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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Rhetorical Criticism of the use of Kritik in Parliamentary Debate

**A Thesis Submitted to the
University Honors Program
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree
With Upper Division Honors**

Department of
Communication

By

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Kritik (pronounced “critique”) is an offensive strategy in competitive academic debate employed by the opposition/negative team that calls into question the language or underlying philosophy of the affirmative/government team. Kritiks are rooted in the deconstructionist philosophy of questioning traditional rhetorical structures. For example, if the resolution the affirmative team puts forward is “The United States Federal Government should require all employee’s insurance to cover birth control.” the negative team may forgo discussing the issue of birth control coverage to instead kritik the affirmative team for use of sexist language. In this instance, the negative team is essentially saying that the use of sexist language is so problematic that it outweighs any other arguments presented in the round, and is grounds for voting against the affirmative team.

The strategy of kritik began within undergraduate academic Policy Debate in the early 90’s, as a way for underfunded colleges with less access to information and research to compete against their better funded rivals. The strategy has become increasingly popular within parliamentary debate (Solt 2004, 44). This paper will explore the contemporary use of kritik within parliamentary debate, while advancing the argument that the theoretical underpinnings of kritik are incompatible with the competitive framework of debate.

The subject of this paper is important because undergraduate competitive debate is rarely the topic of research and criticism. This paper would be one of the few within the communication discipline to address the topic of undergraduate competitive debate tactics and strategy. Competitive debate is incredibly popular within the collegiate community.

This will be a qualitative study that will study a selection of debates that feature a negative team’s use of the kritik strategy. The study will focus on primary sources; a sample of real debates conducted and recorded by the National Parliamentary Debate Association. The

specific artifacts analyzed are rounds from the National Parliamentary Debate Association's 2015 championship tournament that has been recorded and uploaded online. This source compiles more than eleven hours of parliamentary debate.

Review of literature

The strategy of kritik entered academic debate in 1992. Kritiks, originally spelled 'critique', were an interrogation of the traditional assumptions of debate. Marouf Hasain Jr. and Edward M. Penatta (1992) produced some of the earliest writing on the kritik with "The Promise and Peril of the Critique in Academic and Competitive Debate", in which they attempted to examine what influence kritiks could have on the debate world. According to Hasain and Penatta, kritiks promised an examination of long held assumptions promoted by those in power to maintain that power, and a destruction of language that prevent the inclusion of marginalized voices around the world. On the other hand, the authors argue that the peril of kritiks is its unfair tilt to the negative team and its nihilistic nature that could defeat its own purpose. In the end the authors concluded that the argument for using the kritiks strategy did not outweigh the arguments against using this strategy. Hasain and Penatta hoped that the deconstructive nature of kritik would not catch on, but that it would lead to a reconstruction of assumed thought about the debate process.

Fourteen years later, Roger E. Solt (2004) wrote about how kritiks have split the major debate communities in "Debate's Culture of Narcissism". He discussed how the pro and anti kritik perspectives had gone "beyond culture war to full-blown clash of civilizations" (Solt, 2004, 44). Solt discusses the changing nature of the kritik. Solt acknowledged the origins of kritik as an assumption questioning tool and as an argumentative strategy for broad social change. Solt also described the newest strain of kritiks that seeks to question traditional methods

of proof, and to advocate for personal narratives and performance as superior proofs. The constantly shifting landscape of the kritik framework suggests an instability within the kritik mindset. While the anti-kritik perspective remains squarely on the side of policy judging philosophy, that is focused on weighing the debate on who provides the most empirical evidence and creates the most net benefits. Ultimately Solt favors the policy-camp over the kritik-camp. To Solt, kritiks fail in five major areas: they fail to intellectually engage within the topic, the quality of critical debate remains low, they result in uneducational theory debates, the personal narrative structure remains uneducational for those who employ it, and finally the cultural split between pro and anti-kritik camps has led to an unsatisfying community (Solt, 2004, 49). Solt concludes that the two camps will not reconcile in the near future, and ultimately suggests policy-minded debaters will split from mainstream debate.

In response to Solt's essay, Scott J. Varda and John W. Cook (2010) argued in favor of justification kritiks and their importance to academic debate in "Toward a Theory of Legitimate Justification Critiques". Varda and Cook explore the logical underpinnings of justification kritik and they make the argument that often times the ideological justifications for a given action can affect our understanding of the world just as much as the action itself (Varda & Cook, 2010, 5). Interrogating justifications or assumptions allows college as debaters to acknowledge their inherent biases and examine how those biases may be problematic. Varda and Cook further argue that within the debate, the affirmative team attempts to present a vision of the world that includes a plan and its advantages, and that in this way the affirmative is attempting to shape the meaning of the world with its language. Consequently, it is the job of the negative team to not only bring up the possible disadvantages of the plan, but to interrogate whether the justifications used to construct the plan are racist, sexist, neo-colonial, etc. The authors warn that this dismissal

of justification kritiks adds to the continued devaluing of the importance of rhetoric (Varda & Cook, 2010, 25).

