

POSTMODERNISM AND THE PRACTICE OF DEBATE

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Debating Postmodernism

The concept of postmodernism has gained so much popularity in competitive debate that it has been advocated as a decision-making paradigm (Kramer & Lang, 1993). Careful consideration of the suggested paradigm occasions reflection on the role postmodernism might play in academic debate. This essay explores the proposal that debate should be conducted according to a postmodern perspective. An examination of postmodernism reveals that postmodern tendencies, particularly advocacy of inconsistency, run counter to the goals and conduct of debate. Next, the purported advantages of postmodern perspectives are subjected to critical scrutiny. Finally, the repercussions of postmodernism for academic debate are discussed.

The term *debate* applies generically to any rule-governed argumentative exchange. Specific applications to competitive debate are identified as *academic debate*. As employed in this essay, the issues regarding postmodernism in academic debate represent a particular context for confronting postmodernism beyond the forum of debate rounds *per se*.

Clarifying the Concept of Postmodernism

It is difficult to identify the species of postmodernism theorists such as Kramer and Lang (1993) advocate when they propose it as a paradigm, because they do not link the postmodern characteristics they associate with a particular intellectual tradition. Defining postmodernism is troublesome, for it does not describe a methodology, doctrine, or any static body of theory. It "remains, at best, an equivocal concept" that defies pigeonholing (Hassan, 1987a, p. 23). The varieties of intellectual projects and artistic objects labeled as postmodern cast some "doubt [as to] whether the term can ever be dignified by conceptual coherence" (Boyne & Rattansi, 1990, p. 9). Instead, postmodernism qualifies more as a spirit of inquiry, an attitude that distrusts universalization and promotes the revelation of internal inconsistencies. Hassan (1987a) has inventoried the prominent characteristics of postmodernism in its various incarnations. These qualities include:

1. Privileging indeterminacy instead of finality. This resistance to finality also implies a rejection of historical teleology (Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1991).
2. Recognition that reality is fragmentary and disconnected, thus history is discontinuous not linear (Lyotard, 1989).
3. Opposition to all canonical authority.
4. The free mixture of styles, genres, and traditions.
5. Emphasis on the conditionality and historicity of theories, which offer perspectives rather than ultimate answers.
6. Focus on the processes of creation and interpretation instead of on static objects or ideas.

Qualities

Each of the preceding qualities invites appropriation by debaters:

1. Precedents and model programs are treated with suspicion, since they imply continuity with the past. If an affirmative plan has worked as a pilot project, that success may have been due to the monopolization of funds and skewing of reporting by the dominant power interests than to the merits of the program.
2. The critique of causality is subsumed by postmodernism, because assertions of causal linkage are questioned. Furthermore, definitive knowledge is disavowed.
3. There is no decision rule that transcends the individual round.
4. Multiple paradigms can co-exist productively.
5. Claims are evaluated not as true or false themselves, but are contextualized as having truth-value only within specified parameters. Not only are conditional arguments recommended, but all arguments are subject to revisions that restrict their domain of applicability.
6. Instead of evaluating the resolution or affirmative plan as a concrete proposal, debate would focus on the assumptions behind the way terminology is employed. The argumentative process becomes the center of attention, not supposedly completed proposals offered for wholesale adoption or rejection.

Importing Postmodernism

When postmodernism is suggested as a model or mindset for the practice of

debate, it may be imported in one or more of the preceding ways.

There is a big difference between observing what could be called a postmodern condition and elevating that condition to an "-ism" that would regulate argumentative practice. Marshall (1992) understandably recommends erasing the -ism suffix because it "suggests that here is something complete, unified, totalized" (pp. 4-5). Postmodernism, in a word, resists specification as a doctrine or method. Richard Bernstein (1991), frustrated with the inchoate ways that 'postmodernity' has been used, suggests abandoning the term altogether. Instead, he recommends further investigation of the issues raised under the rubric of postmodernism. To clarify those issues, we must examine the assumptions and implications of postmodernism.

Postmodernism in debate might seem to be a *fait accompli*. After all, the multiplicity of paradigms could testify to the localization of epistemological claims, thereby enacting the postmodern admonition to "give up the luxury of absolute Truths, choosing instead to put to work local and provisional truths" (Marshall, 1992, p. 3). This point invites two responses. First, a plurality of paradigms does not require or prove the presence of postmodernism. The conditionality and multiplicity of truths can be and is accomplished without any need for abandoning a progressive ideal of *better* argumentative practice. Ideas and practices can improve without positing a singular epitome of perfection. Second, the presence of multiple paradigms and their tendency to proliferate testifies to the problematic epistemological status of research in debate. An invitation to construct ever more "new and improved" paradigms--what debaters might label "paradigm prolifer"--undermines claims for debate to acquire scholarly legitimacy. Let us consider each point.

