as controlled by the mediators and the rhetoric of it. We will now look more closely at both.

The above excerpt showed how both discourse and certain catchy phrases can steer the debate. Coming from outside the mainstream of Swedish politics, Åkesson felt it necessary first to indicate his sympathy with the hegemonic discourse on climate change; his criticism could only take place within this constellation. Yet this is not all there is to it. As is revealed here, the interactive dynamic within the turn-taking cannot be subordinated to the discourse. The moderators were instrumental in hooking on to Lööf’s phrase “somewhere else” and turning it to support her argument on leadership. The concept of “leadership” had appeared in the debate for the first time in connection with the need for health care reform. It emerged when the leader of the Moderate Party contrasted the presence of resources and of political will: resources alone are not enough, there must also be political will. Annie Lööf from the Centre Party continued the Moderate leader’s reasoning: by not tackling the problems in the health care system, the Red-Green government was showing disrespect towards the citizens. Better management, that is leadership, is both possible and necessary. Annie Lööf used the term “leadership” to distinguish between the political blocs, where the government in charge was accused of lacking political will, and thereby leadership, and where the Alliance “must show leadership”. It is clear that the use of the term “leadership” was extended from the question of implementing specific policy measures to the general ability to steer the country. Political will and leadership, however, are not quite the same thing. Political will accompanies questions of power, representation and even sovereignty, but leadership is an administrative and technocratic term. Political will articulates a connection between the people and the politicians, whereas leadership articulates a self-subsistent elite. Political will is about decisions and directions in politics; leadership is about the stamina to implement and manage issues. Thus “leadership” in this debate became a standard rhetorical weapon with which the Alliance could attack the Red-Greens as lacking leadership, as being incapable of it and perhaps not understanding its importance. Leadership is connected with the main election promise of the Alliance to change the government, which is itself, of course, a political ambition but is presented as a technical question of leadership.

From rhetorics to semiotics

The fact that the same concept came to organize several different political domains constitutes a problem within the idea of deliberation that Kock entertains. His main argument against epistemic reasoning on deliberation is that, because deliberation concerns choices, it cannot be driven to any one true position. On the contrary, a legitimate pluralism should prevail. The excerpt above shows how the legitimate pluralism that existed in the beginning of the debate on climate policy was reduced to a question of leadership by the moderators of the debate. But it also shows how the term “leadership” itself was already a contextual reduction of a more complex question about political will and vision which tended to become technical and subject to measures of management. Further, the fact that “leadership” was the proposed solution to problems ranging from health care to climate policy also indicates that politics in this understanding is expected to yield to standardized responses with little or no contextual consideration. This is not deliberation in the sense understood by Kock.

To pursue further our analysis of the final debate and the study of talk in politics, we turn to cultural semiotics in the mode developed by Yuri Lotman. In the beginning we pointed out that final debates before general elections tend to “condense” the political situation at hand. Lotman approached culture as a process of turning entropy into information.¹⁰ In our case, this approach leads us to ask how certain ways of understanding performed in the debate came to provide organization both to it and also to contemporary Swedish politics in more general terms.

In the excerpt we have used to discuss deliberation, a powerful reduction of choices seems to take place. This is concretized in the way that the catchy phrase “somewhere-else-democrats” is able to disparage the Sweden Democrats and exclude Åkesson’s arguments from the realm of Swedish politics. Why just this phrase turns out to be so central is due to both institutional and semiotic conditions. On the institutional plane, the debate reflects the political blocs, where the Sweden Democrats are ostracized while the Centre remains in the neoliberal mainstream. The same division is further reflected in the fact that it is Åkesson, who feels the need to affirm his position within the common discourse on climate change, and it is Annie Lööf’s phrase that is used by the moderators to question Åkesson. In other words, the phrase “somewhere-else-democrats” not only reflects the institutional balance of power and political discourse, but was also used effectively by the logics of a

TV debate to create tension, contrast positions and drive home an easily digestible position that would somehow sum up what the debate was all about. On a semiotic level, putting the Sweden Democrats “somewhere else” is also an exclusion in a cultural sense. It is the text of “somewhere-else-democrats” that calls for a semiotic analysis: where does it come from? What is the information that is generated by the text? How does that information evolve? In other words, what kind of semiotic space is constructed by the phrase?