Ryan Galloway (2013) takes a hardline stance against kritiks in his paper “Kritik Killer: Winning answers to the critique”. Galloway reviewed how the kritik is rooted in the Frankfurt School of philosophy of deconstructionist thought. The author focused on the philosophical origins of the construct to make the argument that kritiks are essentially an extension of neo-Marxist thought. Like Marxist thought, kritiks are chiefly concerned with unmasking the motives and assumptions of the power structure. Galloway identified a problem in adopting neo-Marxist thought in academic debate because it always over simplifies an issue to a two sided conflict. To neo-Marxists, the worldview is always bourgeoisie versus proletariat, black versus white, men versus women. Galloway’s other problem with neo-Marxist thought is that it will always perceive government action as bad, as all government action is a delay in the inevitable perfect marxist state. As Galloway says “Anything that the United States federal government does which seems (on the surface) to be good is actually bad – it only serves to delay the inevitable transition to a communist future.” (Galloway, 2013, 2). So in effect, kritiks are in favor of all societal ills because kritiks will always interrogate government action, even on when it involves taking measures against poverty or genocide. It is Galloway’s goal for students to mount a concentrated effort to defeat kritiks within rounds so the tactic will no longer be used in academic debate.

Critical Perspective

The kritik camp receives its ideological underpinnings from the work of structuralism and post-structuralisms. The kritik borrows a lot from the work of French philosopher Michael Foucault. Foucault is a critic of discourse which he defines as speech acts that “because it follows particular rules and has passed appropriate tests, is understood to be true

in a culture” (Foss, Foss, Trapp, 1985, 351). The rules and tests that determine truth within a culture are important to Foucault because they make up what he calls a discursive formation. Foucault believes that only one discursive formation can exist at a time. It is impossible for two discursive formations to exist at the same time because the structure is so fundamental to a given culture that to think outside of it is extremely difficult. Foucault finds that all discursive formations are unique and that they come in succession with no relationship to their predecessor (Foss, Foss, Trap, 1985, 352). In his works Foucault examines the change in discursive formations, for example in Foucault’s book Madness and Civilization, he examines the changing discourse on madness through the late Middle Ages into the 20th century (White, 1979, 95).

Foucault interrogates discursive formations because they determine who is allowed to speak and what is allowed to be said. Foucault identifies different rules that determine discursive formation. One is the rules that determine what is allowed to be talked about or what experiences are allowed to exist. For example, discourse did not recognize sexual harassment as a legal action until the early 1970’s (Foss, Foss, Trap, 1985, 353) so while sexual harassment certainly happened before the 70’s, it was not allowed to be talked about. There are also rules on who is and is not allowed to speak, for example doctors are granted the right to speak on healthcare because discourse attributes competence and legitimacy to their position where as alternative medical practitioners are not. Whenever Foucault sees discourse arise in any aspect of society, he sees a fight between groups claiming the right to use discourse and groups denied the right to their own discourse.

Foucault finds that discourse is always related to desire and power (White, 1979, 89). In Foucault’s eyes, discourse is merely the rules imposed by those in power to determine what can and cannot be said. For example, Foucault finds that the discourse on madness is imposed by an

authoritarian structure that uses the distinctions of healthy and unhealthy to reinforce itself. (White, 1979, 98). Those in power do this by creating and imposing norms. Foucault believes that norms create “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault, 1975, 138) that act and operate as those in power desire.

While Foucault sees power as omnipresent, dispersed, continuous, and creative he also believes that resistance is possible. Foucault finds resistance to the universal order of things can only be achieved by the specific intellectual (Foss, Foss, Trap, 1985, 360). A specific intellectual would be an ordinary person that has knowledge of the specific sector of life they find themselves in. For example, a prisoner criticizing the prison conditions would be a specific intellectual. This is opposed to a universal intellectual that attempts to posit knowledge that is true for all things. Foucault does not believe that this resistance will ever achieve an ideal or utopian society, as even if we replace the present discursive formation we will never be free from discourse. What we do have, Foucault believes, is the critique. The critique is defined as an “examination of the discursive formation to discover rules and power relations that undergrid it” (Foss, Foss, Trap, 1985, 360) so as to problematize and disrupt commonly held beliefs. Yet Foucault says that critique does not give one the right to speak for others who have been left out of the discursive formation for “the role of an intellectual is not to tell others what they must do” (Foucault, 1966, 462). Foucault also does not connect problematic discourse to the individual who authored it. This is because the author is merely fulfilling the discursive formation that is ever present in society, the author’s role could be filled by any number of other individuals.