To scrutinize postmodernism, it is useful to turn to figures such as Rorty and Lyotard, considered "the original sources of postmodern philosophy" in America (Lemert, 1991, p. 181). Lyotard "remains today perhaps the most influential theorist of postmodernity" (Boyne & Rattansi, 1990, p. 13), and his book *The Postmodern Con-*

dition" enjoys a certain definitive status in discussion[s] of postmodernism" (Callinicos, 1990, p. 3). In most of its incarnations, postmodernism designates the distrust of comprehensive rational foundations of knowledge. Rejection of foundationalism often targets scientific reasoning, which has epitomized ultimate explanations in the absence of authoritarian pronouncements (the ultimatums of autocrats) or divine law. The fact that science bears the brunt of postmodern wrath will loom large when we reconsider paradigms.

The advocacy of a postmodern paradigm strikes a discordant note because postmodernism and paradigms as employed in academic debate are incompatible. Postmodernism as an epistemological orientation rejects transhistorical criteria for what counts as truth, knowledge, or meaning. Put succinctly, a postmodern attitude fosters "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). Surprisingly, Kramer and Lang defend postmodernism while offering it as "an overarching argumentative strategy" (1993, p. 58). Any attempt to construct an argumentative framework that has universal validity no longer qualifies as postmodern, but falls squarely within the conventionally modernist mission of modeling debate after science (hypothesis testing), legislative deliberation (rational policy making), or storytelling (narrativity).

A less relativistic version of postmodernism would not undercut the employment of paradigms *per se*. Instead, it would pose paradigms provisionally, advocating the reflexive recognition that one is operating within the constraints of a culturally and historically specific "paradigm of thought" (Marshall, 1992, p. 3). In short, any theory operates "within a certain paradigm" of background assumptions (Marshall, 1992, p. 187). This version of postmodernism offers cumbersome theoretical baggage that acknowledges what current debate practice already takes into account. Does any debater or critic claim that a paradigm offers a path to ultimate truth? Probably not. When explaining hypothesis-testing, Zarefsky characterizes the knowledge available through debate as probable truth which, like scientific knowledge, is not "eternal and unchanging" (1992, p. 255). Instead, paradigms lend structure to argumentation by providing models for the argumentative process (Berube, 1994). Depending on the paradigm employed, different criteria for assent will receive more or less emphasis.

Purported Advantages of Postmodernism

Zavarzadeh and Morton (1991) contend that cogent arguments against postmodernism can arise only from considering its "consequences and effects" (p. 121). In other words, what sorts of attitudes and practices would result from a postmodern perspective? The emphasis on effects is prominent because, the authors contend, any logically based arguments (e.g., accusations of logical inconsistency or fallacious reasoning) would attempt to subject postmodernism to the strictures of the very logical framework it rejects. Taking this point a step further, "the very deployment of logical argumentation against (post)modernism would unfortunately legitimate a rather reactionary notion of truth" because it would presume universal criteria for rationality that restrict innovation and invest only one disputant with The Truth (Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1991, p. 121). Zarefsky (1992) makes a similar point in the context of debate. He explains that the choice among paradigms is difficult because none can be attacked except on the terms it recognizes as legitimate. Zarefsky suggests examining how a paradigm might undermine its own purposes. Let us consider how postmodernism might do just that.

Postmodernism sometimes gets touted as a dramatic rupture with the past, a radical discontinuity with Enlightenment traditions of rational discourse. In this sense, it is tempting to label the postmodern movement a paradigm shift in argumentative rationality. That label, however, would generate more confusion than clarity. Postmodernists could contend that the traditional ideals of debate were valid but have outlived their usefulness. If this were so, then proponents of postmodernism would be advocating a form of historicism that presumes an ability to judge (on heretofore unidentified grounds) the compatibility of theories with events (Crook, 1990). That is, postmodernists would presume to know the moment in history when an idea no longer serves a function. Such a claim runs counter to the postmodern enthusiasm for indeterminacy. On the other hand, if traditional argumentative rationale is wrong or undesirable in principle, then postmodernism's opposition rests on the very sort of universal standards or truths postmodernism decries.

