

There is No Debate Community

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Abstract

This article focuses on the ways in which we describe debate as an object. Through a theoretical focus on the linguistic politics of community and home places we claim that the common phrasing of debate as a ‘community’ is both inaccurate and counterproductive. Against this, we build a theory of debate as a potential assemblage.

Freire (1970/2010, pp. 87-88) explained that there was no true pedagogic praxis without both purposeful actions and constant critical reflection upon those actions. This article takes seriously the call for constant self-reflection by focusing on how we (a pronoun that this article hopes to unsettle the boundaries of) think of debate and by proxy describe debate in language. Namely, our contention is that the common framing of persons engaged in competitive debating as a 'community' is not only a misleading signifier, but also a justification of exclusion. Admittedly, this is an argument that will seem counter-intuitive to many readers who might think of debate as a safe place, a *home* for critical thinking (hooks, 1990). We do not wish to discount these positive effects for debate nor do we question the pedagogic power of debating. Instead, we question who gets access to debate when it is thought of as a bounded object. That is, who gets to come *inside* debate when it is hailed as a community (Dikec, 2002)?

While our focus is explicitly theoretical, it should be noted that the ways we think about any pedagogic practice have an over-determining influence on what and how we teach (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Thus, while good theory might only be a *part* of good pedagogy, bad theory *always* creates bad pedagogy (Giroux, 2011). Methodologically then, this paper seeks to chart various framings of debate as an abstract object against symbolic structures and patterns of politics explicated by a variety of critical thinkers. Thus, we proceed by staking out what a community might be before holding debate as a collection of pedagogic activities and participants against this criterion. This is followed by a discussion of what potential disadvantages are accrued by thinking of debate as a community. Finally, we describe current debate practice as a *scene* before offering our alternative framing of debate as an *assemblage*.

The Community

A brief search of online message boards or email listservs focused on any format of competitive debating quickly reveals that referencing the people and schools that attend debate tournaments on a regular basis as a ‘community’ has become increasingly widespread. This phrasing is deployed when coaches and competitors wish to thank ‘the community’ after a tournament, or tell ‘the community’ goodbye as they transition away from the activity. Likewise, important issues of tournament structure and/or topic selection are put forth to ‘the community.’ Similarly, claims leveraged in metadebates about evolving forensic pedagogy and practice are often grounded in the norms, values, or expectations of ‘the community.’ From our perspective, there is no object that neatly fits into the signifier of ‘the debate community.’

Social theorists and philosophers have weighed in on what might constitute a community both in existence and practice (Hardt & Negri, 2009; hooks, 2003; Williams, 1976/1985). A particularly salient definition is provided by Dewey, who claimed, "What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—like-mindedness" (1916/1944, p. 4). Dewey’s concept of community shares with many other notions of the concept that a community is ideologically bounded, sharing common values and aims and is made up of human actors that are all intelligible and known to the other human actors within the community. Similarly, others have used the term ‘community’ to refer to groups of actors that have in kind cultural or political interests stemming from a shared struggle or similar lived experiences (for example: the African-American community, the Queer community, etc.). Conversely, debate by its intrinsic nature is driven by disagreement and ongoing agonisms. We will isolate three reasons why debate is not, and likely can never be a community.

First, debate is not a physically, temporally, or geographically bounded system or collection of actors/institutions. This means that the experienced educational contexts of the actors and collections of actors that make up debate at any given moment cannot be uniform. Instead, debate is made up of diffuse physical locations defined by school sites, some of which are loosely connected to other regional debate schools while others stand-alone. These physical outposts lack a static or finite character or limit and tend to shift, change, and merge from season to season and even during the course of single seasons. This happens because schools join and leave various debate leagues, funding is cut (and unfortunately more seldom, established) changing the potential participation of certain schools. Similarly, individual programs' travel schedules might change from season to season. Likewise, debate (and those that are believed to be 'in' debate) stretches and skips through various temporal moments and epochs. Many times former competitors that have not actively judged in a given season are nonetheless considered to be 'in' debate. Indeed, more than one first year law school student has been called the best superlative of choice 'in debate.' Furthermore, the geographic footprint of debate is both undefined and always in flux. The relative borders of NPDA debate for example have spread out and contracted multiple times over the last two decades.

