

“THIS IS L-D”: THEORY ARGUMENTATION IN LINCOLN DOUGLAS DEBATE

by
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It has been over twenty years since the inception of Lincoln Douglas Debate. Created as an alternative to team or policy debate, L-D seems to have always suffered from an identity crisis. Very often L-D has defined itself not by what it is, but by what it is not. How often have we heard debaters moan statements like the following? “This is not policy.” “This is L-D.” These statements are not only overused, but they are also not very meaningful when really examined. They are however reflective of the problems underlying Lincoln Douglas Debate as it evolves as an activity. What does it mean to say- “this is L-D”? This statement seems to assume that there is some common agreement as to what the nature of Lincoln Douglas Debate is or at least should be. It should be clear to anyone who has judged at the NFL National tournament (or any other large event with a diversity of areas represented) that this is simply not the case. Yet in spite of the vast differences in the way different people in different areas view L-D, rarely are these differences the subject of meaningful debate or discussion during the course of a round. While it is not unheard of to listen to a theory debate in a policy round, this is virtually unheard of in Lincoln Douglas. Most of the time deep theoretical or philosophical differences are glossed over by debaters with broad sweeping generalizations like the ones mentioned above. “This is L-D.” “This is NOT policy.” The result is often debates that are frustrating and confusing for both the competitors and judges. This is more than likely the result of the fact that the theory aspect of Lincoln Douglas debate is both underdeveloped and all too often overlooked by students, judges, and coaches alike.

In discussing theory argumentation in L-D it is first necessary to define exactly what we are referring to when we talk about debate theory. In debate, theory refers to arguments as to how any particular form of debate ought to be conducted. In other words, what rules or guidelines ought to govern how the debate is carried out by the

debaters or adjudicated by the judge? Traditionally in policy debate theory argumentation has focused on such issues as the legitimacy of counterplans or kritiks, the proper use of fiat, or the importance of various stock issues like topicality or inherency. In L-D, theory argumentation (when it occurs) seems to be limited to the proper use of value or criterion standards to evaluate the round. Even in these cases there seems to be very little actual discourse as to why the interpretations presented by the debaters are in fact justified or superior to that offered by their opponent. Rather both sides simply assert that their position is correct. These claims are almost made as if they factual statements to which there can be no counterargument advanced. This is simply the way it is and there is no real need for discussion. Anyone who has judged more than a few rounds of L-D can attest that such widespread agreement concerning the use of values and criteria, or any other issue for that matter, is at best illusionary.

Why is it that Lincoln Douglas debaters seem so hesitant to engage in discussion of theoretical differences during the course of a round? The most likely explanation for this lies in the fact that theory in Lincoln Douglas is not well developed. Many of the conventions that govern the practice of the activity seem to lack any substantive justification. Many others tend to be applied so broadly that they often serve only to prevent the meaningful discussion of issues that the activity is intended to facilitate. The answer to these problems may lie in the recognition that theory in L-D must be flexible due to the nature of the activity itself. Lincoln Douglas theory should be viewed as topic specific. In other words, the nature of the topic should be the primary factor in determining what is and is not proper argumentation. All too often debaters seem to be more interested in framing their positions in terms of the ill defined and vague conventions that are prevalent in the practice of L-D than in developing solid, realistic, and persuasive arguments. This is not to say that there

are not certain guidelines that should be used to define the sphere of debate on any given topic. These guidelines, however, should be clearly and narrowly defined to allow the necessary flexibility to embrace the diversity of topics that are debated in the Lincoln Douglas format.

The most prominent of these guidelines is derived from the fact that Lincoln Douglas is considered to be value debate. The resolutions debated are intended to be viewed as resolutions of value as opposed to resolutions of fact or policy. While there is universal agreement that L-D is “value” debate, what exactly that means is not as easily ascertained or agreed upon. One simplistic interpretation of this idea is to state that we are debating what we ought to value. In other words we are determining what values we ought to hold and which ones ought to be prioritized over the others. This would seem to imply that the two sides in the debate are therefore suppose to hold different things to be of value. While this may certainly be true on some topics, this interpretation does not always hold true. Sometimes a value resolution may question how best to achieve what is held to be of value, rather than to compare two different competing values. Political scientists make this distinction when they distinguish between what are called position issues and what are called valence issues. Position issues are ones in which the opposing sides hold different values to be of importance. One such issue is abortion where one side holds the sanctity of human life to be most important and the other side views the value of personal choice to be paramount. Valence issues on the other hand are ones in which both sides hold the same value or values to be of importance, but have differing conceptions of how best to achieve those values. Issues like economic prosperity and political corruption are prime examples of valence issues. No one is against economic prosperity or for political corruption. There are clearly differing opinions as to how to best handle these matters however. L-D resolutions can be broken down in a similar man-

