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Policy Debate as Fiction: In Defense of Utopian Fiat

BRIAN R. McGEE and DAVID ROMANELLI

The fact of the matter is that in talking about an artificial construct such as debate no language has a prior claim on validity. Indeed, the construct itself is to a very considerable degree actually created by the language. Debate is what we say it is; it is shaped and designated by us out of the terms and syntax of the idiom we are accustomed to apply to it. . . . No single language can exhaust its possibilities.
Douglas Ehninger (29-30)

For decades, intercollegiate debate has been driven by the metaphors used to describe and constrain the discursive and inventional practices of debaters. Despite experiments with social-scientific hypothesis testing (Zarefsky) and public forum (e.g., Weiss) metaphors, the dominant "generating metaphor" (Rowland 191) for understanding intercollegiate policy debate has emphasized the pragmatics of making public policy. Before the authors of this paper were born and to the present day, judges and debaters have been encouraged to treat debate as an exercise in crafting policy, with judges acting like a composite audience of those making decisions in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal and/or state governments. By the 1970s, the development of the idea of "fiat" and counterplan theory (e.g., see Freeley, "Fiat"; Lichtman and Rohrer) led many members of the debate community to increasingly sophisticated analyses of affirmative plans and negative counterplans, with some community members imagining that what they did was a specialized version of the work done in university departments of public policy and management.

Obviously, the metaphors that have been central to the development of academic debate in recent years are not the only possible metaphors that might have influenced such development in the past or might guide such development in the future. If, using the well-known example of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, one conceived of argument as a kind of interpretive dance, "good" debate might look very different to the intercollegiate debate community, perhaps with the adversarial character of debate relegated to a secondary role or eliminated altogether. There is nothing wrong with metaphor as a guiding force in academic debate or in public discourse. Scholars like Lakoff and Johnson contend that we "live by" such metaphors, since we cannot

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imagine a theory of the social in which the metaphoric function of language does not shape both language and action. There is no reason to believe that the influence of metaphor can be or should be overcome, and there doubtless are advantages to using familiar metaphors in explaining the esoteric idiosyncrasies of intercollegiate debate to undergraduates.

This essay defends one specific variety of metaphor for interpreting academic debate. To risk turning metaphor into simile, academic debate as currently and best practiced is usefully described as an educational game involving the creation of *utopian literature*, rather than as an exercise in making policy. In other words, debate is a game played by social critics trying to envision the ideal social order. First, the current state of fiat theory in academic debate is examined. Second, the history and function of utopian literature as a social practice is briefly described. Third, the advantages of this metaphor for academic debate, which would legitimize arguments for radical social change in response to proposals for modest, incremental modifications to the policies of the *status quo*, are explained.[1]

A few caveats are necessary before this thesis is developed. Initially, the previous paragraphs already have mixed Alfred C. Snider's ("Fantasy," "Game," "Revisited") metaphoric explanation of debate as a "game" with the utopian literature metaphor for the debate experience. This mixing of metaphors is appropriate because Snider's gaming approach is compatible with a variety of other metaphors, including the policy-making perspective, that explain how the game should be played. For example, one easily could find members of the debate community who accept both the policy-making and gaming metaphors. Recognition of debate's status as an educational game does not render the game unimportant or trivial. Instead, the game is useful precisely because it teaches many important skills that we value as communication scholars. The utopian literature metaphor is designed to supplement, rather than displace, the understanding of debate as an educational game. Further, this essay's concentration on policy debate is not meant to suggest that non-policy debate is irrelevant or unproductive.

[1] We are not the first scholars to explore the role of utopian thought in forensic practice. A decade ago, Richard E. Edwards defended "the role of utopianism in stimulating social change" (112) as relevant for debate practice and argued that traditional debate theory was open to the possibility of utopian argument about alternative futures. Unfortunately, the fullest exposition of Edwards's ideas on utopian thought appears in an unpublished 1986 SCA conference paper, to which the authors do not have access.