“Somewhere-else-democrats” is used to level criticism for not showing “leadership”. As we saw, leadership evolved in turn out of political will, the political capacity that was used to explain the lack of results despite the alleged abundance of resources. “If it were only money and tax increases there would be no problems in Sweden”, the Moderate leader criticized the Social Democrats. “You took away that special political will that was there to cut the health care queues”, he continued. The Centre leader soon after adds that “showing leadership” explains the differences in access to health care in the country. This leadership then travels into climate politics, where the Centre continues “we also have to take leadership”. Leadership thus appears to play out at two different levels. On the one hand, it is clearly an elite project that unfolds in the international arena, where Sweden performs as an exemplary country and declares that it will become the first fossil fuel-free country in the world. On the other hand, leadership is the leverage of the arguments directed against the still incumbent government: it is the lack of leadership that has thwarted policies to cut the health care queues, set the schools back on track, improve the infrastructure. The link between these two levels, as well as the phrase “somewhere-else-democrats”, create a semiotic universe where taking responsibility and showing respect, both globally in the face of climate change and locally by tackling the health care queues, become condensed in the idea of leadership.

During the following autumn, the 2018 election was often described as the election where ideas and commitment came to occupy the foreground. The eventual good performance of the Centre party and the Christian Democrats—the latter of which initially feared losing its place in the parliament—was, for instance, explained by the argumentative skill of their leaders and the fact that these two parties showed a strong commitment to their central values. In the debate after the election, analysts generally claimed that this mirrors a new divide alongside the old left–right one, adding to politics a conservative-nationalist versus a progressive or “alternative” global value dimension. However, even this cursory analysis of “somewhere-else-democrats” puts many questions marks on this interpretation.

In the guise of a conclusion

More importantly, and in contrast to this mirror vision of the results of the election, we submit that the political talk itself in this debate can tell more about what is underway in Swedish politics. By way of conclusion, we thus put forward two tentative theses informed by Lotman's cultural semiotics on this debate and Swedish politics. These theses build upon the way in which the term leadership emerged to provide structure in and for the debate.

To begin with, both leadership and its semiotic origin in this debate, political will, have territorial boundaries. Hence leadership can only be shown within the Swedish jurisdiction. "Somewhere else" than in Sweden does not make sense in this context. Leadership thus requires that a link between the global and the local be institutionalized as bearing responsibility, putting forward an example, making a point. It is difficult to deny the rational potential in Åkesson's argument that climate change is best fought where emissions are highest, but this undeniably does not make a point in global politics, nor does it set a target worth aspiring to in domestic affairs. To apply the prism of Sweden to global problems is as such nothing new to Swedish politics, but reflects the longer tradition of Swedish exceptionalist thinking manifested perhaps most outspokenly in assuming the moral—and now also green—voice of the world. This voice, here conveyed as leadership, excludes the rationality and feasibility of focusing on concrete technical solutions to climate change unless they take the form of territorially bound Swedish leadership.

Secondly, leadership as an elite project posits the importance of values, but it ascribes these values to the elites and detaches them from the citizens' concrete interests. To organize politics only around values marks a definite rupture from Social Democratic society, where economy and interests were closely linked to values. Values can be serviced by identification, but interests often call forth action and therefore might have a closer bond with rights. In this closing debate, the rights of the citizens are evoked only in connection with immigrants. Climate leadership—and other areas of leadership promoted during the debate—were not about everyone's right to clean air or the relationship between the citizen and the state, but about self-referential talk whose main purpose was to provide a structure for politics that can claim progress and that everyone can admire but with which no interaction, no engagement, is necessary. This, perhaps unintentionally, was also the outcome of the moderators' actions during the debate. By structur-

ing the exchange on catchy phrases initially designed to exclude, they contributed to reducing the possible courses of action present in the debate and advanced politics relying on symbolic values with no concrete and active bond between the citizen and the state.

Instead of making an “informed choice” on the basis of information about the different parties’ proposed solutions to the problems and issues discussed, voters were left to themselves. Thus, in the condensed setting of the final debate, the information received was not much about proposed actions and solutions, while the meaning generated—once again—told us “who we are”.

- ¹ Marco M. Steenbergen et al., “Measuring Political Deliberation: A Discourse Quality Index”, *Comparative European Politics*, 2003(1): 21–48; Jürg Steiner et al., *Deliberative Politics in Action: Analyzing Parliamentary Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004); Jürg Steiner, *The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy: Empirical Research and Normative Implications* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012).
- ² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA.: The MIT Press, 1991).
- ³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vols. 1 and 2* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1984 and 1987).
- ⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1996).
- ⁵ Christian Kock, “Choice is Not True or False: The Domain of Rhetorical Argumentation,” *Argumentation* 23 (2009): 61–81.
- ⁶ Christian Kock, “Aristotle on Deliberation: Its place in ethics, politics and rhetoric”, in *Let’s Talk Politics*, eds Hilde van Belle et al. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014).
- ⁷ Kock, “Choice is not True or False,” 67.
- ⁸ Eudemian Ethics, 1226a, quoted in Kock, “Aristotle on Deliberation,” 14.
- ⁹ Kock, “Choice is not True or False,” 77.
- ¹⁰ Yuri Lotman, “On the Semiosphere,” *Sign Systems Studies* 33.1 (2005): 205–229.