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Conscientious Objections: Debating Both Sides and the Cultures of Democracy

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Our critics support debating both sides as a capacity-building exercise for democratic participation. However, the critical issues are how debate works as democratic pedagogy and what kinds of democratic subjectivity are being nurtured by this pedagogy. Our position is that when one takes care to identify historical links between the debating-both sides controversy and the (inter)national and economic particularities after World War II, a very liberal conception of democracy is being yoked to fashion the student-debater. Although liberalism has many forms, two are of particular importance to our history: the invention of Cold War liberalism as a fighting faith in the United States to challenge totalitarianism more effectively and the transformation of liberalism into a deliberative theory of democracy. We account for how the debating-both sides controversy problematized the ethical capacities of democratic subjectivity by coupling the student-debater to cold war liberalism and making possible the student-debater's re-assignment to the program of deliberative democracy. It is the historical specificity of our link story, if you will, that becomes lost when critics reduce it to the claim that debate is being put to the imperial or hegemonic service of the United States (see English et al., 2007, p. 224; Stannard, 2006, para. 28).

The problem with reducing our position to the claim that debate promotes American imperialism is that we do not identify the United States as the object of our history, but to liberalism. It is a contingent fact whether or not the United States promotes governmental regime change, scaled at either the person or the nation-state, and, in word or in deed, to promote liberal values. Other agents might include non-governmental organizations, the United Nations, the World Bank or Empire. For us, the key invention of liberalism, an invention expressed in the debating both sides controversy, is the invention of the problem space between first-order and second-order convictions. This problem space, we argue, is constitutive of "a deliberative theory of democracy, by which, communication becomes the field, instrument, and object of cultural governance" (Greene & Hicks, 2005, p. 121). A response to our critics requires returning to our story to develop a better account of how their misrecognition of our impact story is symptomatic of their liberal presuppositions.

The Problem of Conviction

The ethical problem of debating both sides ostensibly is the risk of student debaters' arguing against their convictions (Murphy, 1957, 1963). Murphy conceptualized the speech acts of tournament debaters as public utterances entailing public commitments. Murphy approached conviction as both a sincere belief and a commitment performed publicly by an advocate. The student-debater, therefore, should research and use the practice room to argue from and learn about different perspectives, but once in a debate round should be arguing from conviction. Murphy considered conviction to be prior to the public utterances of a debate round. His opponents questioned the temporality of conviction. Baird (1955), for instance, argued that conviction came after one engaged in the rigors of debating a controversial topic. Otherwise, for Baird, students were not so much learning from debate as they were speaking dogmatically.

From this perspective, debate was a pedagogical device removed from the practical life of the platform and more akin to a dialectic pedagogical exercise than public deliberative speeches. The defense of debating both sides was purchased by shifting the performance space of tournament debate from the rhetorical platform to that of a pedagogical laboratory, a safe space that allowed students to experiment with advocacy as role-playing. It was the separation of the debate tournaments from public life that troubled Dennis Day (1966). Day's intervention is the key pivot point in our story because he reveals the problem space between first-order convictions and second-order convictions. In Day's approach, debating was not so much a genre of public advocacy as it was a democratic procedure for making good decisions. Debating both sides, a practice carrying the presumption that students would argue against their first-order convictions was necessary to inculcate the view of debate as a democratic procedure. Debate as a democratic procedure was the second-order conviction that Day believed was nurtured by debating both sides because debating from a perspective one does not believe orients a debater toward valuing the norm of free and full expression.

After the Cold War, Muir (1993) defended the ethics of debating both sides from the standpoint of debate as a pedagogical game, which harnessed the practice to Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. As such, the game dynamics of debate transforms tournament debating into a safe space for a kind of moral development that locates conviction in reason. Free and full expression and a theory of moral development are key internal elements for turning liberalism into a deliberative theory of democracy.

Our critics minimize this link story to extract a policy implication. They assume that by revealing the problem-space between first-order and second-order conviction as a governing space of liberalism, we advocate that tournament debaters should debate from first-order convictions (see Stannard, 2006, para. 33). Representing our link story as an argument against multiple perspectives (English et al., 2007) and requiring debaters to argue from personal conviction is then rendered as courting fundamentalism (see English et al., p. 224) and as "more tyrannical" (Stannard, 2006, para.33) than debating both sides. Moreover, Stannard aggressively supports debate as a cross-cultural technology of truth capable of "questioning preconceptions" that protects the participating cultures from Islamic fundamentalism (para. 34).

We do not suggest that student debaters should be required to argue from first-order convictions, but instead that the debating-both sides controversy makes visible how conviction became an anxiety for liberalism. Our point, one that the argumentative stance

of our critics makes more explicit, is that the advocacy of debating both sides has sutured the critical imagination about democracy to the political agency and procedures associated with debate, which is another way of saying that democracy is limited to its liberal variants. What we support is multiplying our critical imagination about democracy beyond the liberal variants of deliberative democracy. Alternative "cultures of democracy" (Gaonkar, 2007, p. 16) exist, but they often embody practices whose "democratic character and possibilities" (p. 16) are difficult to recognize from liberal standpoints about deliberation. We should encourage the maximum forms of democratic self-fashioning in political life and debate tournaments. Unfortunately, the current defense of debating both sides still sees it as a capacity-building measure contributing to moral development of individuals for proper modes of democratic participation (see Appadurai, 2007, p. 32).