Second, debate does not share a set of common values and aims. There are considerable (and un-reconcilable) differences within debate in terms of practice. Some debaters and coaches believe that debate must be fast and technical in order to maximize pedagogic outcomes, while others refuse to engage in such practices regardless of the potential competitive impacts focusing instead on honing skills aimed at public argument. Certain groups within debate espouse a true faith commitment to a form of argumentation that stems from trichotomous learning or foundational policy analysis while others tend to view these epistemes as inherently violent.

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Debaters and the teams they represent hail from social locations and material conditions of working and learning that vary markedly from one another. Regardless of how many times some folks might state the opposite, what is in the best interest of students from an elite liberal arts college is not also in the best interest of students from community colleges located in economically impoverished communities.

Third, not all actors that exist within debate are mutually intelligible to all other actors in debate. This is true for at least two reasons. In terms of sheer size, it is likely impossible for the preponderance of active competitors in debate to ‘know’ every single student competitor from every single school from the entire continent during the course of the year. Yet, perhaps more significantly there is not universal intelligibility within debate because of the slipperiness of the concept of being a member ‘of’ debate. Who has significant standing within the supposed debate community is a contested (if only implicitly) terrain that shapes which actors might have standing in any of the meta-debates we tend to engage in either online or in person.

At any given time the people who have the power to hail others under the singularity of community is based on their shifting social positioning. For example, participants in debate that have accrued a high level of competitive success but now only judge occasionally may be able to frame themselves as members of the community while community college participants that actively debate every weekend may not so easily. Likewise, parliamentary debate participants that have previously competed in policy debate may be framed as not ‘understanding the community’ when they disagree with more entrenched parliamentary participants on questions of debate theory or practice. Similarly, a former competitor who takes an unpopular orientation toward the state of competitive collegiate debating on an online discussion may be discredited for not understanding the characteristics of “the community” today.

Safe Neighborhoods

Thus, we feel confident in our estimation that debate (as an object hailed through discourse) is not a community. Some readers may be questioning why this is significant. After all, humans tend to communicate many concepts through metaphors that lack a perfect fit. However, the metaphors we use to imagine, describe, and create debate are significant for at least two reasons. First, the metaphors we speak through shape our preconceptions of the objects of discourse in meaningful ways. These subtle rhetorical comparisons prime us as audience members and participants to think of abstract objects in particular ways, and accept/reject value structures associated with such objects (Bitzer, 1968; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Second, there seems to be a tendency within forensic meta-debates to ground competing claims about the will of debate participants in the notion of the community. Indeed, discussion of both the threat and the value that epistemic and social differences seem to pose to established debate practice and practitioners are both framed through the good of the community (Fine, 2001; Miller, 2006).

Thus, speaking of debate as a community implies that certain people that do debate are in fact not proper members of the community, and that these undocumented forensic interlopers are potentially a threat to the good citizens of the community. We fear that as new forms of argumentation multiply within competitive debating that a pattern of suburban white terror seen in cities throughout the United States over the last fifty years (Brown, 1995) might rhetorically emerge within debate contexts to limit the forensic body politic down to those schools and debaters that constitute the 'traditional' debate community. Whereas 'good citizens' of many urban centers created spatially demarcated, de facto white suburban enclaves; the defense of

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debate against the influx of social and argumentative difference is enacted through discursive violence in and out of formalized debates.