THE PROBLEMS WITH FIAT THEORY

In the history of intercollegiate debate, "fiat" is a relative latecomer. While this essay is not the place to provide a comprehensive account of the development of fiat theory, textbooks in the first half of the twentieth century make no explicit reference to the plans of action that are now the central feature of most intercollegiate policy debates. This early lack of attention to plans of action may be a consequence of the ambiguous relationship between the language used in the resolution and the specific resolutional action advocated by affirmative debaters.

The idea of fiat is simple enough. To avoid uninteresting arguments about whether a policy *would* be adopted by a government that has not yet done so, fiat allows affirmatives (and negatives, when offering counterplans) to assume a counterfactual world in which their new policies exist and the merits of those policies can be evaluated.[2] This minimalist and widely (though not universally) accepted understanding of fiat power increases the educational value of debate without requiring any metaphoric assumption of governmental authority by debaters or judges, since debating *about* policy is not synonymous with *making* policy. However, beginning in the 1960s, the development of fiat theory was driven by the *policy-making metaphor*. Going well beyond the modest dictum that policy debaters deliberate on the best course of action for the government and the nation to take, affirmatives took on the role of acting *as* the government, with the plan typically conceived under the terms of the metaphor as a truncated summary of a Congressional bill, executive order, or Supreme Court decision.

Again, rather than merely debating *about* the merits of public policy, affirmative and negative debaters under the influence of the policy-making metaphor act as if they are *making* policy for purposes of argument development and comparison. By the mid-1970s, David Zarefsky could advocate his own "hypothesis-testing paradigm" (258) by contrasting it with a "policy-comparison paradigm" (260) in which "the judge is regarded as if he [or she] were a decision maker with the power to implement a decision" (257). While much has changed in academic debate since Zarefsky wrote his essay, the policy-making metaphor has remained dominant while other metaphors, including Zarefsky's, have fallen into disuse.

Working out the implications of the policy-making metaphor has not always been easy (e.g., see Solt). Beginning in the 1970s, the advocacy of "utopian" counterplans (e.g., anarchy,

[2] We recognize that some scholars maintain that debate resolutions are not counterfactuals in some technical, philosophical senses of the term. We use the word here in a minimalist sense to refer only to the fact that plans and counterplans advocate an alternative world that does not yet exist. For different perspectives on counterfactual analysis, see, for example, the essays of Kenneth Broda-Bahm and Phil Voight.

decentralized socialism) inspired a sporadic discussion spanning two decades over the appropriate scope of negative fiat (though utopian counterplans have become less fashionable in recent years). Most of the arguments in favor of a limited notion of fiat power and in opposition to utopian fiat were and are grounded in the policy-making metaphor, with opponents of utopian fiat arguing that world government counterplans, for example, demand action beyond that possible by agencies of the U.S. government. Further, Richard H. Dempsey and David J. Hartmann reject the agent-change or "mirror state" counterplan, which usually is not considered utopian, because the simultaneous adoption of a particular policy by all fifty states (at least without federal coercion) is "inconsistent with real world state behavior" (162). Even if states *should* operate in this manner, according to negative debaters, Dempsey and Hartmann contend that fiat power in this case does not extend to negative counterplans because states normally *would* not operate in this fashion.[3] Dempsey and Hartmann, along with many other members of the debate community, would assent to John P. Katsulas, Dale A. Herbeck, and Edward M. Panetta's contention that "fiat theory should be restricted to assumptions grounded in real world policy making processes" (Katsulas *et al.* 96).

Few scholars would object to the mundane contention that one should compare the merits of competing policy options in policy debate. This *weak* sense of "making policy" does not require any pretense of government authority or official imprimatur. In this weak interpretation of "policy" as an adjective modifying "debate," the judge's decision to vote for the affirmative or negative debate team is an act of "intellectual endorsement" (Solt 130) without necessary policy-making consequences. However, the *strong* version of the policy-making metaphor, which insists that debaters work within the confines of extant policy-making institutions in the United States, is not satisfying.

