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A Response to Crenshaw's "Dominant Form and Marginalized Voices: Argumentation about Feminism(s)"

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Professor Crenshaw makes a courageous and sadly accurate assessment of causal reasoning and intercollegiate debate where argumentation concerning feminism(s) are concerned. Her conclusions about marginalization and reductionism demonstrate the presence of a serious lack of scholarship and critical inquiry on the part of student advocates, debate coaches, and, I suspect, debate judges.

At the most recent CEDA National Tournament, I had the displeasure of observing the reality of such marginalization first-hand, when two female debaters (a hybrid team, one of whom was my student) were subjected to what can only be described as sexual harassment[1] in a debate which featured the very process Crenshaw has described. Not only were feminist authors lumped together into one school of thought, they were then referred to in derogatory terms *because of their gender and theoretical lack of objectivity*. The effect of this reductionism was not only to marginalize the feminist theory but also the female advocates in the debate itself. To say that this contributed to the outcome of the debate is to make a serious understatement; the female debaters lost this contest as the judge complained of their taking this process too personally.

This essay is not about sexual harassment, however; I will leave that to another forum. I merely wish to observe that this practice does occur. In this sense, Crenshaw's essay can and does stand on its own. If I have an objection to her essay, it is only that she does not go far enough in her claim, for it is my contention that the problems she describes (which arguably are unique to argumentation regarding feminism) also can be applied to almost every kind of critical issue we examine in debate. Professor

[1] The nature of that incident is *not* the focus of this essay, and hence I shall omit the details involved. Suffice it to say for now that the female students *and their evidence* were subjected to gender specific verbal abuse throughout the debate, elevating to a level which materially affected their ability to proceed or derive education from the experience.

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Crenshaw's piece rekindled in me something I knew only too well as a debater and have been far too lax about as a coach. I don't find myself unique in this respect. In a sense, this process of reductionism is very much a part of the larger problem with the way we participate in, coach, and evaluate debates. In my judgment, a great deal of this stems from the appalling lack of scrutiny we bring to the research phase of debate—and the evidence it in turn produces.

Western culture and the now traditionally accepted norms of reasoned discourse demand proof for arguments, which would otherwise be little more than assertions. Evidence supplies that proof in argument. Modern competitive debate has refined this process to an elaborate series of documentations to "prove" claims or assertions. In itself, this use of evidence is valid and valuable, as it raises debate to a more informed, educational level. Students of different questions and topics not only learn because of the research that goes into their preparation, they hopefully learn from the laboratory the debate itself provides, when analyzing a topic and dissecting the evidence for or against it.

The use of evidence in modern debate, however, can also promote a overly relaxed or perhaps inaccurate learning experience, as it all too often reduces the mental stretching required of advocates, who sometimes feel content to pass that cliché we have all heard at one time or another: "This must be true; I have a card which says so!"

This attitude in an environment thriving upon competition has resulted in shoddy scholarship, overclaiming of evidence, and, as Crenshaw has observed, confusion and misapplication of positions. One needn't look only at feminism to see this. In the last twenty years, can't the same complaint about reductionism be made about such topics as growth,[2] proliferation,[3] or constitutional rights?[4] Moreover, on the subject of marginalization, how often do we hear students debating policies about HIV and AIDS, referencing the gay community as if it were one homogeneous unit, lumping both gay

[2] Both economic and population growth are terms which, over time, have been confused by debaters. The schools of thought for both are wide and diverse.

[3] Here I could be talking about nuclear or conventional, horizontal or vertical. Again, how often have we reduced these very different concepts?

[4] I cringe each time I hear students confusing language from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Equally, how often are arguments about different forms of due process attributed to the wrong amendment, or for that matter, are different rights *in the same* amendment confused (for example, religion and expression in the First Amendment)?

men and lesbians together in the same camp? In my experience, I have witnessed the same with reference to the "African American community" in this country, flying in the face of demonstrable value differences owing as much to geography as to accident of birth. In point of fact, I could go on and on. Our students do engage in the very practice Crenshaw describes, but on a much wider scale.

I don't place the blame for this solely on students; to be sure, as educators we coaches and teachers need to do some reexamining ourselves. The same is doubtless true of judges.