Indeed the symbol of community is often mobilized as an organizing device to distinguish those who are granted full participatory membership in the grouping and those who exist on the outside. Often the schools, coaches, and competitors that are deemed to be located 'in' debate are granted temporary membership when politically necessary for those who consider there to be a single knowable thingness to debate, a thing they call community. Marginal participants may be granted community standing when their aspirations adhere to the whims of those with access to good social and competitive ranking in a given moment only to find themselves *sans-papiers* when they dissent. This process of interpellation brings with it several concerning dynamics.

Exceptionalism

First, the rhetoric of a singular debate community, is rooted in exceptionalism- a systematic process of exclusion and inclusion of particular persons (Agamben, 1995/1998, 2003/2005). Those who insist on the existence of community do this by identifying groups who possess certain signifiers both performatively and physically that deem them worthy of membership. The community will create distinctions between who is and who is not worthy of full membership based on the performative and symbolic embodiment of what the community is deemed to be like at the time. Here embodiment takes on the form of incorporation: to gain the benefits of membership one must incorporate what are considered to be community norms into their forensics praxis. When a praxis not possessing the granted legitimacy of community norms confronts the way power has been sedimentized in debate either competitively or otherwise, the dissent is not only silenced but must be labeled a threat to debate as a whole (Zizek, 2008). It is

not enough for arguments to be labeled as incorrect factually or competitively disadvantageous, unincorporated difference must be marked as a threat to the debate community's access to doing forensics 'properly.' We have seen this cycle of incorporation and exclusion repeatedly when emergent teams have engaged in forms of argumentation that are novel in a particular debate epoch. It never seems enough to question the logoi of such arguments; instead, the community must label the offenders as the example *par excellence* of the downfall of debate. After all, when the wrong kinds of people start moving in, the whole neighborhood just goes downhill before you know it.

This dynamic is concerning because it is reflective of the way that power may encapsulate and assimilate dissent. Power informed by exceptionalism distinguishes outside and inside, while also blurring the distinction between the two (Caldwell, 2004). Thus, power functions by the encapsulation of difference. When applied to the forensic context, it becomes clear how dissent can simultaneously exist in and be excluded by the systems of debate power. Namely, to squelch forms of dialogic dissent that may challenge the way power has settled in debate, the very same ordering of community declares that some forms of dissent are a part of its singular self. Power is always a part of competitive debate because it inextricably a part of knowledge production-the presupposed goal of a debate round. Thus, the violence of a sovereign knowable community does not lay in particular acts, as there is hardly a blatant kicking out of schools and competitors who might occupy the margins of what is hailed as the community, but in its demand for submission and assimilation of those schools and their accompanied ways of engaging in debate.

Benjamin (1978) explained that “[power] reveals itself to be less about punishing transgression than exerting its control over life, and doing so for the sake of [power], not life”

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(p.286). The signifier of community then, is operationalized to translate those not deemed worthy of political participation, or of holding full stake in the activity at large into energy; energy the community uses to maintain itself as a singular object. It is this practice of power which gives community 'leaders', those who supposedly speak for all debate interlocutors, the ability to decide when the community rules apply, to what extent, and when such considerations are even relevant.

Consensus

A related concern is the demand for an implied consensus. In the context of political advocacy and argumentation consensus is the idea that everyone agrees, or at least agrees about how they ought to engage in disagreement. This idea brings with it the notion of best practices in debate. Under the guise of community consensus, arguments must take on a template form and be delivered in a way consistent with the aesthetics of those norms to be granted legitimacy by the community. The aesthetic of a false or enforced consensus produces modes of doing debate that assert a universal way to engage in the dialogue we call forensics. Put precisely, consensus is the idea of the proper (Ranciere, 2010). Calls to a universal community bring with it calls to what debate should look like. These calls calcify in a supposed universal way to engage in debate. This is concerning because it flattens out difference and only reproduces existing knowledge structures. This process in turn maintains and rewards particular types of argumentative performances to thin the uncommon singularity that is debate from 'nontraditional' voices.

