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AUTHOR Weiss, Robert O.  
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## ABSTRACT

After a long period of substantial academic assault, the ideal of democracy as "government by the people" is undergoing renewal and re-evaluation. Jurgen Habermas's persistent exploration of the conditions which make rational discussion of public affairs and democratic decision-making possible has generated numerous concepts that may be operationalized in public forum activity. Even the enclave of students of public opinion is moving beyond the mere tabulation of discrete individual attitudes to recognize communal thought patterns and the important role of deliberation in the formation of public opinion. A study on formal academic debate is concerned with the present and potential activities institutionalized and supported on a co-curricular basis beyond normal disciplinary classroom routines. Keeping in mind the nature of American public forum activity as a pragmatic venture in furthering democracy and academic debate as an educational enterprise directed toward the same end, the study's purpose is two-fold: (1) How might academic debate contribute to the rediscovery of the American public sphere through its development of argumentative principles and practices appropriate for that end? and (2) How might academic debate contribute directly to this end by conducting public forum activities that draw university and community members into concrete involvement in public debate? After examining argumentation theory and theorists and the role of debate in the academic environment, the study suggests that academic debate can explore and develop theories and practices that will contribute to excellence and productivity of discourse in public life and that it may also put on debates that serve as models of civic discourse and provide at least one venue for the citizen participation so vital for democracy. (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

RE-DISCOVERING THE AMERICAN PUBLIC FORUM:  
THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC DEBATE

Robert O. Weiss

DePauw University

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## RE-DISCOVERING THE AMERICAN PUBLIC FORUM: THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC DEBATE

The effort to "rediscover" the American public forum is a timely as well as a valuable project. After a long period of substantial academic assault, the ideal of democracy as "government by the people" is undergoing renewal and revaluation. The denigration of the public represented by Walter Lippmann and a succession of social scientists churning out documentation of the incompetence of the common citizen and touting the supremacy of technical expertise has more recently been countered as democratic theory is invigorated with fresh theory supporting the existence of a "rational public" and with scholarly examination of the ramifications of participatory democracy (Lippmann; Page and Shapiro; Marcus and Hanson)..

The "public sphere" as the site of opinion formation has recently become a glowing star in the scholarly constellation, with many a professional telescope turned toward it. The noted and influential European scholar, Jürgen Habermas, author of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and a stream of other provocative works pertaining to the public sphere, has set the pace for this research. Interestingly enough, his persistent exploration of the conditions which make rational discussion of public affairs and democratic decision-making possible has generated numerous concepts that may be operationalized in public forum activity: communicative action, a consensus theory of truth, validity claims, the ideal speech situation, and others (Outhwaite).

Even the enclave of students of public opinion is moving beyond the mere tabulation of discrete individual attitudes to recognize communal thought patterns and the important role of deliberation in the formation of public opinion (Merkle). And in the field of speech

communication and argumentation, led by the insightful contributions of Thomas Goodnight, a flood of work has been exploring the communication aspects of public sphere deliberation, including some reservations about the possible reification of the public perhaps represented in the present essay (Gronbeck).

Formal education at all levels has a contribution to make to democratic deliberation and the present study will focus on a component of education that should be aimed most directly toward preparing students for citizenship and accustoming them to deliberation on significant societal issues, namely formal academic debate. Specifically, the study will be concerned with the present and potential activities institutionalized and supported on a co-curricular basis beyond normal disciplinary classroom routines.

Academic debate today may be described as an enterprise carried out almost entirely in the form of interscholastic tournament competition. One form of tournament features two-person policy debate sponsored in high schools by state associations and the National Forensic League and in colleges by the Cross-Examination Debate Association and schools associated with the National Debate Tournament. A second form of debate given formal structure is a one-on-one format known as "Lincoln-Douglas" debate, frequently associated with individual events tournaments, less evidenced and more communicative. A third major form, increasingly popular, is called parliamentary debate, using a format having some resemblance to British parliamentary debate and notable for the fact that resolutions for debate are revealed only shortly before each contest. Following standards closer to the public arena are the National Educational Debate Association and the Public Forum Debate League in New York.

Keeping in mind the nature of American public forum activity as a pragmatic venture in

furthering democracy and academic debate as an educational enterprise directed toward the same end, the purposes of this investigation are two fold. (1) How might academic debate contribute to the rediscovery of the American public sphere through its development of argumentative principles and practices appropriate for that end? (2) How might academic debate contribute directly to this end by conducting public forum activities that draw university and community members into concrete involvement in public debate?

### ARGUMENTATION THEORY

The academic debate enterprise may first contribute to the reinvention of the public forum by re-incorporating a public dimension into its rationale and exploring this dimension in its practice and theoretical expectations. Reinventing the public forum could mean to some extent reinventing argumentation. In assuming some responsibility for democratic processes in society, the academic debate world might well be asking what kind of argumentation is conducive to full citizen participation. How can argumentative discourse be made accessible to the citizenry and negotiable among them? Not only determining policy but sustaining the polity should be an aim.

