

Debate: A Cross-cultural Perspective

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Despite the unity of language and hundreds of years of history, academic debate among the English-speaking nations has developed independently in terms of style and the level of esteem in which the respective society holds the activity. Primarily focusing on debate in the United States and European debate in Ireland and the United Kingdom, I will describe the differences between European and American debating styles and the differences regarding respect for debate, with particular emphasis on possible reasons for those differences in style. I will also describe and explain apparent differences in the level of cultural esteem for debate. First, for background we'll look at academic debate in North America and in Europe, and then we can examine the inception and development of academic debate as a foundation for further discussion. Third, we'll discover the nature and possible reasons for the divergence in style between the two regions. Overall, as we will see, the difference in styles between Europe and America are undeniable, however, the differences in level of esteem within the host society, though marginal, give a distinct advantage to European debate.

I. The Present State of Debating

In the United States a variety of debate associations exist, but for our purposes, we'll concentrate on three of the most popular; the Cross-Examination Debate Association (CEDA), the National Debate Tournament (NDT), and the American Parliamentary Debate Association (APDA). CEDA and NDT share similar structure,

style, and emphasis, but differ the argumentative burdens imposed upon the debaters.¹ Structurally, both forums contain four constructive speeches of eight to ten minutes each alternating between two two-person teams, the affirmative and negative. Both forums allow three minutes of cross-examination after each constructive speech, and four alternating, four- or five-minute rebuttals beginning with the negative team. By switching the alternation, the affirmative team has the first and last word. Offsetting the advantage of the last word, the negative team has thirteen minutes of almost continuous argumentation, "the negative block," presenting the first affirmative rebuttalist with the crucial and sizeable task of arguing as many of the negative's points as possible in less than half the time of the negative block. Both forums also offer preparation time.

APDA has adopted a modified parliamentary system of debate. Rather than have the teams represent the affirmative and negative sides of the resolution, the parliamentary system has the two teams represent the government and the opposition, much like European governmental parliaments. No preparation time is allowed, no cross-examination period takes place, and only six speeches, rather than eight, take place in a round of competition, tournaments being the primary forum.²

¹Though this section largely derives solely from my personal experience debating in CEDA for seven semesters in novice, junior, and open division, I think it fairly describes commonly held views regarding the parameters and characteristics of the activity.

²This section also relies on conversations with the President of APDA and members of the Princeton Debate Society in addition to personal experience.

CEDA and NDT debating occurs almost exclusively within a competitive tournament format throughout the academic year. The resolution, or topic for the debate, remains the same throughout either the year or the semester. At the competitions, audiences in preliminary rounds, other than the judge, are a rarity, though for the elimination rounds, other eliminated competitors or teammates may watch for experience or "moral support." Judges for CEDA and NDT are predominantly former (or present) debaters, speech communication specialists, or other university faculty.³

In contrast, APDA parliamentary debaters often must react to an audience. And the judges, usually students, have little specialized knowledge about the topic and often have had limited exposure to intercollegiate debating. The resolutions are announced ten to fifteen minutes before the beginning of each round, making prepared speeches virtually impossible. The opposing side, expected to be silent while the other team speaks in NDT and CEDA, is expected to taunt the other team to some degree in the rounds. Heckling is meant to be short, witty, and to the point, and can both distract and undermine the credibility of the speaking team. The dynamism of such a forum cannot be overemphasized, however, the threat of shallow argumentation always lingers and occasionally rears its head as a result of debaters pandering to the audience.

Delivery on the CEDA circuit ranges from the rare "communication" round, featuring a moderate rate of delivery, to

³Occasionally, a "lay" or inexperienced judge will judge rounds, but they are the exception rather than the rule.

the common "speed" round and periodic (some would say common) hyper-speed round. Most debaters, judges, and coaches agree NDT rate of delivery is generally faster (Steinfatt 66). In 1974, J. Robert Cox wrote an article entitled "A Study of Judging Philosophies of Participants of the National Debate Tournament. Though not centered on speed delivery, or "spreading," the study included remarks by judges on spreading at the 1974 National Debate Tournament. As part of his conclusions, Cox noted,

Almost all of the 1974 NDT participants displayed (though at times reluctantly) a willingness to "flow" a spread round. Only a few critics indicated they "generally give low points to spread debaters." So long as debaters met basic requirements for intelligibility, most participants tolerated this form of discourse, "believing the ultimate value of competitive debate to be analysis and not oratory."(22)

Such conclusions are still valid today in CEDA and NDT, where a prerequisite to winning rounds seems not to be persuasiveness but quantity of argument.⁴ The argumentative intensity required for spreading in most rounds has been described as "hostile and uncivilized" by those less familiar with debate as it exists today (Steinfatt 67). With the exception of some cross-examination periods and some rounds with larger audiences, humor rarely comes into play. Emotion is virtually impossible to

⁴This comment is not meant to imply speed debating is incapable of being intellectually complex, rather speed is a more commonly used tool than outright persuasiveness ceteris parabis.

detect in most rounds, while ardent attempts at persuasiveness and genuine advocacy are similarly uncommon.