Foucault’s belief that no two things are similar to each other due to differences in internal nature, external attributes, and location in space (White, 1979, 94). This makes all language abusive as it attempts to give a singular name to groups of unique individuals. Due to

Foucault's belief in the uniqueness of all things, he does not propose an alternative system of understanding, he merely critiques the existing systems.

Foucault's original concept of the critique will be applied to examples of negative team's use of kritik in NPDA debate rounds. From this application one can see how kritiks borrow heavily from Foucault's ideas, yet fail to represent them accurately. Ultimately it will be shown how Foucault's ideas and the kritik itself are incompatible with competitive undergraduate debate.

Analysis

Round 1

The artifacts analyzed are from the Kansas City Kansas Community College's, or KCEC, youtube account. The tournament is presented in four parts under the title "National Parliamentary Debate Association Championship". All of the debate rounds videos discussed can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/user/KCECable>. The first round begins as the affirmative team frames the debate on the subject of systematic racism within the debate community. The Prime Minister, or leader of the affirmative team, advocates for a rejection of structural racism and a reformation of the debate culture through his own personal narrative as a black man. The negative team employs a racism kritik, arguing that the affirmative team's plan is problematic. The leader of opposition argues that reformation of debate culture only reinforces the culture's inherent whiteness because it does not eliminate the structure that privileges whiteness. This is because debate culture is based on "white terms" that prevent black individuals from thriving. The negative presents a metaphor that compares the affirmative's advocacy to improving the conditions of the slave plantation. The logic presented is the affirmative team attempts to improve the condition of black individuals while ignoring that the system they are working under

is inherently oppressive. The alternative presented by the opposition team is a destruction of current system which they tagline as a vote “to endorse the end of the world”.

The negative team’s kritik is informed by Foucault’s critical framework. The arguments made about debate’s cultures inherent use of white terms is derived directly from Foucault’s examination of discursive formations. The opposition leader specifically mentions how the power structure uses the distinction of civilized and uncivilized concepts to enforce the norms of whiteness, much like Foucault’s examination of healthy and unhealthy (White, 1979, 95). The negative recognizes that debate has its own discursive formation that determines what can and cannot be considered true, their argument is that the norms enforced by debate culture inherently promotes whiteness. The negative team’s advocacy for the destruction of the current discursive formation aligns with the Foucault’s belief that no two formations can exist in the same space and time. Yet while deriving its theory from Foucault’s thoughts on discursive formation, the negative team violates the framework’s belief in the specific intellectual.

The negative team dismisses the affirmative team’s personal narratives in favor of their own methodology. This completely violates Foucault’s idea that resistance of the universal order of things comes from the specific intellectual, an ordinary person that has knowledge of the specific sector of life they find themselves in (Foss, Foss, Trap, 1985, 360). The negative team not only denies the narrative of the specific intellectual but also takes up the role of the universal intellectual. The negative team members both speak to the experience of the plantation which neither of them have experienced. Effectively the negative team attempts to speak for groups that have been shut out of the discursive formation rather than creating a space for them to speak for themselves.

The negative team's kritik has major implications on the debate community. By introducing the ideas of discursive formation to debate the negative team introduces a major paradox into the round. The negative team attempts to end the discursive formation by utilizing terms that are enforced by that same formation. The negative team calls the white terms enforced by debate problematic, yet at the same time maintains the use of debate's parliamentary procedures. Parliamentary procedures themselves are white terms reinforced in debate. Ultimately the negative team is arguing for an end of the discursive formation because they wish to win the ballot, but the ballot is itself a product of the discursive formation. If the negative team cannot seek the ballot without creating a paradox the use of the kritik strategy is not compatible with the competitive framework debate exists in.