When collective identifiers such as community begin to partition an inside and outside and by extension frame out what type of speech is appropriate and not appropriate, a form of pedagogy is crystallized where affective experiences and relationships to debate are at best

ignored and at worst policed. For example, when students select a divergent way to speak to the structures and feelings in the topic that are not apparent to most, or something ostensibly not present, their different ways of knowing the topic and its affective manifestations are pushed to the wayside in the name of ends based rationality-the community norm. The tension between norms and experiential criticism is obvious in the way those who enforce the existence of a community navigate the unsettled territory between what can be rationally understood in the context of debate dialogue, and what some forensics participants demonstrate must be known by feeling, experience, and identity. These ignored affectations collect overtime to form ghosts in the form of memories, fears, and nostalgia (Mindell, 1995). Here we use “ghost” making as a heuristic to describe the process of exorcising the supposed undesirable feelings and desires of affective modes of engaging in dialogue. A ghost is not materially present, and is paradoxically a lingering presence nonetheless. It is a form and feeling that is not quite articulated and ephemerally defined. Dialogic ghosts then are the shadows of thoughts that never occurred because their expression was disallowed or frowned upon. After all, we have to believe if we wish to see the paranormal. Ghosts can affect our imagination and therefore produce an over determining influence on the psychic matter that form our thoughts and words. Thus favoring rational norms at the expense of affection constrains the matter that forms debate. The calculative norms of the debate community lack the openness to engage in deep consideration of these anxieties and affectations (Mindell, 2002), leading to cycles in which participants and schools that summon such ghosts must be cast out of the assumed community, lest we remember how the picket fences were built in the first place.

Because there is a supposed community and affective engagement of the topics are outside the norm, even though a good amount of forensics participants choose to

methodologically engage in topics this way, a privilege is associated with being able to do so without risk. After all, some good kids from the neighborhood might make youthful mistakes, but the same behavior performed by kids from the wrong side of the tracks is cause to clutch our pearls. When the ‘wrong’ teams debate in a non-normative manner, the community reacts in a way consistent with maintaining a perceived consensus. The reactions take on the form of anger. The community cannot label people as merely preferring different ways of engaging in dialogue, conflict, and politics; rather they are framed as people destroying the activity. Thus to maintain consensus and community, the powers that be will either encapsulate the divergence as part of itself, or demarcate it as a thing so outside of itself that it constitutes an existential threat.

Thinking Otherwise

If debate is not a community, what alternative metaphors and signifiers might be attached to debate (as an object of discourse) to describe its features? While our goal is not to replace one singular object metaphor for another, new place holder (much the contrary, our preference would be that forensic participants and pedagogues each seek their own appropriate descriptors) we offer two potential alternatives for consideration: the debate *scene*, and the debate *assemblage*. The first of these terms seems to be descriptive of what most of us mean when we reference the community of debate. The latter alternative points toward the possibility of what debate might be (in language and material practice) when unmoored from the ontology of a singular community.

The debate scene

In our estimation, the most common usages of the phrase debate community during forensic meta-debates are likely referring to the debate *scene*. We borrow the noun scene from previous work on music and cultural groups (Bennett, 2004) and specifically through the usage of scene as a descriptor in punk music culture (Davis, 2006). There are two elements of a music

scene that fit the supposed debate community. First, a scene is a collection of persons (sometimes geographically centered, but not always) brought together through their mutual admiration of, or interest in, creating/promoting very specific aesthetics (Bennett, 2004). Secondly, scenes tend to have an element of ‘clique’ politics that determine their human content (Davis, 2006). That is, presence at communal events in and of itself does not constitute being part of the scene. Instead, scene membership is only attainable to those that have the proper social-cultural cache with the rest of the scene.