Developed largely as a reaction to the speed and evidence emphasis of NDT/CEDA debating, parliamentary's focus is on delivery and persuasive argumentation. Speed is not tolerated in APDA. Structurally, the rounds are run on a European, parliamentary model, though only a few formalities of parliamentary procedure are used. Rounds are most commonly judged by one to three judges with one judge acting as "Mr. or Madame Speaker." The Speaker introduces each debater and rules on points of order and personal privilege brought up by either team. While speaking, a debater in a parliamentary round may be interrupted by a member of the other team, who rises to a point of order or a point of personal privilege. Points of order are usually an attempt to prevent the speaking debater from offering new arguments in the rebuttals. Points of personal privilege may be offered as protection from personal attacks and insults. The Speaker, whose judgement is final, determines and immediately rules aloud in the round whether the point is justified or not. Points of order will not cause a win or loss by themselves, but can be damaging to either team.

European parliamentary debate, on the other hand, is, for all intents and purposes, the only kind of debate in those countries, and has changed little in a century and a half. Its structure, style, and emphasis have remained largely unchanged, with the level of formality the primary source of variety.

The least formal and most prevalent format for competitive European debate has been called "intervarsity" debate. Noteworthy tournaments which have used the format include the World Debating Championships (World's) and the Observer Mace, though World's sometimes adopts other formats. These competitions feature a government and opposition, but, instead of two teams, four teams compete in a round; two teams of two persons each represent a side. Each debater speaks for seven minutes, and no preparation time is given. Rather than use a cross-examination period, the European format allows points of information, the only kind of parliamentary procedure utilized. From the beginning of the second minute of a speech to the end of the sixth minute, any debater from the opposing side may rise to ask the speaker for permission to ask a question, a point of information. The speaker may refuse, but is expected to accept about two or three, thus striking a balance between time belonging exclusively to the speaker and time for the opponent to question the speaker. The resolutions are called motions, and range from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the concrete to the ethereal. Announced shortly before the round, motions change from round to round.

The inclusion of four teams adds nuances to strategy absent from all North American forms of debate. The first two teams must do their best to cover the most significant, logical, and predictable arguments to make the closing teams' job of bringing up new arguments more difficult. The opening teams must also stay active in the debate, offering points of information.

Otherwise, the twenty-eight minutes that pass after the last opening speaker before the end of the debate leaves ample time for the judges to forget the opening teams. The closing teams rarely abandon the arguments of the opening teams on the same side, yet they must distinguish themselves and make unique contributions. Each team is ranked first through fourth and speakers are assigned points. Such considerations add to the drama of the debate, but complicate the decision of the judges immeasurably in some rounds.⁵

More formal debating occurs as part of the university debate club's regular activities. Most European clubs, called debating societies or unions, hold weekly, non-competitive debates open to the public. Often, guest speakers from government participate (Langwollner). These debates model the national parliaments of Europe down to the seating arrangement; members of the government sit on the right of the Speaker while members of the opposition sit on the left. After four opening speeches to represent each side (two speeches a side), speakers from the audience may address the motion. Time limits vary, but typically, the opening speeches are longer than the floor speeches. At the end of the debate, the entire "House" votes on the motion, and the meeting is adjourned. The strictness of observance of parliamentary procedure and the seriousness of the debate varies depending on

⁵Other drawbacks of the format include inherent disadvantages to the first government speaker position and the first government team, who rarely win rounds due to the absence of a rebuttal, and the impossibility of "refutation" if speaking first.

the motion and the level of formality desired by the Union.
(Rodden 312).

II. History of American and European Debating

When viewed through the narrow perspective of the present, the differences between debating in North America and Europe seem natural, almost expected. However, viewed with a knowledge of the past, the present state of debating in the two regions becomes ironic. Winders and O'Neill offer one of the few accounts of the development of debate in America, and, though already limited in depth, a summary of its facts will suffice for the purpose of this paper.