The prevailing policy-making metaphor, in which debaters play the part of government agents, has three disadvantages. First, this approach would have debaters pretend to argue before a U.S. president, the members of Congress, or some other qualified maker of public policy. This judge role-playing is problematic because very few debate judges thoroughly understand the decision-making processes that elected or appointed federal officials would employ. The inability of judges to meet the requirements of the policy-making metaphor inevitably divorces debate from the "real world" of making public policy that so many defenders of the metaphor prize. Moreover, judges lack the constraints usually placed on those who craft public policy. A member of Congress is often influenced by her or his hopes for re-election,

[3]In a response to Dempsey and Hartmann, Dean Fadely also argued that "Dempsey and Hartmann confuse *should* with *would*" (Fadely 74).

while the President may support or oppose a certain bill based on its political ramifications. short, debate judges typically are not capable of meeting the demands of the policy-maki metaphor. As Dallas Perkins comments, since "the judge is not in fact a policy *maker*, it appropriate that resolutions are not typically a tool of policy *making*" ("Counterplans" 148

Second, while debate facilitates the *discussion* of public policy, debate does not mir the *making* of public policy. In "real world" policy discussion the number of alternatives wo be far greater than those considered in a typical two-hour intercollegiate debate. It would impossible to discuss all of these options intelligently in a single debate round. As Sni argues, it "seems clear that the best possible policy decision cannot be arrived at afte two-hour discussion" ("Fantasy" 13). Policy options in the "real world" are brought bef committees, differences are worked out between House and Senate versions of legislati addressing the same issue, and the U.S. President may put pressure on Congressional lead to modify legislation or risk a veto.

Third, the policy-making metaphor asks undergraduate debaters to pretend to something that they probably will never do in the "real world." Most debaters will never h public office or have a great deal of immediate input in the making of public policy. Th involvement in U.S. politics will be much less direct, though not necessarily unimporta Insisting that debaters meet the demands of making public policy suggests that the educatio goal of debate is to train future generations of bureaucrats and policy wonks. Without accepti the entirety of their analysis, one can sympathize with the contention of Thomas A. Hollih Kevin T. Baaske, and Patricia Riley that there "are `technocrats to spare' in the boardrooms corporate America, in the defense establishment, and in the rest of the bureaucracy. We ne more social critics who are capable of inspiring citizen activism" (186). While t policy-making metaphor undoubtedly encourages a debate *praxis* that teaches students t intricacies of policy analysis, a better metaphor would preserve most of these pedagogi advantages without asking students to take on roles they are not likely to play in the real wor Also, preparing students for life outside formal policy-making circles, where the vast major of them will find themselves after graduation, is presumptively desirable.

To summarize, the policy-making metaphor, particularly in its strong sense, unsatisfactory for guiding intercollegiate debate practice. The prevailing metaphor asks t much of debate judges and the debate format, while asking students to reject the "real worl in which most of them will live. The next section provides the context required t understanding an alternative metaphor for the intercollegiate debate experience.

THE PRACTICAL RELEVANCE OF UTOPIAN LITERATURE

To this point, "utopian literature" has been mentioned as an alternative frame of reference for understanding debate. Comprehending this metaphor requires a very brief discussion of the importance of utopian and dystopian literatures in U.S. history. In this discussion, the potential of literature to influence the political process is assumed. (For example, Abraham Lincoln once credited Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with starting the U.S. Civil War.)