American Exceptionalism

Ours is not an ideological criticism, but a genealogical and conjunctural one. Our project is genealogical because we argue the debating both sides controversy revealed the ethical power of debate to work productively to create speaking subjects willing (or procedurally required) to regulate their communicative behavior. Moreover, this material ontology works conjuncturally because we illustrate how this ethical problematic finds political uptake in light of the Cold War and its aftermath. Our claim was that the fear of communist rhetoric and the defense of free speech worked together to create a cold war liberal vision of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism is the idea that the United States represents the exemplary subject of democratic history. Our work highlighted the liberal variant of American exceptionalism expressed in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s (1949) book, *The Vital Center*. For liberalism to meet the challenges of the Cold War, Schlesinger advocated civil rights and civil liberties (especially free speech) as the moral foundation of America's credibility to lead the free world. The United States asserted its exceptionalism as the bearer of these universal democratic norms by creating citizens in favor of civil rights and civil liberties. Our argument was that free speech worked during the cold war to secure the moral claim of U.S. leadership. Yet, the primary work to be done was on the domestic population of the United States. The more Americans imagined themselves as defenders of the process of free speech the more they developed the fighting faith to resist communist rhetoric and to resist the "Hitler and Stalin in the breast of every [hu]man" (Schlesinger, 1949, p. 250). The debating-both sides controversy revealed that to keep vigil over one's internal totalitarianism was to keep watch over one's convictions by promoting debate as a procedure for democratic decision making. Today, this same liberal variant of American exceptionalism is promoted as a usable tradition by Peter Beinart (2006) to promote how liberals might execute and win the war on terror.

Our history of how free speech ethically connected debating both sides to the political demands of cold world liberalism goes completely unchallenged. The cold war liberal variant of American exceptionalism was built on the terrain of debate and free speech and turned against the likes of McCarthy. Cold war liberalism worked from a stark opposition between the free world and totalitarian states, so too did the defenders of debating both sides. Our critic's slippage between absolutism and fundamentalism makes it difficult to know whether our critics understand cold war liberalism or the advocacy of

debating both sides as a species of fundamentalism. By periodizing the controversy about debating both sides to the Fall of 1954, a more heroic history for debate appears, but it displaces our argument concerning the liberal variant of American exceptionalism to a lament about how little academic debate seems to matter today. The idea that debating both sides might ethically split the student debater between first-order and second-order convictions came after McCarthy was dispatched. This problem space is the key to understanding how debate moves from cold war liberalism to participate in a theory of deliberative democracy. As we conclude in the next section, the deliberative democrat's claim that debate is a bulwark against fundamentalism serves the same role for today's advocates of debating both sides as totalitarianism did for cold war liberals.

Debate and the Battle against Fundamentalism

We do want to acknowledge that our critics make several important additions to the historical record. For example, English et al. (2007) show that Karl Wallace defended the 1954-1955 topic's controversial status and challenged the critics of the resolution to trust the process of debate as essential to a free society. Edward R. Murrow even took up the cause of those who supported debating the resolution. However, the rhetorical purpose of these additions, we suspect, is less about adding historical detail than facilitating the switch in gestalt that animates their criticism of our position. That is, the focus moves from the specific history we offer of how free speech was used to generate a liberal variant of American exceptionalism to an indictment of McCarthyism itself, with English et al. (2007) contending that it is a political climate of hyper-politicization and paranoia inaugurated by McCarthy, and repeated by Bush and Cheney in the war on terror, that fuels suspicion of debate's "being a weapon of mass destruction capable of jeopardizing homeland security" (p. 221). The fault, then, lies solely with the motives of these particular political actors and the dysfunctional discursive climate they cultivated to further their aims. Debate, even if perilously open to misuse, retains its essential, unblemished character as a technology for expanding the worldview of its practitioners and, thereby, as an efficacious "training ground for future advocates of progressive change" (p. 224).

Genuine debate, founded in a "robust understanding of the switch-side technique and the classical liberalism that underpins it," English et al. (2007) allege, "would help prevent misappropriation of the technique to help bolster suspect homeland security policies" (p. 224). Moreover debate, because it is an inherently progressive political technology, stands as an ever-present threat to the concentration of power in the hands of fanatical demagogues, a claim used to warrant their speculation that the debating both sides controversy "may have helped rein in McCarthyism run amok" (p. 221). The lesson is that debate is an ever-present threat to all forms of absolutism; genuine debate refuses all us/them classifications, embraces "intellectual experimentation in an age of orthodoxy" and inculcates reflexivity in the "face of fundamentalism" (p. 224).