In many respects, what's missing is a lack of the very critical thinking skills we are supposed to be teaching and practicing. Specifically, this critical thinking should be more rigorously and regularly applied to the evidence our students use as their means for proof. Earlier studies (Fleshler, Ilardo and Demoretckz) have already confirmed that "concrete" documentation results in more positive (as in "favorable") evaluations of speaker and message credibility than does vague or confused documentation. Other studies (Kline) have demonstrated that specific factual evidence more effectively produces attitude change. In practice, however, modern competitive debate has placed a premium upon volume over quality, speed over comprehension, and recency over comprehensiveness.

Our students do not spend enough time filtering evidence *before* debates, subjecting it to appropriate tests. How often do we see evidence in debate which is little more than hasty generalization (Rottenberg), faulty induction, or fallacious use of composition (Kahane 7-8)? Once upon a time, hasty generalization was a popular negative argument in CEDA. Today it is only a distant relic in debates; one almost never hears of it during the research process.

The same can be said for qualification of sources and bias (Freely, Rottenberg). How much of what we hear in debates today is attributed accurately? What are the qualifications of the sources? What are the checks for bias in the source? On the United Nations topic, I heard numerous conservative think tanks and several sources from the John Birch society quoted—these sources even turned up in the research of my own students. Does the John Birch Society have sources qualified to speak about the United States and the United Nations? Yes—perhaps. Do they have an institutional bias? Without question. Does this mean they should never be cited? Not necessarily—but all things being equal, the credibility of the source must be discounted by the lack of objectivity.

The same can be said of fallacious uses of authority in debate evidence (Fearnside and Holther). As my favorite law school professor once commented, "there are authorities, and then there are *authorities*." Merely because the source is an expert does not mean the message is automatically true. The fallacious use of appeal to authority—or

ipse dixit—relies upon the qualification of the source to demonstrate the veracity of the evidence. But how often do we counsel our students to distinguish, as a lawyer might, between that evidence which is offered as opinion and that which is offered as the result of fact or study? How often do our students probe for methodology—or even the presence of factual observation by the source?

The previous statement about methodology raises other questions as we consider the manner in which our students casually volley statistical evidence back and forth. Should people who may not understand how statistical computations are derived be encouraged to argue the same statistical conclusions? Even in a non-quantitative based critical thinking class, we teach students that data can be manipulated to produce many different results (Kahane, 88). In the statement "nine out of ten doctors agree that Preparation H is the best remedy for relief of hemorrhoidal tissues," what precisely do these numbers represent? Does this mean that, out of all doctors, ninety percent side with Preparation H? Does it mean that, out of all specialists in dealing with hemorrhoidal tissues, ninety percent recommend this product? Could it be that the statement literally referred to only ten doctors, of which nine sided with Preparation H? Suppose these nine doctors were all staff/research employees of the company producing the same product?

These are the kinds of questions students should be encouraged to ask—not just in debates—*but in their research of the topic.* Likewise, students should pay greater attention to the design and scope of methodology (Spiker, Davids and Bernabo), not to mention being able to analyze and evaluate the hypothesis that went into creating the given statistical study (Lee, Harris and Dudczak). What assumptions did the survey make about its subject? What is the size of the sample group? What controls and/or variables were factored in? Was the sample representative (Rieke and Sillars) of the greater pool to be studied? As addressed in hasty generalization with evidentiary statements above, was enough time for study allowed? How much is enough? Are the results of the study consistent with other known evidence (Freely 122)?

One of the clearest examples of fallacies—*post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (after the fact, therefore because of the fact)—applies in consideration of methodology and conclusions (Rottenberg, 224-5). The clearest explanation I ever heard of this fallacy came not from a speech or rhetoric professor, but from a mathematician teaching me statistics my freshman year in college. His example: Passing the scene of most fires, we will ordinarily observe firetrucks and firefighters. Should we then conclude that firetrucks and firefighters start fires? Obviously not. But we did observe one in the presence of the other *after* the other began. When Lieutenant Tragg in the old Perry Mason program just happened to be there to catch Perry's client after a murder, he often used this very kind of logic.