Utopian literature presents an alternative social order as being morally or practically better than the *status quo* in politics, law, economics, and/or interpersonal relations. The transition to this new social order might be sudden and dramatic, but nothing logically prevents a series of small, incremental steps over time from leading to the establishment of utopia. While utopia, the perfectly "good place that is no place" in John Rodden's words (Rodden 1), may not yet exist, American utopians have always struggled to make some counterfactual utopian world a possibility. In the nineteenth century, utopian experiments in agrarian living were numerous in the United States, and familiar names like "Shaker" and "Amana" are the detritus of those experiments. In the twentieth century, utopian novels still appear as commentaries on the problems of American society (see Haschak). Consistently, American utopians have emphasized their desire to demonstrate the practicality of their proposed alternative world and the ease of the transition from the way things are in the current milieu to the way things ought to be (in a sense other than Rush Limbaugh's). Even when criticizing the limits of utopian desire, James Darsey concludes that "utopian desire thwarts complacency by keeping alive dreams that practical politics would consign to the morgue" (Darsey 34).

In contrast with utopian novels, dystopian literatures emphasize the limitations of alternative world views by demonstrating their impracticality or their considerable disadvantages. George Orwell's *1984* and his *Animal Farm* are considered classic examples of dystopian novels, given their harsh criticism of totalitarian government and socialism. If utopian novels demonstrate the advantages of abandoning the current order, their dystopian counterparts warn against the dangers of too quickly abandoning a system that is not wholly dysfunctional. For example, one could argue that Francis Fukuyama's announcement of the "end of history" is simultaneously a proclamation that the capitalist, North Atlantic democracies are utopias and that non-capitalist alternatives have dystopian consequences.

Finally, utopian literature has had an historically important social function. In the nineteenth century, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* inspired the foundation of Bellamy societies and a short-lived political party. In the twentieth century, B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* has remained in print for several decades and was consulted by some of those who experimented

with communal living in the 1950s and 1960s. Today, first- and second-wave feminist utopias, including Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Sally Miller Gearhart's *Wanderground* (1979) are embraced by many academic feminists.[4] In short, utopian literature is an important part of the history of American social movement, and there is some reason to conclude that utopian science fictions and other utopian literatures will continue to play a role in future efforts to inspire social change or, in the case of dystopian literatures, to discourage such change.

The next section suggests that envisioning debate as utopian fiction has several practical advantages.

DEBATE AS THE SEARCH FOR UTOPIA

Snider argued several years ago that a suitable paradigm should address "something we can ACTUALLY DO as opposed to something we can MAKE BELIEVE ABOUT" ("Fantasy as Reality" 14). A utopian literature metaphor is beneficial precisely because it is within the power of debaters to perform the desired action suggested by the metaphor, if not always to demonstrate that the desired action is politically feasible.

Instead of debaters playing to an audience of those who make public policy, debaters should understand themselves as budding social critics in search of an optimal practical and cultural politics. While few of us will ever hold a formal policy-making position, nearly all of us grow up with the social and political criticism of the newspaper editorial page, the high school civics class, and, at least in homes that do not ban the juxtaposition of food and politics, the lively dinner table conversation. We complain about high income taxes, declining state subsidies for public education, and crumbling interstate highways. We worry about the rising cost of health care and wonder if we will have access to high-quality medical assistance when we need it. Finally, we bemoan the decline of moral consensus, rising rates of divorce, drug use among high school students, and disturbing numbers of pregnant teen-agers. From childhood on, we are told that good citizenship demands that we educate ourselves on political matters and vote to protect the *polis*; the success of democracy allegedly demands no less. For those who accept this challenge instead of embracing the political alienation of Generation X and becoming devotees of *Beavis and Butthead*, social criticism is what good citizens do.

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[4]Of course, not all utopias would earn the progressive left-liberal intellectual's seal of approval. As Lewis Mumford observed over seven decades ago, "far too large a number of classic utopias were based upon conceptions of authoritarian discipline that seemed . . . far from ideal" (4).