The history of debating in America goes back as far as colonial times when the activity focused on philosophy, logic, and religion. In the nineteenth century, debating became obsessed with delivery, and propositions for debate were accordingly perfunctory. After the Civil War, topics debated became more current, and the seriousness of the topics, and thus the activity, prompted the founding of debating societies in universities across the country. The advent of intercollegiate debating or "dual debates" as they were called, naturally followed. Surprisingly, as Winders and O'Neill explained, "such debates were festive occasions" (12). As Winders and O'Neill went on to describe,

Large crowds came to hear and heckle. Prayer, group singing, and orations usually preceded the debate. There were cheers for points well made, boos for mistakes, and

great laughter for sarcasm and humor. Often the audience itself voted on who had won the debate; sometimes distinguished politicians and attorneys were on hand to judge. Occasionally a "wrong decision" was booed vigorously by the audience who disagreed. (12)

Such a characterization of American debate sounds remarkably analogous to a European debate. Transcripts from debates in the 1930's show American dual debates, and their public orientation, continued through the 1940's. However, such similarities began to wane with the introduction of multiple-university, tournament debating in the mid-'30s. Though public, dual debating continued (some were even broadcast over the radio) at least through the late 1940's, tournaments rapidly became the focus of debating activity in the United States.⁶

With the advent of tournament debating came the birth of another phenomenon—increased rate of delivery—though the time period when delivery in American debating began to increase isn't as easily determined as the initiation of tournament debating. Steinfatt, in an insightful and amusing 1990 article, explains how his reintroduction to debate after a twenty-three year absence took him by surprise.

Concerning the style of the majority [of the debaters I saw], I was prepared for speed. I was not prepared for total unintelligibility and hostility in delivery. Several debaters must have come close to dying from stroke.

⁶Transcripts from dual debates may be found in the University Debaters' Annual, a series dedicated to recording text from debates of that era.

. . .The very worst speaker I saw, who had a good record in the varsity division, . . .gave his entire presentation with both forearms supporting his upper body weight while leaning on a low table, from which he read his whole speech verbatim. . . .He turned from a normal color to beet red during his constructive, which he screamed at the top of his lungs. I was quite surprised to see him survive the experience. (66)

The inference the reader can make is that Mr. Steinfatt, who debated in the mid-1960's, has noted, like many others, a clear increase in speaking speed from a rapid rate of delivery to an unintelligible, but somehow judgeable, blur.

The history of American debate has vacillated from one extreme to the other. From the logician-philosophers of colonial times, the delivery-minded elocutionists of the nineteenth century, and the public-oriented debates of the post-Civil war era, we now see an almost exclusive use of the sequestered tournament atmosphere. In the minds of many debate has changed from a lofty tradition of understandable oratory to a rapid-fire battle of evidence, while others view the changes as a natural and preferable progression from shadow to substance. American debate has experienced a varied history.

The history of European debate, on the other hand, has been characterized by an ability to develop new styles of debating without abandoning old ones. The debating unions of Oxford and Cambridge, which have received much of the attention of the scholarly journals, were founded in the 1820's (Rodden 308).

Ireland's Trinity College, which recently celebrated its quacentenary, provided a forum for the College Historical Society, the oldest debating union in the world (Bolger), and also host for the most recent World Debating Championships.

Unlike American debating at its inception, British debating unions were forbidden from debating religious topics (Skorkowsky 354). As has been previously mentioned, the debates of the unions modeled themselves after the typical national parliament. As a result, ". . .the early unions provided young would-be politicians ample opportunity and encouragement to polish their rhetorical skills" (Skorkowsky 356). And, as recent as 1948 some observers still viewed European debating as motivated more by the importance of the political issues than the political aspirations of the orators (Benn, Boyle, and Harris 470). Since intervarsity debating did not exist, the "sheer love of debating" was also cited as a source of argumentative inspiration (Benn, Boyle, and Harris 472). However, according to Skorkowsky in 1971, both the spread of intervarsity debate and the inflated importance of the entertainment value of the activity led to the trivialization of parliamentary debating (339). In other words, though speech communication literature has historically praised British parliamentary debating, Skorkowsky took issue with the desirability of the developments in British-style debating over the years and the substance of the style itself (336).

Rodden in 1985, however, takes a more moderate view of European debating. By providing a comprehensive description of the many variations in parliamentary debating, Rodden showed some

types of British debating are meant to be more serious than others (309). "British debaters usually do have strong reservations about debating against conviction," Rodden wrote, "but I found that their attitude varies with different formats and motions" (312). Overall, though, the European style of debating has remained largely unchanged, with a varying adherence to the parliamentary format, a focus on persuasion, a public orientation, and the relatively recent introduction of intervarsity debating. Such characteristics distinguish European debate from traditional American debate which puts a premium on evidence, argumentation, speed, and tournament competition.