In those formula-written plots, Mason's client-to-be often would enter a dark room, tripping over a body. The character would then begin doing stupid things, such as touching the body, getting blood on his or her hand, or smearing the blood on his or her shirt. Then, the individual would follow this enlightened activity by picking up the murder weapon (usually a gun, knife or blunt instrument), getting fingerprints all over it. At this point, Lieutenant Tragg or his surrogate would break in the door, catching Perry's client-to-be "in the act." Of course, Mason then had to spend the rest of the program proving that merely because one appeared after the fact of the other (Mason's client after the death of the victim), *did not necessarily* mean one was the cause of the other.

We can laugh at this, but how often do the studies our students use utilize this kind of faulty reasoning? More to the point, how often do our students compound and reinforce these fallacies in arguments like value objections and disadvantages when claiming that X is the cause of Y? In methodologies and the conclusions they yield, problems of causation (did X really cause Y?) abound (Ericson, Murphy and Zeuschner). Merely saying "no link, no link, no link," is not much of "an answer, an answer, an answer."

One sees the same problems with evidence that diverts questions of causation or cogency, such as: ambiguous evidence (Barnet and Bedau); evidence which begs the question (Engel); evidence which equivocates (Barnet and Bedau, 202); or evidence which engages in *tu quoque* (Reinard). As a judge, I often see this kind of evidence in debates where 2AC extensions are offered in defense of sources used by the First Affirmative. Occasionally, this act of justifying the original statement or behavior reduces itself to an *ad hominem* attack (Rottenberg) on the opposite source.

I could list literally hundreds of other fallacious uses of evidence, for which we should be more vigilant in teaching our students. In my judgment we, myself included, have not done enough to change this practice.

This was a lesson I learned many years ago as a college debater. Owing to lack of budget and time for in-depth research, I often was forced to debate on the negative by thoroughly critiquing the evidence offered by the affirmative. In one memorable exchange, an arch nemesis of mine from a large private university in southern California argued (on an NDT consumer product safety topic) that tobacco consumption did not cause cancer; rather, it was the sugar-curing process which netted this carcinogenic effect of tobacco. Losing to this case once forced me to more critical research of the issue, which produced the following conclusions: a) the main source my opponent cited as "Doctor O'Leary" was indeed entitled to be called "Doctor," although I discovered he was a dentist and *not* an M.D.; the article in the *British Medical Journal* my opponent quoted was a letter to the editor and not a refereed journal article; and the subject Dr. O'Leary specifically addressed was sugar-cured *chewing* tobacco, not, as my opponent claimed, cigarette tobacco. I did not lose to the case a second time.

Over the years, however, I find that many of us in this profession have lost track of this art of critical evaluation so necessary for finding and sustaining the proofs to arguments. I see the potential for this lack of inquiry to increase with the advent of computerized electronic data-base searches for debate evidence in products like LEXIS/NEXIS. At the most recent CEDA National Tournament, I observed the most successful teams in the later elimination rounds all engaged in full-time research of topics and subtopics related to human rights and the United Nations, such research often occurring between rounds off the modem set up in hotel rooms.

I know this is a technology my own students have and most likely will continue to use if we wish to remain competitive next year. It concerns me.

Aside from the question of fairness[5] regarding this technology, I have larger concerns with how it is used currently. Entire cases may be written from whatever material (often in abbreviated form) is downloaded from the computer—without students ever seeing the inside of a library or doing much in the way of *critical* and careful evaluation of the source. After all, how much critical review can one give a wire service report about Bosnia, when the evidence is only twenty-minutes old? While the aspect of recency in the evidence appeals to me (as do the computer skills learned), I am troubled by the questions we are not encouraging our students to ask about the evidence.

With such a setting as a backdrop, it is not hard to imagine how things could reach the place where feminism(s) are treated as a single *feminism*. As indicated above, I do think Crenshaw's essay stands on its own. Perhaps there is even a message Crenshaw is too polite to make clear: That we allow argumentative reductionism of feminisms precisely because of gender. Intercollegiate debate is still oriented towards men, and our society and culture is very much male dominated. Reducing arguments and marginalizing voices that might threaten the status quo is a rather predictable result.

From my perspective, the lack of critical thinking we bring to debating, coaching and judging the use of evidence in argument only facilitates this and makes it a certainty. Taken in that way, Crenshaw's article reminded me that where such evaluation of evidence is concerned, it's time to get back to basics.

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[5] I have serious doubts about whether enough schools can afford the subscription rates for this service, meaning those programs and students with money may possess an unfair advantage over their opponents.

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