

# SPONTANEOUS VERSUS PLANNED ORDER

by Gary Leff

When I first glanced at Larry Smith's article in the January 1998 *Rostrum* ("Curmudgeonly Thoughts on the State of Policy Debate"), I made a mistake: I dismissed it. At first brush, it struck me as a lone rant about the state of debate, with proposals far enough outside the mainstream that they had no chance for adoption.

Among other things, Mr. Smith proposed restructuring time allocations and forbidding the use of evidence except for those on 4 X 6 cards. I didn't think these specific proposals warranted consideration, and more importantly I didn't think anyone else would feel they merited discussion. As a result, I saw no reason to write a response. I was wrong.

Ultimately the question that Smith's articles raises and that's most worth considering is how we can best preserve and grow an activity that has tremendous social and intellectual benefits. I believe that the activity should be guided by the minds and ingenuity of the participants, with as few restraints as possible. Coaches should guide their students but not stifle them. Above all debate is one of the few opportunities high school students have for intellectual excitement and challenge, and we ought not risk anesthetizing it.

The problem isn't in the arguments student present in rounds. The real crux of any problem with debate lies in coaching. Hopefully we can spur a discussion of how to attract bright teachers who are willing to dedicate themselves to the activity.

## *Misunderstanding the Nature of the Problem*

Perhaps the least compelling concerns about debate today are the ones that Mr. Smith cites. The real problems are varied, but they lie far away from the speed debaters talk or the innovative arguments they develop. There aren't enough coaches and there isn't enough money available to retain the good ones.

Debate has been getting consistently more complex over time. Smith told me that in the late 1960s his teams had a hard time competing against top schools whose students spoke "too fast" and went to summer institutes. At the same time, participation has grown exponentially. It seems hard to establish a causal relationship between the innovations in debate and any perceived recent decline in participation. There are fluc-

## **Response to Larry Smith article published in the January, 1998 issue of the *Rostrum***

tuations in the strength of schools, leagues, areas, and states over time, but debate is certainly larger today than when the complaint was first registered.

A large cause of fluctuations in policy debate participation has been Lincoln-Douglas debate. When LD debate was introduced some team debaters opted for the new form of debate. More importantly, it became a draw for new students entering the activity that might otherwise have participated in policy debate. Most regions have more team debaters than they did when LD began, though perhaps not as many as they would have if there was only one kind of debate. It's similar to a stock split. All of a sudden the price per share is reduced, but the total value of outstanding stock remains the same, and may continue to grow over time. Adding events, like LD or any number of interps, draws away from existing events but reinforces the activity over time by offering more things to more people.

Speed isn't the problem either. When lay judges are confronted with debaters who speak too fast and get scared away from future judging the culprit isn't the school of thought which favors significant quantities of detailed argument. No sane coach would recommend that his or her students speak in a manner the judge cannot comprehend. It doesn't foster learning *or* winning. The problem is that the students haven't been sufficiently trained to adapt to their audience. They need a coach who can help them understand their audience and use a more appropriate rhetorical style for the particular judge.

Some schools offer the explanation for only competing in individual events and/or Lincoln-Douglas because debate is too "tough" or their students "can't compete." That just doesn't stand up to scrutiny. First, because LD is probably tougher than policy (think about teaching graduate level philosophy to fourteen year olds), and second because it isn't the kids who can't compete, but the coaches who are unable or unwilling to teach them how (or put the work in to learn to teach them how). The key to overcoming this dilemma is a pool of coaches that aren't scared off at the mention of policy.

Far from discussing how to tweak the rules of the activity, the real focal point of our discussion ought to be: how do we develop and retain talented, dedicated coaches?

Unfortunately, solutions are far from easy. If we want to attract and retain bright people, we need to pay them more. A good coach's opportunity cost is simply too high if the compensation is substantially smaller than what they can receive elsewhere. Work environment plays a part, so support from school administration is important, too.

In order to develop high school coaches, strong college programs are a huge asset, first feeding assistant coaches and then teachers well-versed in the activity into high school debate. Too often, though, there is a huge disconnect between college debate programs and the high school teams in the same town.