ner. Take the resolution- "*Resolved: A just social order ought to value the principle of equality above that of liberty.*" This is clearly an example of a resolution where the value conflict is similar to the conflict surrounding a position issue. The two sides in this resolution are called upon to defend two divergent and competing values. This is not always the case however. Take for example the resolution- "*Resolved: A lesser developed nation's right to develop ought to take priority over its obligation to protect the environment.*" One of the negative strategies on this topic was to take the position that true economic development could best be achieved by developing within the constraints of one's obligation to protect the environment. "Sustainable Development", as it is often referred to, lies at the heart of much of the literature concerning this topic. Yet many affirmatives tried to preclude arguments of this sort claiming that they did not fulfill the negative's burden. These affirmative's seemed to be operating from the assumption that the negative was required to treat the conflict in the resolution as a position issue, rather than allowing them to view it as a valence one. There does not seem to be any valid reason that the negative in this resolution should be required to argue their position based on a completely different and competing value. When the term "value debate" is properly understood, it should be apparent that it can still be a value debate even if we are not directly comparing competing values, but rather attempting to determine how to best uphold a commonly held value. The fact that the actual real world discussion of this topic is centered on the concept of sustainable development should weigh heavily in any critic's assessment of the legitimacy such a position. The topic itself should define the proper parameters of how to intelligently discuss the issues inherent within it. Attempting to establish a steadfast set of rules that govern what are and are not legitimate positions ignores the variety of forms that value conflicts can take as well as the diversity of issues that value debate is capable of embracing. Anytime debaters make claims as to what is or is not appropriate argumentation they should be sure to explain such claims in terms of how they relate specifically to the topic at hand. In defining what is appropriate ground for debate it is imperative that the primary focus be on capturing the conflict inherent in the resolution under consideration. This will ensure that debate is focused on meaning-

ful and relevant issues and that the educational value of the activity is maximized for the participants. To illustrate this one can look to the topic concerning the morality of possessing nuclear weapons. (*Resolved: The possession of nuclear weapons is immoral.*) One interpretation advanced by the affirmative was that the resolution dealt with universal disarmament. Such an interpretation would completely eliminate the word deterrence from the discussion of the topic. To anyone who has done the least bit of research on this topic it is apparent that the idea of deterrence lies at the heart of the issue. Any really world discussion of the issue would be considered shallow and incomplete if it neglected to address this issue. Any interpretation of this resolution that would eliminate the issue of deterrence from consideration would therefore not be well grounded from a theoretical standpoint. Since the very purpose of debate theory is to create meaningful discourse it should be clear that any interpretation of a resolution that is counter to this purpose should be rejected. Recognition of this by both debaters and judges would go a long way to increase the quality and substance of debate in the Lincoln Douglas format.

Another controversial issue in L-D concerns the extent to which pragmatic argumentation is appropriate. It is clear that in L-D no "plan" is required to meet the burden of defending the resolution. Yet what is exactly meant when one refers to a "plan" is not quite as clear-cut. In policy debate a plan is offered by the affirmative team as a means of narrowing and defining the ground that they will defend in the round. That plan must fall within the limits established by the resolution, but the affirmative is not considered to be defending the entirety of the resolution. Any attempt in an L-D round to narrow the ground in the debate to one specific course of action would be inappropriate. This does not deny however that it may very well be necessary to provide practical explanation of the position one is advocating in an L-D round or even to explain the real world implications of the position which is advanced by one of the sides. To label such arguments a plan and attempt to discard them from consideration in the round would be to misinterpret what should be meant when one refers to plans and plan attacks.

In addition the use of so-called "counterplans" has created controversy in L-D. The primary argument advanced against the offering of alternatives to the

resolutionally defined positions is that counterplans are a policy argument. When scrutinized this argument lacks substance and is founded on a faulty premise. Simply because something is used in policy debate does not mean that it should be precluded from use in L-D. Ideas must be evaluated independently to determine their appropriateness for a given format. The use of such ideas in one form of debate should have no bearing on whether they can be used appropriately in another form. The appropriateness of "counterplans" or alternatives in L-D should be defined primarily by the topic under consideration. There are certain topics where the failure to discuss alternative options would preclude a full and comprehensive discussion of the issue at hand. Take for example the resolution concerning violent revolution as a response to oppression. (*Resolved: Violent revolution is a just response to oppression.*) For any person actually confronted with this choice it would unthinkable to not consider what alternatives might exist before deciding to use violence as a means to accomplish one's goals. In debating this topic it would only make sense to consider such alternatives before making a judgment. This type of consideration should be more important than whether or not theses arguments fit what have traditionally been commonplace practices in L-D.

The use of "kritiks" in L-D has also been an extremely divisive issue. Ironically "kritiks" seem to have wider acceptance amongst the policy debate community today than in Lincoln Douglas circles. Many people seem to forget that when "kritiks" first became prevalent in policy debate many attempted to discredit them by labeling them as L-D arguments. Certainly there are "kritiks" that would be inappropriate for value debate. "Kritiks" of the resolution itself that essentially lead to the conclusion that the topic is undebatable obviously do not facilitate the substantive discussion of ideas that is the purpose of any form of debate. Just like any other theoretical issue the nature of the topic itself should guide our consideration as to the acceptability of a particular form of argumentation. Arguments appropriate to the topic should not be rejected because they vary from the traditional ideas that are most often utilized. At the same time "kritik" arguments that are tangential to the issues embedded in the resolution or that fundamentally change the focus of the debate away from those issues (*Pellicciotta to page 20*)

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should be rejected.

To conclude it is important to recognize that topics are framed carefully and that much thought and research goes into selecting and wording them. The topic itself therefore should define the proper parameters for debate. Only through proper consideration of the issues embedded in a resolution and adequate research of the importance of such issues can we hope to have the opportunity for relevant and educational debate on important issues. We as a community must recognize this in order for Lincoln Douglas Debate to remain a relevant and valuable activity. This will require that we approach original ideas with an open mind and with the flexibility to stray away from traditional practices when they no longer serve their fundamental purpose of creating a meaningful educational experience for all involved.

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