Social Emancipation

The varieties of postmodernism share a political focus (Boyne & Ratansi, 1990, p. 23) in their goal to recover discourse that

has been marginalized or silenced by hegemonic ideals of argumentation. In debate rounds, the advantages associated with postmodern critiques,¹ for example, usually stem from giving "voice to the powerless and marginalized" (Lake & Haynie, 1993, p. 17). In fact, postmodernism may be characterized as "a shifting and differential cultural site of social struggles" rather than a "settled or stable" set of doctrines (Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1991, p. 106). If postmodernism *per se* has a project, it is to disrupt the argumentative ideals that constricted discourse to conform with Enlightenment models of rationality. In the context of public or academic debate, a postmodern project would involve revising the canon of "classic" argumentative exchanges to include discussions that fall outside the mainstream political parties and campaign issues. The question arises, however, as to why postmodernists would recommend such revisions.

The inability to find an answer in postmodernism has made some feminist theorists uncomfortable with a postmodern emancipatory project. Since postmodernism devalues consensus as a central objective, it falls short in explaining why any underrepresented group such as women might merit recognition *as a group* (Lovibond, 1990). By placing highest priority on continuance of discourse, postmodernism cannot identify or endorse material signs of progress toward reducing oppression. Quite the contrary: by aiming for continuance instead of closure, disagreement and contentiousness (not concessions or acts of liberation) have intrinsic merit (Lovibond, 1990). Lyotard envisions the task of postmodern philosophy as "multiplicity and the incommensurability of works" (1989, p. 193), which promises greater diversity but less sharing or amalgamation of ideas. Postmodernism leaves the deeper questions about the roots of oppression and marginalization unanswered. Lyotard's proposed fertilization of incommensurability surely does not hold much promise of greater empathy with the oppressed. What resources does postmodernism offer for expanding the ranges of options open for underrepresented populations (Lovibond, 1990, p. 172)? To expand available opportunities requires more far-reaching social actions than individual deviations from norms or distrust of totalizing narratives. Postmodernism in any of its incarnations has failed to give methods for dealing with uncertainty, the dis-

trust of timeless truths, and the decay of universal values. Postmodernism provides insufficient inventive resources to provide solutions for the narrow epistemological habits it criticizes.

If postmodernism can earn its keep as a productive or advantageous mode of thought, it must offer some methods for resolving disputes and reaching decisions. Lyotard recognizes this difficulty writ large as a challenge to communication itself: "You multiply manners of speaking and sensing, but how will you communicate? The contemporary artist knows that this difficulty in communicating happens" (1989, p. 193). But the artist fuels irresolution instead of quenching it. Postmodernism offers few recommendations for improving the means to effect social change or render judgment. This lack of a critical edge has led Rorty (1991a) to criticize postmodernists such as Foucault for revealing the methods of social manipulation without providing routes to escape them. Similarly, James L. Marsh finds in postmodernism "no criteria to indicate whether or why we should move forward, no groups identified whose position in the social structure presents a possibility or probability of transcendence, no identifiable crisis points within the system" (1992a, p. 94). Postmodernism ultimately endorses "a stance of pessimism and quietism" on social issues since "it can offer no positive, constructive ethics or politics" (Marsh, 1991a, p. 94; 1992b, p. 208).

It is inappropriate to discuss postmodernism as "an overarching argumentative strategy" (Kramer & Lang, 1993, p. 58) since postmodernism is directed against the very notion of such all-encompassing discursive strategies. Lyotard's opposition to Habermas's advocacy of universal consensus lies in the denial of "metaprescriptions regulating the totality of statements circulating in the social collectivity" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 65). Lyotard enjoins his readers to "wage a war on totality" (1984, p. 82), a call that does not sound conducive to paradigm-building, or to sweeping reforms that would target the institutional bases for repressive social practices.

Postmodernism, unlike critical theories such as feminism or socialism, provides few if any resources to counter institutionalized forms of oppression that might be pervasive but exist in several forms and on several levels of society. The distrust of grand explanations generates a suspicion of universals but leaves untouched "the complexities of the social, political and eco-

nomie formations that exist as part of a heterogeneous but interdependent global configuration" (Boyne & Rattansi, 1990, p. 19). In other words, repressive forces can be manifested in ways other than the unitary, overarching, grand narratives that Lyotard and other postmodernists target. For example, how could postmodernism offer a means of redressing economic elitism, racism, or sexism in competitive debate? Phrased in the language of policy debate, what potential for solvency does postmodernism offer? Because of its elusive character, postmodernism cannot be instituted in any case because it is not a body of doctrine but a critical attitude (cf. Lyotard, 1989, p. 314).