Maybe this will spur some discussion, because these broad strokes alone will not be sufficient. The randomness of scientific discovery suggests that by having a multitude of people working on this problem we're bound to get farther than with just a few people opining.

## *Evolving and Growing*

Though I believe that what Larry Smith describes is not good debate, simply saying "I'm right and you're wrong" isn't enough, since the concerns he expresses are real. I prefer viewing the world in a different way. I prefer to focus on the process by which debate evolves rather than the specifics of how topicality is debated or what kind of evidence can be used. The distinction I draw is between a spontaneous order and a planned order.

Spontaneous order is a dynamic process; a series of trials and errors. Individuals engaged in an activity try out different styles and different types of arguments, and those that seem to work well are adopted. Some are fleeting and others are enduring. It would be foolish to think that styles are chiseled in stone and will be around forever and thus need to be "fixed" if we don't like them. Though Karl Marx was much more inclined toward planned orders, he aptly described the aforementioned fallacy as the "illusion of the epoch;" the notion that the existing state of affairs is static and will remain unchanged.

Debate is constantly evolving and

the use of speed, critiques (or "kritiks"), and all other innovations will evolve as well. We ought to preserve an open forum where debaters can be experimental and try out new things, rather than creating restrictions in an attempt to engineer debate to meet anyone's own preferences.

Planning inevitably leads to unintended consequences which are often worse than the ills the planner originally intended to remedy. Planned economies in Eastern Europe collapsed because of the "knowledge problem": no individual possesses sufficient knowledge to control a complex system of production. Questions like what to produce, how to produce, and how much to produce can only be answered by individuals who understand their own subjective preferences and managers who look at prices as summaries of information about relative scarcity.

Likewise, no single eye can account for all of the innovations of debaters or determine the validity of an argument *a priori*. It is much better to err on the side of liberty and free experimentation than seek to control an outcome by imposing rules on an institution like debate or an economy.

The philosopher of science Michael Polanyi sums up the argument in a piece titled "Two Kinds of Order" (*The Logic of Liberty*, 1951)

**My argument for freedom in science bears a close resemblance to the classical liberal doctrine of economic individualism. The scientists of the world are viewed as a team setting out to explore the existing openings for discovery and it is claimed that their efforts will be efficiently coordinated if-an only if-each is left to follow his own inclinations. This statement is very similar to Adam Smith's claim with regard to a team of business men, drawing on the same market of productive resources for the purpose of satisfying different parts of the same system of demand. Their efforts-he said-would be coordinated, as by an invisible hand, to the most economical utilization of the available resources.**

We must maintain the position that everything is open to challenge. Isn't that what we're trying to teach students?

### ***The Unintended Consequences of Legislating Debate***

The rules that Smith proposes aren't necessarily the most contentious or the ones most likely to be adopted. As such, I comment on them here only to demonstrate the perverse outcomes that often result from attempts to plan an activity such as this, and to illustrate my point that no one per-

son possesses sufficient knowledge to direct the activity.

### **Example #1: Instructing Judges to Inject Their Own Knowledge**

Larry Smith writes that we ought to "[i]nstruct judges that they do not have to take debaters' word. If they have personal knowledge (not beliefs) that indicates an argument is blatantly untrue or counter-intuitive to logic and historical precedent, the judge may reject the argument and so note on the ballot."

How are we supposed to separate out "knowledge" from "beliefs" in any meaningful way? Most people probably "know" that the average human body temperature is 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, but they would be wrong (the original measurement was taken in Centigrade, *rounded off*, and then converted). "Knowledge" isn't supposed to be settled. Instead it should be debated.