Competitive academic debate is currently dominated by a vision of scientific rationality based upon an idealized interpretation of the methods of the natural sciences. Evidence in this framework is limited almost entirely to what is empirically verifiable. Reasoning is a process reduced to calculation universalized and detached from individual judgment. The reductionism that necessarily characterizes scientific approaches is carried into the realms of human behavior and societal practices. And, fourthly, the insistence on the value-free nature of a scientific approach means the dismissal of value arguments from academic debate to the point where debating value propositions has not only been denigrated but explicitly eliminated in CEDA/NDT

tournament competition. Judges are to one degree or another expected to subscribe to a *tabula rasa* paradigm. Academic debate in its present manifestation is empirically based, calculative, reductionist, and value-free.

A case can be made that this presumably objectivist approach is exactly what the public sphere requires, either as an introduction to the discourse of the experts who are running society or as an educational program to make all citizens equipped to behave rationally. However, this discipline is restrictive in a number of ways that impinge on reasoned public deliberation. For instance, the insistence upon verified empirical data as a form of evidence ignores the fund of common knowledge upon which popular discourse depends as well as non-empirical wisdom, narrative and emotion that need to be further explored as bases of public deliberation. Calculative reasoning processes, a second feature of the current social science approach, works on the assumption that sound calculation would produce the same results in any rational person, in that case downplaying common sense and the various humanized and personalized operations of judgment and *phronesis* in democratic debate. The reductionist imperative, so apparent in the narrowly constricted cases of competitive debate as well as experiments in the natural sciences, obviously tends to miss the big picture and the important attention to the development of societal norms that may be more important than the implementation of a specific plan. And, of course, striving to be value free can be said to dismiss all that is most important in life and limit deliberation on the questions of "why" underneath public advocacy and deliberation.

In developing argumentation appropriate for the rediscovery of the American public forum, the above factors will be worth exploring. What are the rational dimensions of the common knowledge and general wisdom that form part of the evidentiary base in the open forum

and how may these be researched and determined? In reasoning, what forms will common sense and human judgment take in argumentation, and how may the fact that humans legitimately differ in their responses be accommodated? To avoid reductionism, argumentation theory and academic debate practice will explore the ways in which they may get beyond a case-by-case approach to public policy. As for values, there is already a cottage industry trying to develop coherent methods for structuring and supporting discourse in value controversies.

The necessity of reconsidering the resources of rationality for purposes of public deliberation is made manifest in the work of many scholars attentive to democratic opinion formation. Most notable is the distinction between "systems" (as in the legal system) and "lifeworld" (culture, society, personality)) which Habermas reinforces in his most recent work, and the rapprochement he calls for between them (*Between Facts and Norms*). As Habermas contends, the discourse of autonomous and specialized systems is not adequate for social consensus building and the lifeworld brings lived experience to bear upon it.

Stephen Toulmin is another major argumentation scholar who sets up a similar distinction, in this case between "rationality" and "reasonableness," describing how in modern thought rationality has come to be equated with objective calculation whereas public deliberation calls for a humanistic reasoning incorporating the complexities of experience and existence: "In our day, formal calculative rationality can no longer be the only measure of intellectual adequacy: one must also evaluate all practical matters by their human 'reasonableness'" (*Cosmopolis*, 185).

And in speech communication, Goodnight's seminal explication of the public sphere as relatively distinct from the technical and personal spheres of discourse also works in the direction of identifying a place for an argumentation directed toward public forum activity: "An

appropriately designed public forum would provide a tradition of argument such that its speakers would employ common language, values and reasoning so that the disagreement could be settled to the satisfaction of all concerned" (p. 220).

In examining the explicit phenomena, methods and expectations of argumentation in the public forum, participants and scholars may well utilize the laboratory of academic debate and its accompanying literature as readily available resources. Some of the emerging theory is merely peripheral and incidental, as when Gamson and Modigliani in their useful work on frames of reference are paraphrased as saying these frames consist of "metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions and visual images; they often include a rudimentary causal analysis and appeals to honored principles" (Marcus and Harrison, 362). At the opposite pole of comprehensiveness is *The New Rhetoric* of Chaim Perelman, with its elaborate treatment of starting points and argumentative development. Says Perelman, "The unfolding as well as the starting point of the argumentation presupposes indeed the agreement of the listener" (65). He rapidly introduces explanations of such categories as the real and the preferable, distinctively appropriate to public forum deliberation. In the larger sense, the whole panoply of classical and contemporary rhetorical theory can be applied comprehensively through academic debate and the public forum.

One service, therefore, that academic debate may help to perform in the re-discovery of the American public forum is to help develop meaningful, useful, and explicit theories of argument that would be applicable and appropriate in democratic deliberation.