Two tendencies of postmodernism render it ineffective in accomplishing the very political tasks that supposedly lie at its core: "an inability to specify possible mechanisms of change, and an inability to state why change is better than no change" (Crook, 1990, p. 59). The first difficulty has been encountered in the inability to instigate or even take account of a need for broad-based social reform. The second point, advocacy of change, raises another set of issues.

It is difficult to envision how postmodernism could justify any social reforms, even the most localized changes in debate practices. If the quality of discussion hinges on the multiplicity of viewpoints articulated, then expressions of intolerance such as sexism, racism and homophobia presumably deserve encouragement because they add to the plurality of perspectives (Crook, 1990). Debate conducted in a postmodern manner would not and could not justify ruling out offensive *ad hominem* argumentative practices. Even if such intolerance were not sanctioned by a postmodern mindset, it should be unacceptable. Although proponents of postmodernism might agree, the decision to restrict available argumentative tactics runs counter to the cardinal postmodern value of creativity. Paradoxically, the most intolerant and repressive social agendas become legitimate even if not explicitly endorsed under the postmodern rubric of creative expression.

Enhanced Creativity

One argument Kramer and Lang (1993) suggest to support a postmodern paradigm cites the value of creativity. Allowing inconsistency would open the floodgates for debaters' creative juices to flow freely, thus irrigating parched argumenta-

tive ground. Lyotard hints at a similar preference for creativity in his choice of art as an epistemological model. Postmodernism now encounters the familiar quandary of romanticism: how to reconcile creativity with quality and morality (which presume standards of conduct). Does relaxation of strictures encourage creativity? The lesson from paradigms in science shows the opposite to be the case. In an often overlooked early essay, Kuhn (1977, pp. 225-239) remarks on what he calls the "essential tension" in science. Paradoxically, the tradition-bound nature of science with its preservation of "normal science" obedient to paradigmatic strictures has been conducive to innovation. Only when the boundaries of normal science are clearly articulated in a paradigm do practitioners begin to question the paradigm's articulation. Who are the innovators? Kuhn explains that "the productive scientist must be a traditionalist who enjoys playing intricate games by pre-established rules in order to be a successful innovator who discovers new rules and new pieces with which to play them" (1977, p. 237). Applying this principle to debate, the innovators can redefine the game only if the game already has set boundaries and rules. The test of creativity lies in the ability to improvise within guidelines, not rewrite the guidelines to accommodate novelty.

We now confront the question: "Why artificially limit the size of the playing field" (Kramer & Lang, 1994, p. 67) by prohibiting inconsistency? First, no clear distinction has been made between "artificial" versus "natural" limits, and no reason has been given to prefer one over the other. Second, preserving the game metaphor, all games have rules or they cease to qualify as games. The reason for regulative paradigms that limit argumentative options is both logical and pragmatic. If all argumentative options are allowed, then an infinite regress occurs because no standards emerge from the paradigm to evaluate the quality of the arguments (Panetta & Herbeck, 1993, p. 26). The regress turns vicious in debate or in any deliberative forum because decisions must be made and justified.

Pragmatically, the procedural regulations in debate rounds mitigate against unconstrained invention. In competitive debate these constraints are designed to achieve definite closure if not definitive solutions. Strict time limits and zero-sum decisions mimic how deliberation often must proceed because policies must be formulated and issues decided under the pressure of the moment.

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Contrary to this realistic albeit imperfect scenario, "resolution and closure are not goals of the postmodern moment" (Marshall, 1992, p. 13). Panetta and Herbeck (1993) observe that the intellectual grounds of postmodernism are so alien to those of policy debate that it is not possible to reconcile these incommensurable perspectives. Since postmodernism condemns two-valued thinking (while touting incommensurability), it cannot in principle qualify as a clear-cut alternative to other orientations. The more that advocates of postmodernism portray it as a dramatic rupture with other modes of thought, the more they exemplify the very all-or-nothing mentality they condemn as elitist and exclusivistic. This inconsistency is not simply logical, but instead constitutes a failure to reconcile proclaimed goals with actual argumentative practice.