When I debated the space exploration topic in 1990-1991, my partner and I ran a Gorbachev disadvantage. We argued that declining Soviet prestige would cause hard-line communists to stage a coup. At that point, the Soviet Union would either return to communism or more to democracy. Our position was that the United States had an important role to play in influencing the outcome. My coach told me that the position was ludicrous and that I shouldn't run it. In the summer of 1991, just such a coup occurred and the breakup of the Soviet Union ensued. Admittedly, the US space program probably wasn't instrumental in the collapse of communism, but that's exactly the debate that we had in rounds throughout the state. The future, while not unimaginable, is certainly unknowable. That's why it is folly to brand certain kinds of discourse bad or unacceptable. My coach's "knowledge" would have rejected this argument out of hand.

I was a part of another round where my partner and I did a fairly good job on the negative, and decided to collapse down to arguments we were winning in the 2NR. It was the college CEDA topic on the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We kicked out of Islamic Fundamentalism. The judge voted for us on that issue because he "served in Desert Storm and he knows it's true."

Encouraging judges to intervene in this fashion *even more than they already do* can only serve to reduce the quality of argument, limiting it to conventional and reactionary themes which play to peoples' prejudices. And it can only stifle interest in

the activity (read: less participation, not more) when the work that a debater puts in is shunted aside by a judge that has been told to put his or her preconceptions above the discourse in the round.

### **Example #2: Evidence and Evidence Quantity**

Another proposed rule would be to require that "Debaters may not utilize prepared briefs...debaters may read quotations from 4" x 6" cards in support of their arguments. There go the canned eight-page disadvantage briefs".

Far from improving debate, requiring evidence on 4 x 6 cards would force debaters to use short, conclusionary evidence, as opposed to longer, more detailed and analytical evidence, just to fit it on the index card. One of the *positive* trends in debate is students finding well-reasoned arguments that explain their claims, which can then be debated by their opponents. Eliminating this forces us back into the "he said, she said" dualism that I described earlier.

A rule against "pre-prepared briefs" could also be skirted by keeping cards in a particular order, with transition sentences written on each. Debaters are some of the sharpest students in school. Like the rules described in previous examples, they can easily be circumvented. Of course, I'd rather have students researching their cases than figuring out how to get around the rules imposed on them.

On this same issue, Smith suggests that we only "allow each debate team two evidence tubs for files." He doesn't define the size of the boxes as he does evidence cards (which, presumably, he would require the judge to measure; so much for easing the burden on judges and encouraging them to participate in the activity), so ever larger tubs would become the norm. And how about evidence that can be used either on the affirmative or the negative, depending on the case or disadvantage? Have we reached the point where we want to micromanage debate to the extent that we evaluate what evidence can be in which box?

No Rube Goldberg scheme can shackle the creativity of our brightest students, and we can't foresee their innovations or the unintended consequences of the rules that we, with the best of intentions, may pass.

### ***Preserving Debate as a Learning Process***

When we limit what is acceptable practice, a student learns all there is to know (*Leff to page 57*)

(Leff from page 22)

about debate in their first year. There are no more complex theories and innovations to grapple with. They can shut their brain down and coast the rest of the way. The affirmative says there is a problem?

Negative just says there isn't. Solving the problem would be good? Negative responds that solving the problem would be bad. Simple mechanics and Boolean logic.

Theories and "counterintuitive" arguments *are* educational. They force debaters to think. First they have to study the issue, understand it, and dissect it. Then they have to discuss and debate it. They defend it and argue against it. Implicit in debate is the assumption that discourse and argumentation yields better truths. Some arguments are successful for a short period of time and then go out of style because they become discredited (anyone remember Topicality Justification?). Others survive and change form, improving over time. Outlawing this process is anti-educational.

My ultimate point is not that Smith's proposals would be bad for the activity (although I think my position on them is clear). My point is that we don't want to try to "plan" the activity to conform to our wills, because it will inevitably backfire. We need open discourse. Let's not outlaw certain things like "theory" (whatever *that* might be defined as). If something out not be a valid argument, let's discuss its legitimacy in a round. Make a case against it, don't legislate it out of existence.

At least don't legislate against it on a statewide or nationwide level. ***Offer a tournament where you clearly spell out a set of rules.*** Good rules will attract participation, be emulated at other tournaments, and endure over time. Bad rules will get weeded out. If we impose rules "top down" this evolutionary process cannot occur.

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