It is no small irony that this "fighting faith" in the inherent powers of debate as a moral and political technology for fighting fundamentalism has become a central premise in the war on terror. The growing recognition inside the Defense and State Departments that the occupation of Iraq has swollen the ranks of those opposed to the United States in the Muslim world, coupled with the now obvious perverse effects forging tactical alliances with the Mujahedeen and Wahhabism, has demonstrated the need for a broader

strategy to stem the rise of anti-American sentiment.

Over the last five years, in addition to the military prosecution of the war on terror, the United States has "embarked on an ambitious theological campaign aimed at shaping the sensibilities of ordinary Muslims whom the State Department deems to be too dangerously inclined towards fundamentalist interpretations of Islam" (Mahmood, 2006, p. 329). The largest of these programs is the Muslim World Outreach (MWO). Established in 2003 the Muslim World Outreach program aims to transform Islam from within by finding and supporting organizations in Muslim countries that the United States government deems moderate, tolerant, and open to "democratic values" (Kaplan, 2005). The funding for the MWO is funneled through the United States Agency for International Development rather than the CIA or State Department and it is spent on programs that include building Islamic schools that counter the teaching of fundamentalist madrasses, training Islamic preachers, establishing radio and satellite television studies, and producing and distributing Islamic talk shows (Mahmood, 2006, p. 331). The aim of this project is to foster public debate concerning the meaning of Islam and to shape its content by providing a platform for what is broadly called "moderate Islam as an antidote and prophylactic to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam" (p. 331).

The ethical and political sensibility the MWO aims to transform is called "traditionalist" in an influential report written by the National Security Research Division of the Rand Corporation titled *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources and Strategies* (Benard, 2003). The report suggests that even though militant Islamic fundamentalist groups have been the focus of attention, the more serious, long-term threat to United States strategic interests comes from those millions of adherents of traditional Islam constituting the Islamic revival. Traditionalists believe that the Quran is the actual word of god and their goal is to preserve "orthodox norms and values and conservative behavior" (p. 4). They closely observe Islamic rituals such a praying five times a day, fasting, and veiling. Traditionalists consult the Qur'an, the prophetic tradition (hadith) and Islamic jurisprudence to guide their daily conduct. The report argues that traditionalists exhibit a "mentality willing to accept authority with few questions," a worldview, the report argues, that is "causally linked with backwardness and underdevelopment, which in turn are the breeding ground for social and political problems of all sorts" (Benard, pp. 29-30). However, as Saba Mahmood (2006) points out, it is not the substantive positions of the traditionalists that the report faults, but their modes of reasoning. Specifically, traditionalists, according to the report, fail to historicize scripture properly and, thereby, are unable to recognize that the truth of scripture is grounded not in its theological claims but in culture and history.

This failure stems from the traditionalists' inability to engage in proper forms of communicative and poetic labor, as well as a failure to treat scripture as "an object of aesthetic, poetic and spiritual appreciation" (Mahmood, 2006, p. 336). The report contends that "traditionalism is antithetical to the basic requirements of a modern democratic mind-set: critical thinking, creative problem-solving, individual liberty, secularism" (Benard, 2003, p. 33).

The central problem facing Muslim societies is the inability of many of their members to achieve critical distance between the divine text and the world and, thereby, to break their overreliance on religious authority. Securing liberal reform does not come from the promotion of pro-western positions on social and political issues, however, but through the cultivation of a critical hermeneutic disposition able to reveal the "biases and

prejudices that are a natural result of the Quran [sic] and the exegetes' situatedness within the ideological apparatuses of their time" (Mahmood, 2006, p. 339). This critical disposition is forged in and through the experience of debating the meaning and significance of texts, starting with scripture, and moving on to constitutions, laws, and science. Hence, what is needed, the Rand report concludes, is the promotion of religious debate in Muslim societies, a project that should be undertaken through collaborative partnerships between the State department and secular liberal Muslim reformers. Promoting these debates has become an explicit focus of the MWO and, more recently, the Minerva initiative inaugurated by the Department of Defense (Gates, 2008).

Although this account is by necessity too brief, what we hope is clear is that promoting switch-sides debate, for the very same reasons our critics do, as perhaps the most efficient and effective means available for refusing to honor divisions between those who believe and those who do not, as well as for using intellectual innovation as the means to extinguish orthodoxy and to diminish the hyper-conviction of those fanatics who believe too intensely, has become a significant part of the United States government's efforts to reform and reshape Islam in the service of our national security.

When understood within the context of these initiatives, our critics' claim that debate is a "weapon of mass destruction" takes on new meaning. The war on terror is being fought on two fronts: one military and the other hermeneutic. And although we are sure that both we and our critics deeply question, if not outright oppose, the military aspect of this war, we nevertheless believe that as critics, citizens, and most of all as former debaters and coaches who are deeply committed to the promises of the activity, we must file as conscientious objectors to our critics' project of deploying debating both sides as a weapon in liberal-secularism's hermeneutic battle with alterity.

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