The Employment of Postmodernism in Academic Debate

Before delving into the mechanics of postmodernism in academic debate, one key point merits attention. Postmodernism cannot and should not be advocated as a voting issue. The "thoroughly hierarchical constructs" of winning and losing" are fundamentally incompatible with the post-modern agenda" (Lake & Haynie, 1993, p. 19). To qualify as a "voter," postmodernism would have to function as a decision rule. This role could be fulfilled in two ways, both of which reduce postmodernism to incoherence or pernicious relativism. If a team deserves to lose because it fails to foster creativity by allowing paralogical argumentation (e.g., inconsistency, non sequitur, etc.), then creativity or freedom are being postulated as values sufficient to merit voting for the team that best promotes them. That being the case, postmodernism is reducible to traditional liberal values. More problematically, postmodernism appeals to creativity and related values as sufficient criteria for rendering decisions. Bernstein (1991) observes that postmodernists such as Lyotard and Rorty resort to "a universal 'letting be' where difference is allowed to flourish" (p. 222), a *laissez-faire* epistemology just as sweeping and potentially just as constraining as conventional rationality. In other words, this version of postmodernism relies on normative criteria accepted as inherently desirable--the very sort of grand standards postmodernism is designed to combat.

Postmodern argumentation could assume a more critical edge without commit-

ting its proponents to indefensible universal decision criteria. This version of postmodernism would recommend at least suspending judgment (i.e., not voting for the opposing side) because the opposition fails to account for the "other" in its argumentation. Employed by the negative, postmodernism could underlie either a resolutionally-focused or case-focused critique. The basic argument would be to reject the resolution or the affirmative plan because its very language or assumptions exclude social forces or people that, despite their marginalization, should count as significant stakeholders in decision making. Of course, if the critique is argued as an independent voting issue, then it falls prey to the reification of values just discussed. On the other hand, a postmodern critique could carry an impact similar to a studies counterplan that urges a negative ballot in lieu of sufficient information to vote affirmative. Failure to account for marginalized social groups leads to decisions that are myopic at best and often paternalistic or destructive toward those who are excluded. The postmodern position would presume that the voices of the marginalized are *ipso facto* liberating or beneficial. Instead, a much more modest claim emerges: irrespective of its actual impact, hitherto suppressed perspectives deserve inclusion.

The claim that postmodern perspectives would liberate decision making, however, relies on the premise that inclusiveness in rendering decisions is desirable. If, for example, it is argued that formulation of foreign policy toward Mexico should include more Mexican or Hispanic participation, the advantage would be more participatory decision making. The advocate of postmodernism, however, has no grounds for claiming that participation would render better decisions, especially since a postmodern foreign policy would deny any single, overarching value that would guide policymaking. Present American foreign policy toward Mexico, Latin America in general, or toward the world for that matter, already qualifies as thoroughly postmodern. Without the guiding influence of containing communism, foreign policy decisions are made on an ad hoc basis. Inconsistent policies, contrary to the supposed virtues of postmodernism, have caused international embarrassment and public disgrace to the United States in Haiti, Somalia, and countless other locales. Inconsistency *per se* is no more a virtue than rigidity.

For a postmodern view to generate

advantages, it must assert *what counts* as an advantage. Postmodern critiques do little to replace current patterns of thinking, although they question and criticize those patterns relentlessly. Exactly what sorts of reforms would postmodernism promulgate? Postmodernism has not generated coherent strategies--even provisional ones--for coping with change and uncertainty. McGee (1990) states the point unequivocally: "I think it is time to stop whining about the so-called 'post-modern condition' and to develop realistic strategies to cope with it as a fact of human life, perhaps in the present, certainly in the not-too-distant twenty-first century" (p. 278). The problem is not so much that postmodern perspectives have arisen, but that they have failed to offer productive alternatives to excessive rigidity of thought.

Postmodern Critiques

Many critiques in debate rounds have been launched under the banner of postmodernism. Run as a critique, postmodernism typically emerges as follows: The opposing team (not merely their case but their entire mode of argumentation) exemplifies an undesirable way of thinking. From a postmodern perspective, such undesirable thought patterns typically involve marginalization of oppressed populations, cultural imperialism, masculinist agendas, anthropocentrism, all-or-nothing mentalities, etc. By voting for the affirmative, the critic would endorse these undesirable thought patterns. Critiques typically ask the critic to make a personal decision against the affirmative, since any implications of setting a precedent for making policy run counter to the postmodern rejection of linear reasoning and trend-setting. I quote from one such brief: "All the critique asks is that you make a personal, conditional moral choice to inform your action."² The critic, therefore, operates as a lone voice whose vote represents nothing more than a personal commitment against the affirmative and for the liberating benefits attendant to postmodernism.