We believe that what passes as the debate community might be better described as a scene then, for several reasons. First, the scene is framed as available to all interested parties in a given geographic area at a particular time, but this guaranteed access usually amounts to the *mere* right to presence. In the same way that “all ages” punk shows are framed as egalitarian in their manner of access (Azerrad, 2001), the debate scene frames itself as being open to ‘all’ by virtue of not explicitly banning certain types of schools or participants. However, both all ages shows in the music scene and debate tournaments draw a distinction between those who may attend and those who ‘belong’ (Bockris, 1998/2000). Likewise, a similarity exists in the manner in which these lines of demarcation are drawn. In both instances, an aesthetic judgment is passed that sorts bodies into or out of the scene.

Thus, rather than a community, debate (as it is presently conceptualized and practiced) is a scene. Debaters, coaches, and schools do not have access to debate ‘citizenship.’ Instead, they merely gain or lose standing as a debate ‘scene kid.’ While this may seem pithy, our denigration of status quo debate politics is purposeful. When meta-argumentation rushes to framings of who is ‘in’ or ‘out’ we are (as a scene) acting like disaffected scene kids. Perhaps though, it is more productive to focus on what debate might become instead of what it presently seems to be.

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The debate assemblage

Our alternative to the framing of debate as a community (in language and practice) and manifestation as a scene is the debate *assemblage*. Assemblages are in a constant state of flux, and are made up of radically different parts that relate to one another exteriorly (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2007). They can operate as a whole, but do not have a designated, singular, purpose to that operation. For a thing to have exterior relations is for it to possess at once a unity and at the same time a heterogeneous makeup, with respect to that difference (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2007). To be part of an assemblage is to be part of an always productive relationship that in terms of form is a unit, but in content is a multiplicity of thoughts, ontologies, and experiences (Puar, 2007). Assemblages are always the products of particular histories and contain multifarious component parts that are constantly emergent and contingent, yet appear as a seemingly stable totality (Delanda, 2006). Thus, there are no starting or ending points to an assemblage.

Because the assemblage is a *process*, we are allowed to reframe particular questions. Instead of asking what the community is, and who is a part of the community, we instead ask what potential does this uncommon collection we call debate possess. What might become of debate and what might debate become? The linguistic and conceptual move to the assemblage intuits that while debate may at times feel stable in a given moment, at its core it remains always unstable. Reframing discussions of collective identifiers in the context of debate away from an inside and an outside allows to instead conceptualize of the assemblage in terms of ‘and this...and this...and this...’ instead of the community distinction between ‘this...but not that’ or ‘always this, but never that’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2007).

Debate is a potential assemblage because it is made up of a set of ever changing parts that are geographically, ideologically, and experientially diverse. There is no starting or ending point to debate; rather it exists as an uncommon collection of people with their own starting and ending points. This diversity creates emergent relationships that momentarily operate as a whole, and are defined by their conflict. This conflict produces differences, new thoughts, and potentialities; and reproduces the fluidity of the assemblage. Frankly, this shouldn't be surprising. Debate at its core holds only one single defining value: we should disagree.

To hail debate as a bounded object then, is to take the fluid anti-structure that is the debate assemblage we refer to and impose an organizational order on it through a mode of territorialization. Territories have gates, fences, and marked boundaries that bring with it the exclusionary dynamics of 'community' discussed above. To territorialize the scene is to stratify what and who may belong physically and aesthetically. This article has investigated the ways 'community' rotates as a signifier to carve out territory and boundaries. Yet this shouldn't be conceptualized of as only creating dichotomies between belonging and exclusion because with each act of territorialization comes a stratification in the assemblage that produces lines of segmentarity which paradoxically create the potential for deterritorialization and by extension new exterior relationships (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2007). Indeed the marking of an outside creates ruptures in the assemblage that produce new disagreements, new formations of resistance, and new intersections of participation. Calls to community may have an effect of consent and exclusion, but the very process of building fences means they can be hopped.