## THE PUBLIC VENUE

A second opportunity for academic debate to play a constructive role in the rediscovery of the American public forum is through direct engagement in society's dialogue and "government



through discussion." Historically, debating within and among academic institutions emerged with a distinctly public dimension in literary debating societies and elaborate intercollegiate spectacles, and the conventional wisdom probably persists that the academic consideration of significant issues is to be directed toward civic involvement. In the present forensics enterprise, however, it must be said that this opportunity is pathetically neglected, as energies and resources are universally devoted to tournament debating which is not addressed to popular audiences.

Without suggesting that high school and college debaters can have an overwhelming impact in the public arena, one can see their providing venues for discussion where the public forum is literally recreated and where models for usable formats and appropriate norms of procedure may come to exist. Here we will describe an extensive variety of implementations already in place at a number of institutions.

Debating conducted with the attendance and involvement of live audiences presents an almost paradigmatic case of public forum deliberation, and enough institutions have kept the audience debate flame alive to provide a pattern for its "rediscovery" on a widespread basis. National touring teams from Great Britain, Japan, Russia, and other nations, sponsored by the Committee on International Discussion and Debate, have no trouble filling their schedules and drawing audiences. Bates college, long known for its extensive promotion of international debating, continues a tradition of public forum events and "public on-campus debates continue to attract large audiences at Bates" (Branham, 19). At the Diversity Recruitment and Ideafest at Emory University in June, John Meany reported on community programs at Claremont with numerous public debate events including a weekly TV show, and Gordon Mitchell described public debate efforts at the University of Pittsburgh. An inquiry on the internet produced

information on audience debate activity at the Southeast Missouri State University, Baylor University, University of Nevada at Los Vegas, and University of South Dakota, and future plans from several other schools.

The contribution made by academic debate to the public forum is determined to a large extent by the substantive citizen participation it engenders and the significance of the issues it addresses. As an example, with affirmative action a vital societal concern last year, the University of Alabama debaters did public debates on that topic with students from Stillman College. At Bates College, which sponsors community debates once a month on the most important issues of the day, audience participation is promoted between the constructive and rebuttal speeches, and Robert Branham reports a case in which "one of the most eloquent community speakers told me afterward that he had never spoken in public before but became 'caught up' in our discussion." On the evening before Towson State University's intercollegiate tournament, two teams debate in public on the national topic, thus giving an audience the advantage of responding to the extensive research they had done. A model program at a Midwestern state university, since discontinued, gave visiting teams a full day of debates before high school and civic club audiences, ending in the evening with a large on-campus debate, altogether involving hundreds of participants in four "rounds" of debate on timely issues (Ritter).

Debate is pervasive enough in any academic environment to have ramifications in other institutional forms. Undergraduate debating societies, often not associated with tournament travel, are a long-standing feature of college campuses. At Georgetown University, for instance, the Philodemic Debate Society sanctions weekly debates within its membership as well as 5 on-campus and 5 off-campus debates. And even the regular social science and humanities classrooms

(including communication courses) can sometimes provide a venue for debating of a public forum nature.

A number of accounts have appeared setting forth procedural recommendations and value implications of audience debate. Owen Peterson described 18 years in the history of Louisiana State University's LSU Forum, which brought audience-participation debate to tens of thousands of students and other citizens during the '60s and '70s. Among Peterson's observations was that "the Forum perhaps can claim some small credit for a broadened outlook and greater freedom of expression on the Louisiana State University campus" (438). Sam Cox and Scott Jensen in an informative 1989 essay describe in practical terms how public formats may "redeem part of debate's educational mission." And in *Argumentation and Advocacy*, for a wide forensics readership, Charles DeLancey and Halford Ryan have set forth the typical formats as well as the rhetorical values of audience debate.

Both the rationale and explicit instructions for audience debating are readily available for academic debate programs, and in some places are in active operation. Elements of such programs are in place. Academic debate can now be looked at in terms not merely of training for students but of providing a substantial and positive contribution to the re-discovery of the American public forum.

Again, however, it must be reiterated that in present practice this contribution remains largely a mere potential within the almost entirely tournament-oriented institutionalized academic debate enterprise, which ignores the public forum to the point of disdain. Much remains to be done to re-discover its public function.

## CONCLUSION

The American public forum needs for its substantial re-discovery and re-introduction into societal decision-making and value-making structures an argumentation adequate for its fullness and support as well as a broadened venue which makes participation attractive and possible. Although academic debate has in recent years subordinated its obligations to the public sphere, a re-direction is possible. (1) Academic debate can explore and develop theories and practices that will contribute to excellence and productivity of discourse in public life. (2) Furthermore it may also put on debates that serve as models of civic discourse and provide at least one venue for the citizen participation so vital for democracy.

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