Debate differs from other species of social criticism because debate is a game played by students who want to win. However, conceiving of debate as a kind of social criticism has considerable merit. Social criticism is not restricted to a technocratic elite or group of elected officials. Moreover, social criticism is not necessarily idle or wholly deconstructive. Instead, such criticism necessarily is a prerequisite to any effort to create policy change, whether that criticism is articulated by an elected official or by a mother of six whose primary workplace is the home. When one challenges the *status quo*, one normally implies that a better alternative course of action exists. Given that intercollegiate debate frequently involves exchanges over a proposition of policy by student advocates who are relatively unlikely ever to debate before Congress, envisioning intercollegiate debate as a specialized extension of ordinary citizen inquiry and advocacy in the public sphere seems attractive. Thinking of debate as a variety of social criticism gives debate an added dimension of public relevance.

One way to understand the distinction between debate as policy-making and debate as social criticism is to examine Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder's agenda-building theory.[5] Cobb and Elder are well known for their analytic split of the *formal agenda* for policy change, which includes legislation or other action proposed by policy makers with formal power (e.g., government bureaucrats, U.S. Senators), from the *public agenda* for policy change, which is composed of all those who work outside formal policy-making circles to exert influence on the formal agenda. Social movements, lobbyists, political action committees, mass media outlets, and public opinion polls all constitute the public agenda, which, in turn, has an effect on what issues come to the forefront on the formal agenda. From the agenda-building perspective, one cannot understand the making of public policy in the United States without comprehending the confluence of the formal and public agenda.

In intercollegiate debate, the policy-making metaphor has given primacy to formal agenda functions at the expense of the public agenda. Debaters are encouraged to bypass thinking about the public agenda in outlining policy alternatives; appeals for policy change frequently are made by debaters under the strange pretense that they and/or their judges are members of the formal agenda elite. Even arguments about the role of the public in framing public policy are typically issued by debaters as if those debaters were working within the confines of the formal agenda for their own, instrumental advantage. (For example, one thinks of various social movement "backlash" disadvantage arguments, which advocate a temporary policy paralysis in order to stir up public outrage and mobilize social movements, whose leaders

[5] By citing Cobb and Elder, we are not signaling endorsement of the "issues-agenda" paradigm of Michael Bartanen and David Frank, who base their judging paradigm on Cobb and Elder's agenda-building model.

will demand the formal adoption of a presumably superior policy alternative.) The policy-making metaphor concentrates on the formal agenda to the near exclusion of the public agenda, as the focus of a Katsulas or a Dempsey on the "real-world" limitations for making policy indicates.

Debate as social criticism does not entail exclusion of formal agenda concerns from intercollegiate debate. The specified agent of action in typical policy resolutions makes ignoring the formal agenda of the United States government an impossibility. However, one need not be able to influence the formal agenda directly in order to discuss what it is that the United States government should do. Undergraduate debaters and their judges usually are far removed--both physically and functionally--from the arena of formal-agenda deliberation. What the disputation of student debaters most closely resembles, to the extent that it resembles any real-world analog, is public-agenda social criticism. What students are doing is something they really CAN do as students and ordinary citizens; they are working in their own modest way to shape the public agenda.

While "social criticism" is the best explanation for what debaters do, this essay goes a step further. The mode of criticism in which debaters operate is the production of utopian literature. Strictly speaking, debaters engage in the creation of fictions and the comparison of fictions to one another. How else does one explain the affirmative advocacy of a plan, a counterfactual world, that, by definition, does not exist? Indeed, traditional inherency burdens demand that such plans be utopian, in the sense that current attitudes or structures make the immediate enactment of such plans unlikely in the "real world" of the formal agenda. Intercollegiate debate is utopian because plan and/or counterplan enactment is improbable. While one can distinguish between incremental and radical policy change proposals, the distinction makes no difference in the utopian practice of intercollegiate debate.