Becoming Debate

We believe there are at least two advantages to thinking of debate as an assemblage. Conceptualizing of debate as an assemblage helps to question hierarchies and binaries by

allowing us to hypothesize about things in a way that proposes everything can possess a multiplicity of stories, structures, and relationships by destabilizing consensus and producing spaces for affect and divergence in dialogue. This allows the potential for both dissensus and agonism.

First, debate as an assemblage ruptures notions of implied consensus to produce new forms of pedagogic thinking that place difference as productive in terms of conflict. It should be noted, conflict is not synonymous with violence (Ramsbotham, 2010). Instead, violence (both material and symbolic) is often the outcome of the cessation of linguistic and ideological conflict (Toros, 2012). Disrupting the epistemic underpinnings of implied order and the aesthetic of civility is what Jacques Ranciere described as dissensus. Ranciere explained:

Dissensus means a difference between sense and sense: a difference within the same, a sameness of the opposite. If you assume that politics is a form of dissensus, this means that you cannot deduce it from any essence of the community, whether you do it positively in terms of implementation of a common property such as communicative language (Aristotle) or negatively in terms of a response to a destructive instinct that would set man against man (Hobbes). There is politics because the common is divided. (2011, p. 1).

Thus, there is generative benefit to conflict and multiplicity. There is no handed down, implied, or maintained community in politics. There are conflicts, productions, and together there are agonisms. When we embrace these moments of disruption we open up the possibility of change both from within ourselves and throughout the debate assemblage (Toros, 2012).

Second, these agonisms create spaces that allow forensic interlocutors to escape the naturalized rush to end-based rationality when discussing topics (Mouffe, 2000/2009). The ethic

of the assemblage is key to creating the conditions for divergent modes of criticism in debate that allow us to think of the complex problems we might discuss in more holistic ways. Of note, we do not mean to imply criticism defined narrowly as ‘the K.’ Instead, we mean an ongoing criticism that is premised upon the fact that we do not know what debate might be or become should we have the courage to allow ourselves to think in different modes (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/2009). For example, instead of an obsession with linear calculations we might ask how the topics at hand poses an affective relationship with the past that might materially come to bear on, or *haunt*, the bodies present. We might ask how our own subjectivities interact with debate, and we might do all of this without asserting that debate as a forum is somehow at stake because of it.

Readers may be concerned about how the assemblage translates into pedagogic practices. Indeed, our proposal may make judges of competitive debate rounds uncomfortable because there is no longer an effective and objective way to evaluate argumentation. Simply put, there never was a way. The selection of a winner and loser in competitive debate is a matter of preferring one form of personal advocacy over the other even if both fit within the context of normalized debate practices. Relinquishing an artificial attachment to ‘objective,’ or ‘rational’ evaluations of debate rounds is necessary to free competition from competing normative claims of what ought to be done about the topic, and instead create new affective methods of engaging in and evaluating debate dialogue. We do not wish to describe what this may look like in any systematic way, but precisely the opposite. Indeed debate is really in trouble when a few may partition out difference for the sake of maintaining the forum as is. Thus, we should stop asking what debate is and focus on the many ways debate might become.

Conclusions

The language we use conceptually to describe activities ultimately defines and produces those activities in particular ways. Thus, we believe that while this article has devoted quite a bit of theoretical energy toward the simple phrase ‘debate community,’ such seemingly minor considerations have a ripple effect when they become the starting point for how we talk about and enact our pedagogic choices in forensics.

There is no debate community. There never has been, and never will be a singular, knowable object that contains within it all of debate. Thankfully, what we currently consider our community is likely nothing more than a scene. We believe that this frame of considering debate blunts the pedagogic potential of what we all do together at competitive debating tournaments. At its core, debate is about forced disagreement and the knowledge, growth, and beauty intractable difference creates through continuous agonisms. We are not all the same, and we do not all agree on much of anything other than disagreement is productive. Thus, we believe that a debate assemblage might be built out from this singular point of departure and spiral in unpredictable ways into a pedagogic multiplicity. What does this alternative look like? Thankfully, we don’t know.

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