Round 2

Round two in the KCEC debate tournament, the resolution is that the United States Federal Government should send military aid to Nigeria. The negative team responds with a statist kritik that states the judge can vote for the negative team on the grounds that the affirmative team's plan affirms the problematic state of policymaking. The negative team supports a standard of deconstructing normalized statist violence. Normalized statist violence being the concept of state's regularly resorting to violence to solve their problems, through wars against other states or suppressions of insurrection movements. The leader of opposition argues that the nature of stateism is inherently abusive. This is because the state perpetuates an infinite cycle of violence, the leader of opposition argues, as evidenced by history. Other state abuses mentioned by the negative team include inherent barriers to representation and outward aggression. The negative team also argues that stateism leaves people no choice, either live in the

state you are born into or move to another state that will equally oppress you. The negative proposes the alternative of dissolving the state.

The statist kritik borrows from Foucault's ideas of discourse as it relates to desire and power (White, 1979, 89). The discourse that assumes the state should solve problems is created by the state to reinforce and perpetuate itself. The negative team's standard of deconstructing normalized statist violence comes from Foucault's argument that the state's power is derived from imposing norms. The negative team argues Foucault's point that if the state normalizes state violence as a solution to problems, it allows the state to continue to use violence whenever it's power is threatened. The negative team breaks from Foucault in their alternative, that it believes it can break from an oppressive state. Foucault believes power is omnipresent and continuous, while a new discursive formation may replace the former, there will always be a discursive formation. This is to say that that there can never be a dissolution of the state. The negative team attempts to posit a solution for all things and in affect attempts to create a utopian society, yet Foucault did not believe in a universal solution.

The negative team's kritik is also incompatible with the framework that they adopt, because they attempt to blame the affirmative team for their use of discursive formation. In Foucault's framework, problematic language is not attached to a specific author, yet in competitive debate the negative team has the burden of rebuttal. According to Austin J. Freeley and David L. Steinberg, the burden of rebuttal is the negative team's burden to "refute the issues of the affirmative, or the affirmative will prevail" (Freeley & Steinberg, 1986, 252).

The statist kritik is not compatible with policy debates. A policy debate requires the affirmative team to take up the role of an actor, most often the United States Federal government, and advocate for an action. If the affirmative team must act as the United States Federal

government, no matter how they structure their case, the statist kritik will attack it. This position puts the affirmative team in a precarious spot, as they can be subject to a kritik for language they had no choice but to adopt. The statist kritik also complicates the role of the judge's ballot. The statist kritik argues the role of the judge's ballot is to vote for a solution to a presented problem. Yet if you believe the ballot should be in favor of solving a problem, then the statist kritik ignores the contemporary problems the affirmative team was attempting to solve in the first place. Ultimately the statist kritik is incompatible with the conventions of policy debate.

Round 3

In the third round of KCEC debate tournament, the affirmative team advocated against colonialism and put forth the thesis that all actions taken by the United States Federal Government are illegitimate because they happen on land taken by deception and force from Native Americans. The leader of opposition employs a slam poetry kritik, which challenged the affirmative teams use of traditional proofs like logic. The negative team asserts that accepted knowledge comes from the existing power structure and using it within a debate round only reinforces the abuses enacted by those in power. This is because traditional proofs are squarely masculine, for example, the negative team cites a study that states that when men use evidence it bolsters their credibility yet the same is not true for women, so therefore the use of traditional evidence is exclusionary. That is why the negative team urges the judge to prefer slam poetry as a preferable mode of proof. The negative team's logic is that slam poetry comes from real lived experiences thus opens up a space for those who would not have a voice within traditional debate. The slam poetry performed by the leader of opposition speaks to her experiences not fitting into a traditional category of race and the systematic exclusions of women. Ultimately the

negative team wants the ballot to go to their performance because it creates a space for the voiceless.

The negative team's kritik falls squarely in line with Foucault's ideas of the purpose of a specific intellectual. The negative team understands that there is a discursive formation that deems what can be true, and that the discursive formation is tied to a power structure. This is evident in their exploration of what is masculine and feminine, and how the discursive uses the distinction to privilege the masculine. The negative team's slam poetry is straight from Foucault's ideas of resistance in that it is an ordinary person speaking to their experiences (Foss, Foss, Trap, 1985, 360). The negative team opposes the affirmative team's use of universal truths just as Foucault advocated for. The only break with Foucault's framework that the negative team exhibits is to directly blame the affirmative team for their use of the discursive formation of traditional masculine proofs. Foucault believed that an author is not to blame for their use of the discursive formation, yet the negative team chooses to blame the affirmative team for their use.