Now is not the time to enter into a detailed discussion of critiques. Some remarks on postmodern critiques, however, will illustrate the problematic infusion of postmodern thinking into competitive debate. Many postmodern critiques rely on a simple punishment paradigm: punish the team that advocates the undesirable way of thinking by voting against them. Notice, however, that a notion of desirability lurks behind the postmodern critique. The critique

must presume a standard for decision making that transcends the individual round; after all, the postmodern arguments almost always are found on shells that are employed virtually unchanged round after round. The use of such standardized argumentative tactics shows a commitment to the critique as a constant. The more a standard critique is used, the less credible is its link to postmodernism, which advocates creative, individual argumentation--exactly the values that prefabricated arguments do not foster.

An advocate of postmodernism might respond that the critique invokes and applies values only locally. A negative brief on the subject states: "...we ask you [the critic] to generate morals within the context of this debate, not enforce them universally." The localization of advantages resembles the argument Zavarzadeh and Morton (1991) make in defending postmodernism against the charge of political quietism. They distinguish ludic postmodernism, which seeks local, small-scale political change, from resistance postmodernism, which "works not simply for an ideological intervention and a change of social practices, but for the transformation of the economic structures that bring about those local conditions to begin with" (Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1991, p. 128). The specification of economic structures reflects a lingering Marxist strain that presumes economic factors lie at the core of social problems. Such a Marxist remnant is troublesome given the postmodern denial of economics (or any other single principle) as the basis of social relationships.

Either variety of postmodernism, ludic or resistance, spells trouble for the team employing it in a debate round. Ludic postmodernism promises nothing in the realm of solvency because its only mode of addressing problems is piecemeal. Furthermore, even if solvency could be obtained, it would be inefficient because it would consist of a conglomeration of decentralized, overlapping, and probably poorly funded efforts. These difficulties, of course, should not discredit small-scale problem solving, but they cast serious doubt on whether any definite, positive social impact can be expected from adopting a postmodern perspective. Since implementation of any postmodern program would be a purely individual matter (given the postmodern praise of individuality and creativity), the results would be unpredictable and compliance could be mandated only at the expense of

sabotaging the premise of epistemological liberation that drives postmodern thought.

Resistance postmodernism, in turn, is problematic because postmodernism undermines the very sorts of concepts that would foster the formation of social movements. Individuals coalesce into a movement for the sake of something greater than themselves. Social action is instigated for the sake of a cause that transcends the individual social agent. Although universal ideals have been invoked to justify horrendous injustices, postmodernism fails to offer any means for catalyzing social change *via* concerted action.

Hassan (1987a) suggests a way to sidestep postmodern relativism while retaining the useful spirit of distrusting purportedly universal and ahistorical theories. He proposes a "critical pluralism" that would encourage interpretive diversity, highlight the cultural and temporal limits to theorizing, and "attempt to contain" postmodernism's relativistic tendencies (1987a, p. 23). Hassan confesses, however, that no means of establishing consensus emerge within a postmodern framework. The critical pluralism Hassan proposes, which resembles Habermas's ideal speech situation, offers no checks on the exertion of power or on degeneration into relativism that fails to resolve--even provisionally--any issues (Hassan, 1987a, p. 32). We are left, then, with a renunciation of power and domination but without an affirmation of shared methods, traditions, or other bases of community for resolving conflicts, redressing grievances, or rendering decisions. Postmodernism purchases individual freedom at the cost of communal foundations for action.

Robert Hart (1994) extends this line of concern further by linking postmodernism with the ahistorical *mélange* of images that play on television. He argues that the postmodern renunciation of continuity undermines the possibility of political action, since political action presumes some historical basis and objectives. Television's postmodern aspect emerges in the premium placed on instantaneous emotional reactions. Gut reaction (how people feel) replaces deliberative action (what people think and why). Hart expresses consternation about the possibility of any political action in a postmodern context, since postmodernism tends to "back people away from the political sphere" (p. 98). If history holds no lessons other than individual emotional responses, then moral judgments about events such as the Holocaust, slavery, and

oppression of women remain individual opinions. Hart laments what he sees as an inevitable loss of community and thus of rational consensus (e.g., among critics serving as a panel in a debate round) that could underlie moral reasoning.