As a result of the differences of the two styles of debating, societal esteem of the activity also seems to differ. Judgements on relative levels of cultural esteem are relatively clear. How often does a member of the U.S. Congress attend a debate tournament, let alone participate? How often does a debate tournament make front page news in an elite U.S. newspaper? A debate sponsored by the Oxford Union over the fate of the Social Democratic Party and attended by the leader of the party in the U.K. made the front page of the London Times, a widely recognized and respected newspaper (Rodden 311). A former prime minister of the Republic of Ireland chaired the final round of the 1992 World Debating Championships, which I attended in January of 1992. Similarly, the results of national and international tournaments such as the World Debating Championships, when hosted by a European country, and the Observer Mace are typically well-received and are national news

(Langwollner). Even national tournaments in America are not so notorious. Some have noted that the best debaters on some European campuses receive the kind of attention usually reserved for star athletes in America (Temple and Dunn 51). Indeed, supporters of American debating have largely sought the attention and respect of its own community rather than the community at large.

Historically, then, debate in North America has changed while European debate has remained relatively constant. And, levels of esteem have also changed for America over time. Today, American debate has sped up, accommodates extensive amounts of evidence, and allows for a large number of independent arguments while parliamentary debate has maintained an emphasis on persuasion and audience adaptation. Some of the historical cause-and-effect for the divergence is clearer than other causal inferences, but the causes can be distilled down to economic, academic, and historical in nature. All have their cultural ramifications.

III. Why The Difference?—Possible Explanations.

American debate has experienced a number of changes, while European debate, which began as parliamentary, has largely remained parliamentary, though some slight changes have occurred. For over one hundred years, American and European debate grew virtually independent of one another, and yet, as noted earlier, the style and format of the debating remained surprisingly similar. Both formats featured a public orientation, persuasive speaking, and a great degree of audience participation. The

roots of debate in the English-speaking countries appear, then, to have grown from a common seed, but the strains are now completely different. Two forces, both present in the U.S., seem to account for the drastic differences which now exist: the introduction of tournaments and the increasing nationalization of competition.

Tournaments became necessary due to the existing structure of forensic activity in the United States in the thirties and due to the economic constraints of the Great Depression (Windes and O'Neill 12). Though the Great Depression affected European economies, the debating unions did not rely on college administrations, existing largely independent of faculty (Benn, Boyle, and Harris 472). Conversely, American debate relied on faculty coordination and financial support from the university, and dual debates, as a result, were an inefficient use of scarce funds. Motivated by economic forces, tournaments offered multiple debating opportunities within a short time period at a marked savings over dual debates (Winders and O'Neill 12). As early as 1947 Quimby raised concerns over possible effects tournaments could have on debate.

In the United States today, . . .we are putting more and more dependence on upon debate tourneys. . . .When [tournaments] become the major part of the program, their educational values should receive careful scrutiny, with respect to both the institution and to the debater. A recent study of competitive debate states that tourneys are being used more and more because of less administrative work

and expense and less work in preparation for the debater. How about our educational objectives? (160)

One of the unfortunate side effects of the tournament setting would be more emphasis on winning rather than the educational intent of the contest. However, in 1947 when Quimby published the previous passage, most debate programs still included activities beyond tourneys, thus educational objectives were still met as Buehler noted.

Tournament debating has had its greatest expansion since the war. Its overuse is an abuse, not a basic fault of our system. It is definitely not the tail that wags the dog. Most of our tournaments form only a part of a larger program of speech activities which include discussion, the legislative assembly, oratory, extempore speaking, radio speaking, after-dinner, and other forms of speaking.

(Buehler 430)

Thus, initially tournaments served to complement a larger, more comprehensive program in speech training. Over time, though, tournaments came to dominate debate activity as they do today, even to go so far as to subsume many of the speaking activities Buehler wrote about.

As an adjunct to the domination of tournament debating, expert judges rather than heckling audiences became the norm. The domination of tournaments and expert judges came to be both accepted and seen as advantageous. Writing in response to a British criticism of American debate, Buehler saw the focus on the judge as an advantage of tournament debating.