The negative team accurately portrays Foucault's framework within their kritik, yet they show how Foucault's beliefs do not fit within competitive debate. The negative team follows Foucault's form of resistance, yet in doing so they attempt to invalidate the affirmative team's narrative. Debate is competitive and only one team and its argumentative stance can be rewarded through winning the judge's ballot. That is why even while the negative team is attempting to create a space for their own narrative, they have to speak on why the affirmative team's narrative should not be considered. If the negative team chooses to adopt Foucault's ideas of "critique", they must privilege all individual's experiences; yet if they wish to win the ballot they must clash with the other team. The paradox created through the slam poetry kritik is it maintains the very problem, that of invalidating of an individual's experience, that is was created to resist. The

paradox created trying to marry Foucault's thought and competitive debate proves that two are incompatible.

Round 4

The final round of KCEC starts as the affirmative team advocates for the resolution "Brazil should declare support and enact legislation consistent with the New York declaration on forests". The affirmative's plan for fulfilling this resolution consists of giving reparations, in the form of forest land, to the descendants of slaves, African Brazilians. The negative team employs a hybrid of racism and statist kritik. The negative team's justification for the racism kritik is that the affirmative's language is reminiscent of a white savior attempting to save black bodies. The negative team says this is problematic because it does not acknowledge the role the white savior had in causing the poor condition of black bodies to begin with. The negative team justifies the statist kritik by saying that the affirmative team's plan is merely a suggestion for a state that is not in the room of the debate. Since the state is not listening, the negative team asserts, there is no point in taking on the role of the state. The negative team says this is problematic because it does not create any real change within the round. The negative team proposes the alternative of making change within the room they are debating in. The change the negative team claims they are making, is problematizing the racist language to make everyone in the room more aware of the role they play in structural racism.

The negative team borrows from the writings of Foucault when they take on the role of problematizing certain language. Yet the negative team goes about their problematizing in exactly the opposite way advocated by Foucault. The first major difference is the negative team attempts to speak for Africans citizens of both Brazil and the United States. This flies in the face of Foucault's belief in the role the specific intellectual plays in resistance (Foss, Foss, Trap,

1985, 360). Secondly the negative team's entire argument hinges on the affirmative team being to blame for their use of racist language. Yet Foucault did not believe an individual author is to blame for their problematic language. According the Foucault, the affirmative team simply exists within the discursive structure, and if it was not them using this racist language it would be someone else. This does not support the negative team's philosophy that we must focus on individuals rather than structures. In fact, Foucault's entire work is based on the study of structures rather than individuals (Foss, Foss, Trap, 1985, 368).

The negative team attempts to blame the affirmative for something that is beyond their control with the statist kritik. Again, the affirmative is forced into assuming the role of an actor, typically a state actor, when they debate policy. If the statist kritik persists within the community, it will essentially invalidate an entire category of debate. The idea that debate would no longer examine policy is horribly problematic because it is still incredibly relevant to the world outside debate. For all the negative teams talk of a major culture change in which individuals recognize their use of racist language, it is much less likely to actually happen as opposed to the prospect of the Brazilian government granting reparations. If the debate community moved away from discussing realistic policy outcomes in favor of major rhetorical change, the community would suffer immensely.

Conclusion

While the kritik borrows from an important rhetorical framework that seeks to understand and interrogate language and truth, it ultimately is incompatible with competitive debate. Foucault's ideas are certainly present within the racist kritik's question of racist language and the slam poetry kritik's use of personal narrative. Yet the negative team always compromises Foucault's ideas when they attempt to win the ballot. Foucault did not envision his ideas through

a competitive lens, so naturally they do not apply when the negative team is attempting to explain to a judge why they should be validated and the affirmative should not. This is important because if the philosophical underpinnings of the kritik do not belong within debate. It raises the question of whether kritiks belong within debate.

The long term impacts of kritik on the debate community are also troubling. First, the implication of the statist kritik. As stated, the statist kritik strikes at the heart of policy debate more than at the affirmative team itself. The negative teams that employ a statist kritik propose an alternative in which the debate is not about a state actor completing an action to solve a problem, but instead, about enacting change within ourselves to create major social change. This is less preferable because debate would become too exclusive, as the general populace can understand a state actor taking an action much easier than they can understand major rhetorical change.

Second, the implication of the slam poetry kritik is problematic for the academic debate community. The slam poetry kritik argues that only personal narratives are efficient modes of proof. This implies that all debate teams should utilize their personal narrative over other modes of proof like evidence and logic. This creates the problem of spotlighting, meaning the kritik is forcing teams to speak on their personal experiences even if they are uncomfortable doing so. Marginalized individuals may prefer modes of proof like evidence and logic because they are detached from their personal experience because that experience is traumatizing. In effect the debate community would be shunning those who do not feel comfortable talking about themselves. Ultimately kritiks are not compatible with competitive debate and their continued use is a detriment to the debate community.

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