Postmodernism is particularly unsuitable as a critique because it falls prey to a false dichotomy, treating postmodern perspectives as clear alternatives to inflexible thought patterns. Debaters seem to run postmodern critiques and cases as if they offered clear alternatives: either modernism or postmodernism, but not both. The choice is not whether to opt for postmodernism because, as McGee (1990) observes, the postmodern era is upon us. The unresolved challenge is to go beyond the postmodern distrust of epistemological rigidity. Goodnight (1995) traces the epistemological roots of postmodernism to the ancient Greek skeptics. He labels postmodernism "a skepticism sweeping into and out of the academy for well over two decades" (1995, p. 269). Postmodernism easily degenerates into a pernicious skepticism by *revealing* overly restrictive thought patterns without *redressing* them.

A postmodern critique supposedly offers improved ways of thinking, yet it presents no means of translating thought into action. Without some kinds of ideals beyond the celebration of individual creativity, postmodernism deconstructs social practices without offering anything in their place (Fairlamb, 1994). Exactly what would a critic be voting *for* if deciding in a favor of a postmodern critique?

Limits of Applying Postmodernism to Debate

Far from presenting means to escape repressive social practices, postmodernism could fuel the very repression it criticizes. By negating the role of public deliberation, postmodernism replaces rationality with will power as the means for deciding controversy. Explaining the postmodern aspects of *Jurassic Park*, Goodnight (1995) observes that "it is will, not reason, that confirms genius in the postmodern moment" (p. 275). In debate rounds, therefore, intellectual acumen would not reap rewards under a postmodern view. Instead, the ability to impose one's will on another, be that through persuasion or physical force, would merit praise. Lest this conclusion seem far-fetched, recall that within a postmodern framework there are no *a priori* preferences for persuasion over coercion. From a postmodern perspective, there is no "unique

value to 'rational' as opposed to other forms of justification" such as force (Harris & Rowland, 1993, p. 31). Postmodern heroes, for example, are not necessarily technical experts, but they do know how to manipulate the resources at hand (Goodnight, 1995). Is this the primary lesson debaters should learn from the activity?

Unbridled argumentative inclusiveness also invites abuses. Some viewpoints, such as fascism, have been marginalized in order to *encourage* participation. I submit, with Hirst (1993), that certain practices such as blatant intolerance, racism, sexism, and homophobia have no justification and deserve no place in argumentation. Such means of "arguing" *should* be marginalized. Without some criteria for distinguishing justifiable versus unjustifiable marginalization, blatantly abusive behavior in debate rounds could be tolerated or even promoted in the name of free expression. Not all "otherness" qualifies as virtue (Bernstein, 1991). Designation as an oppressed group does not constitute a *prima facie* case for status as righteous but unfairly persecuted.

The fundamental problem in applying postmodernism to debate is that postmodernism functions best as a critical tool, not as an evaluative method or a set of adjudicative standards. It is designed to expose and question unquestioned assumptions. The supposedly radical break postmodernism makes with previous epistemological practice makes it unsuitable for use in an activity such as academic debate, which is thoroughly modernist in its practices, especially if viewed as advocacy of truth or as discovering which side does the better arguing. Debate in general qualifies as a "traditional (modernist) mode" (Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1991, p. 120) of contesting ideas, to be contrasted with the postmodern accommodation of differences and tolerance of unresolved (thereby unresolvable?) disputes. The avowal of inconsistency, therefore, reverberates beyond academic debate. Once inconsistency is institutionalized, it dissolves the desirability and perhaps even the possibility of converging viewpoints and stable social relationships. The postmodern praise of contradiction "underlines the insurmountable differences that make for a lack of social and personal cohesion" (Kuspit, 1990, p. 59). In an activity that could use greater emphasis on cooperation, why should debate theory undermine unity by underlining heterology? Debaters, critics, and

coaches must ask themselves whether rejecting the basis of communal values serves an educational purpose. It seems far more productive to balance practices that foster community with a respect for diversity. Why further isolate members of the debate community from one another by enshrining inconsistency?

The thoroughly modernist activity of debate is structured according to a division of ground informed by Aristotelian logic. Most prominently, the distinction between affirmative and negative sides presumes incompatible positions as the basis for forced choice that leads to a decision. Debate actually emphasizes argumentative incompatibility in order to facilitate choice. The intolerance of inconsistency is logically and procedurally necessary in a zero-sum game atmosphere where decisions must be rendered for one side only. If inconsistency were encouraged as a component of a postmodern perspective, then counterplans need not be competitive. In addition, the more inconsistency is tolerated, the *less* reason there would be to vote for postmodernism as an alternative to the rational methods employed by the opposing team. As inconsistency becomes more acceptable, it undermines the grounds for claiming that any argument could qualify as a voting issue. Ultimately, if inconsistency is desirable, then any particular debate could and should end in a tie.