More importantly, intercollegiate debate is utopian in another sense. Policy change is considered because such change, it is hoped, will facilitate the pursuit of the good life. For decades, intercollegiate debaters have used fiat or the authority of the word "should" to propose radical changes in the social order, in addition to advocacy of the incremental policy changes typical of the U.S. formal agenda. This wide range of policy alternatives discussed in contemporary intercollegiate debate is the sign of a healthy public sphere, where thorough consideration of all policy alternatives is a possibility. Utopian fiction, in which the good place that is no place is envisioned, makes possible the instantiation of a rhetorical vision prerequisite to building that good place in our tiny corner of the universe. Even Lewis Mumford, a critic of utopian thought, concedes that we "can never reach the points of the compass; and so no doubt we shall never live in utopia; but without the magnetic needle we should not be able to travel intelligently at all" (Mumford 24-25).

An objection to this guiding metaphor is that it encourages debaters to do precisely that to which Snider would object, which is to "make believe" that utopia is possible. This objection misunderstands the argument. These students *already are* writers of utopian fiction from the moment they construct their first plan or counterplan text. Debaters who advocate policy change announce their commitment to changing the organization of society in pursuit of the good life, even though they have no formal power to call this counterfactual world into being. Any proposed change, no matter how small, is a repudiation of policy paralysis and the maintenance of the *status quo*. As already practiced, debate revolves around utopian proposals, at least in the sense that debaters and judges lack the formal authority to enact their proposals. Even those negatives who defend the current social order frequently do so by pointing to the potential dystopic consequences of accepting such proposals for change.

Understanding debate as utopian literature would not eliminate references to the vagaries of making public policy, including debates over the advantageousness of plans and counterplans. As noted above, *talking* about public policy is not *making* public policy, and a retreat from the policy-making metaphor would have relatively little effect on the contemporary practice of intercollegiate debate.[6] For example, while space constraints prevent a thorough discussion of this point, the utopian literature metaphor would not necessitate the removal of all constraints on fiat, although some utopian proposals will tax the imagination where formal-agenda policy change is concerned.

The utopian literature metaphor does not ineluctably divorce debate from the problems and concerns of ordinary people and everyday life. There will continue to be debates focused on incremental policy changes as steps along the path to utopia. What the utopian literature metaphor does is to position debaters, coaches, and judges as the unapologetic social critics that they are and have always been, without the confining influence of a guiding metaphor that limits their ability to search for the good life. Further, this new metaphor does not encourage debaters to carry the utopian literature metaphor to extremes by imagining that they are sitting in a solitary corner and penning the next great American novel. The metaphor is useful because it

[6] One reader of an earlier draft of this essay asked about the implications of the utopian literature metaphor for the wide range of arguments now called "critiques" in both CEDA and NDT. The differences between the various categories of critique arguments make a succinct answer to this question difficult. Briefly, this metaphor does not constitute a response to critiques that question the epistemological status of argument and/or value claims, since the authors of utopian fictions, no less than members of Congress, make some epistemological assumptions. In contrast, critiques that reject current debate *praxis* as anti-educational might be answered in some instances by reference to the utopian literature metaphor.

orients debaters to their role as social critics, without the suggestion that debate is anything other than an educational game played by undergraduate students.

In closing, the best of social criticism and of academic debate always has envisioned possibilities for reconstructing government, the economy, international relations, and interpersonal relationships without bowing to the necessities imposed by the political milieu of the moment. Academic debate would be best served if the debate community embraced this critical, utopian function wholeheartedly, rather than clinging to an overly confining policy-making metaphor. Social critics in the United States have a distinguished history of using utopian literature to popularize and to test alternative ways of organizing society. Advocates of academic debate would do better to embrace this tradition than to maintain their devotion to a central policy-making metaphor that, by itself, does not serve the community well. As Ehninger notes, "debate is what we say it is." To speak of debate as a space for the articulation of utopian thought enriches, rather than impoverishes, debate theory, pedagogy, and practice. Endorsing the utopian literature metaphor will return debate to the real world, rather than further separating debate from that world.

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