The American debater appeals to the critical, expert judge. The British, on the other hand, design their debates to appeal to a large layman audience, a large indiscriminating jury, ready to laugh and cheer at the human foibles depicted by the speakers. (431)

As implied by the passage, Buehler felt parliamentary debating was often more whimsical than logical. Arguments raged in the thirties and forties about the educational value of tournaments, and, if the status quo is any indication, supporters of tournaments won. Tournament debating may be singled out as a primary cause of side effects, including specialization of argument, creation of a discourse community, decreased audience attendance and participation, and, resultantly, a deemphasis on adaptation to large audiences. However, the advent of tournament debating did not solely cause the move away from persuasion.

Rather than the primary cause, tournaments merely preceded the nationalization of competition, and, eventually, the shift in emphasis from persuasion to evidence. In a brief phone interview, James A. Johnson, one of the founders of CEDA, attributed the development of speed debating to the growth of a national debating circuit in the late sixties and early seventies.

With the spread of competition on a national level, [teams] began to think of new strategies, new approaches to get an upper hand in unfamiliar territory. Especially on the negative, new, more innovative arguments were created as national competition spread (Johnson).

As a result, he agreed, both creative arguments and more traditional arguments led to the inclusion of both in rounds. Thus, by not abandoning the old arguments, an increased number of arguments made their way into rounds, putting more pressure on affirmative teams, especially the first affirmative rebuttalist.

The spread of competition also exposed teams to a greater variety of cases. How, then, could a team prepare itself for every case imaginable? Of course, no team could prepare for every case, so generic, pre-briefed, evidence-packed positions also began to gain popularity, further contributing to the increasing rate of delivery in rounds (Johnson). Some authors touted pre-briefing as essential to advanced debating.

After they have met the attack in essentially the same form several times, they may hone their answers to perfection and present them concisely and incisively. Prudent advocates preplan answers to recurring problems—and to problems they anticipate may arise. (Freeley 252)

Such training places the importance of evidence and speed over the necessity of persuasion, and portends the continued use of "spreading" within NDT and CEDA.

American debating has changed considerably over the past two hundred years. The changes pertinent to today's debaters, judges, and administrators, like speed, evidence, and diminishing persuasion in rounds, occurred beginning in the thirties and culminated in the mid-seventies.

The changes in European debating, on the other hand, have not been as drastic. As has been previously mentioned, the most

significant change has been the introduction of intervarsity debating which has not been enough to change the fundamental characteristics of the activity. As noted by Rodden, ". . . Despite the intervarsity tournament's increasing popularity, the modified parliamentary debate remains the most common format in union programs" (315). The speed, structure, and style of debating still puts a premium on audience adaptation while the use of current and voluminous evidence has been precluded by the nature of the format.

IV. Areas for Further Study

Claims about the superiority of one form of debate over another, the alleged cultural differences which preclude the successful merging of the formats, and the necessity of modifying traditional debate are not central to the purpose of this paper. However, upon understanding the present state of debating in most of the English-speaking world, the development of debating in Europe and America, and the causes of changes in both European and American debate, such questions inevitably arise. Two contrasting views are concisely portrayed by Eubank and Rodden. Wayne C. Eubank, University of New Mexico, wrote in 1949,

In two nations whose cultural and institutional patterns vary widely, why shouldn't their philosophy and practice of debate (and discussion), in functioning bases of democracies vary also?

Eubank's conclusion stems from cultural differences and a contentment with diversity. John Rodden of the University of Virginia in 1981 presented an opposing viewpoint.

Just as Britain has, as it were, anglicized competitive American debate within its own debating tradition, so too we can 'americanize' some aspects of the British system and yet preserve our traditional emphasis on fact and evidence. In doing so our systems can selectively 'adopt' and thereby revitalize each other.

More accurately, Rodden may be seen as the middle ground between the view held by Eubank and the other extreme—as represented by APDA's disdain for and abandonment of CEDA and NDT. Indeed, the range of opinions varies widely.

I have not sought to provide the panacea to the many problems of the traditional style of debating or the parliamentary style of debating. But, by reading some of the background regarding the history of debate, areas for further study readily appear. We may ask ourselves, "Have judges in NDT and CEDA become too understanding of the spread?" And, "Is parliamentary debating all show and no substance?" Or, as we begin to weigh options, other questions arise, for example, "Does the importance of research, evidence, and argumentation outweigh the importance of audience adaptation and persuasiveness?" and, "How do we best balance the importance of research, evidence, and argumentation with good speaking skills and persuasive techniques?" and, more fundamentally, "Can the United States learn any lessons from European debating? Should we?" Of

course, the answers will point to the appropriate modifications. The field of research is not limited to the questions I have posed. However, regardless of the question posed, we must recognize the ramifications of history and culture before delving into any comprehensive assessment of the alternatives.

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