Postmodernism offers debate primarily negations: opposition to unitary evaluative standards and rejection of scientifically based means of adjudication. From a postmodern perspective, any attempt to place facts "within some larger, more ambitious explanatory paradigm--is ignoring the weight of *de facto* evidence" that shows the historical failure of grand explanatory schemes (Norris, 1990, p. 7). If a postmodern perspective could be applied to debate, it would not take the form of a paradigm or other normative structure. Postmodernism might simply counsel us to recognize our interpretations as limited, thus enabling political engagement without hegemonic claims to know an ultimate Truth (Marshall, 1992). Such self-imposed restrictions on the scope of claims would introduce a welcome tone of modesty into competitive debates.

The choice is not whether or not to "adopt" a postmodern perspective, but to decide how postmodern conditions could affect the assumptions and conduct of debate. Postmodernists along the lines of

Baudrillard discard the qualification that contradictions should not be obvious and they embrace paradox instead. In contrast to Rorty, Baudrillard recommends: "Distrust campaigns of solidarity at every level," because all sense of unity and permanence is designed to disguise the erosion of referentiality (1983, p. 110n). This strain of postmodernism abandons criteria for valid argumentation, instead judging argumentative quality on the aesthetic merits of the rhetorical strategy irrespective of normative standards (Norris, 1990). The *raison d'être* of debate would become the satisfaction of individual taste, since aesthetics no longer would have any transcendent grounding in human values or fidelity to anything beyond the representation itself. Such a change harbors serious implications. Argumentative acumen reduces to knowing how to best one's opponents, so the hope that argumentation can enlighten arguers and audiences vanishes because enlightenment is illusory.

The political consequences of postmodern debate do not sound enticing, either. The promise of argumentation serving as an intellectually and socially liberating force--an agenda adopted by Habermas, for example--relies on rationally grounded critique that exposes distortion and internal contradiction. Without an understanding of what would constitute argumentative progress or communicative value, postmodernism fails to offer grounds or explanations of change. In essence, postmodernism sounds the call for political involvement while leaving a blank slate when called upon to produce a vision of productive social engagement for intellectuals (McGowan, 1991).

These considerations leave at least two choices for those involved with academic debate. First, debaters and critics can adopt a postmodern mindset but at the cost of undermining procedural foundations and social relevance. Harris and Rowland (1993) note that academic debate already exhibits some postmodern tendencies, such as the detachment from analogues and applications beyond the rounds themselves. The independence of debaters from "real world" concerns such as face validity of arguments brings debate ever closer to Baudrillard's simulacra, where external reference dissolves. In a word, academic debate becomes more postmodern the more it grows irrelevant to the world beyond the round.

On the other hand, the practice of debate might be understood as antagonistic

tic to postmodern tendencies. In policy debate, how could argumentation have any significance once the relationship between intellectuals and social change becomes ill-defined and idiosyncratic? In value debate, how could values be weighed when the standards for evaluating them have evaporated? In any form of debate, how could decisions be rendered when the very criteria for making those decisions no longer stand?

Recognizing the influence of postmodernism still can allow for some explanation of how agreement could be reached and how decisions could be justified without appealing to universal, immutable standards. This task is akin to the project Rorty has undertaken since writing *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. At the core of postmodern thought lies a concern for relationships instead of facts or representations of reality (Klinkowitz, 1988, p. 8). Such a shift in orientation drives Rorty (1979) to reject the epistemological goal of accurately representing nature. Instead, he envisions epistemology as a continuing conversation in which claims are posited, tested, and revised consensually. Worthy as the goal may be, Rorty and others have yet to explore in detail the means for engineering consent and achieving community. Rorty (1991, p. 174) criticizes Lyotard and Foucault for engaging in penetrating social critiques without articulating the basis for the "we" of human solidarity. Debate theorists can take up the same challenge: to elucidate the symbolic and other means for solidarity that permit rational decision-making.

I avoid using the term *Kritik* in the context of postmodernism. As employed in debate rounds, a *Kritik* represents a comprehensive decision-making framework that offers sufficient conditions for reaching a decision. Since postmodernism cultivates a distrust of such universal frameworks, the idea of a *Kritik* could apply only to the individual round, thereby denying its universality. Kant envisioned the *Kritik* as applying to "the faculty of reason in general," not only extending beyond specific instances but "*independently of all experience*" (Kant, 1965, p. 9).

²All the quotes from debate briefs are from materials generated at the 1995 National Debate Institute at the University of Vermont.

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