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Gary Alan Fine: Gifted Tongues: High School Debate and Adolescent Culture

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Introduction

STUDENTS of social life routinely speak of their subjects as *actors*: an image derived, in part, from the dramaturgical approach pioneered by sociologist Erving Goffman,¹ and before him from the various approaches labeled behaviorism, including the social behaviorism of the pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead. What people *do* is judged to be central for human understanding. Yet, if we are honest, we recognize that on many occasions we are less actors than *talkers*, realizing, of course, that talk is a class of behavior. Talk constitutes much of the meaningful behavior that defines humanity.² As sociologist Florian Znaniecki has noted, verbal claims can be more consequential than the behaviors that the claims represent.³

I became interested in this project—the analysis of high school debate—from the increasing interest by humanists and social scientists in narrative and discourse. I wished to examine how a community explicitly and self-consciously immersed in issues of talk developed verbal skills. Some argue, passionately, that rhetorical skills have atrophied in American culture, leading us to become an “inarticulate society.”⁴ Recognizing the centrality of talk to the organization of human society, I address issues surrounding the production of talk. In particular, I am concerned with how talk is *spoken of*.

Although talk is my focus, I do not intend, as a practical matter, to produce a microscopic analysis of discourse, focusing on each half-drawn breath, sibilant *S*, or parapraxis. In contrast, I examine a talking world as a social space: an arena of deeds *and* diction, of action *and* words. My goal is to investigate how adolescents learn to talk: to talk in a distinctive way, a style easily caricatured and derided for its distance from “natural speech.” Yet, it is precisely that speech and its content as a topic of attention that makes this community of particular interest.

Anyone who has listened to an American high school policy debate would not confuse that form of discourse with other speech domains. Contemporary high school debate has been vigorously criticized as downplaying rhetorical skills. The goal in debate is not to persuade a listener, but to demonstrate to a trained judge that one has “beaten” the arguments of one’s opponents—and may contribute to an “argument culture,” as described by sociolinguist Deborah Tannen.⁵ An outsider will immediately notice that speech in debate is extremely rapid—sometimes incomprehensibly so—and evidence is used in ways that differ from the

way that evidence is treated elsewhere. High school debate is a highly formalized and competitive world of talk, whose value must be established: much as the somewhat obscure skills of a decathlon victor must be defined to support the claim that this person is the greatest athlete in the world. Some critics suggest that high school debate no longer matters; it has no future. Yet, it is precisely this formalization, this socially structured, competitive, and judged component, that provokes sociological interest.⁶ Debate is a talking world defined by age, institution, and class.

Debate as an Adolescent World

Before examining the issues involved in learning to speak, collecting evidence, and presenting arguments, I argue that high school debate needs to be understood in light of its social placement as an activity that is engaged in by adolescents.⁷ Just as this book is about talk, it is about teens. This does not mean that high school students are not affected by their collegiate role models or adult mentors, but that the domain I examine is fundamentally an adolescent social world. High school debate allows not only for the understanding of talk but also of adolescent development. I address broader issues of teenage behavior in light of the expansion of behavioral options at this age.

Debate is an arena in which one can observe the cultural and social dynamics of adolescent life. High school debaters are not a random sample of adolescents; yet, the participants are still adolescents, and their moral and emotional development parallels that of their peers. Observing a debate team permits one to learn about a teen community, status system, and cultural world.

With their prodigious knowledge and abilities, sometimes these “children” seem much like adults. Surely they know more about the debate topic than do most adults, and they are more skilled at research and public speech than most “grown-ups.” Yet, on other occasions (and sometimes on the same occasions), they seem to be children. How can this apparent paradox of childishness and maturity be understood, and how does it relate to other “mixed-role” adolescents: drug dealers, tennis stars, teen mothers, computer nerds, poets, political activists, and mass murderers. I argue that adolescence should not be thought of as a stage of development, but rather as a period in which one can select from behaviors characteristic of both children and adults: from the “toolkits”⁸ to which boys and girls have access in creating appropriate adolescent activities. This theme—that adolescence is not primarily a stage, but a toolkit—appears throughout my analysis.

Debate as an Educational World

Debate is justified as a learning tool, not merely as a means by which adolescents enjoy themselves. In a society concerned about the perceived failures of its educational institutions, high school debate is a voluntary activity in which some students—a small and highly select group—choose to engage in research, practice socially valued skills, and demonstrate these abilities in public settings. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students who participate in intermural debate do extremely well in their schoolwork and then (and as a consequence) are successful in college and in graduate or professional school, achieving occupational success. Since debate does not appeal to a random sample of the student body, causality is hard to establish, but the claim that debate is beneficial is surely plausible. Debate is one program through which an often shaky institution encourages adolescents to acquire culturally valued skills. While debate is not the only activity in which the adolescent attachment to competition is mixed with the acquisition of socially valued skills—Model UN, academic bowls, math teams, chess clubs, and mock trials also have these attributes—it provides an exemplary case in its organization, its longevity, and its intensity. High school debate potentially could produce curricular reform based on “teaching the conflicts”⁹: learning how to discuss contentious social issues can permit students to engage and confront moral ideals.

Today many find America’s school systems in disarray, attempting, often ineffectively, to solve seemingly insoluble social problems. If we cannot educate the masses effectively, some suggest that at least we should properly educate our “best and brightest.” Gifted education is a concern for both educators and parents. High school debate teams are highly selective—sometimes self-selected, but often with the assistance of coaches, teachers, and principals who recruit their most energetic, brightest, and most articulate students. Debate helps to reproduce the class system. Most debaters—although not all—are high achievers. In general, debaters are young men and women from affluent homes in which education is valued and in which ideas are discussed. Many of these students have succeeded in school and have established, prior to their immersion in the world of debate, a record of achievement. High school debate magnifies these successes, providing an enriched atmosphere in which students expand their educational horizons. The competitiveness of debate motivates this achievement drive, particularly among those students who have already succeeded in academic competitions.

Within the social world of high school, status systems develop. Debate is an activity in which individuals are stereotyped by others. High schools

contain distinct status systems, and individual schools differ in the prestige accorded different activities.¹⁰ In some schools debate is central to the status system—a high-status pursuit—whereas at other high schools, debate is a low-status, stigmatized activity, left to social outsiders.

In addition to earning school status, debaters belong to a team, with a group culture and local status system. The team generates intense loyalty, but simultaneously creates tensions that must be managed if it is to survive and prosper. This team culture and structure is set within a larger—national, regional, and local—subculture of debate, in which individuals know each other and develop meaningful social ties over months and miles. “National circuit” teams travel to tournaments across the country on weekends, with the season lasting from the start of the school year to its close at the National Forensic League tournament in June. The months of July and August may be spent at debate camps (“institutes”), typically held at college campuses. The season of less-extensive programs typically lasts from October to January.

Debate as a World of Talk

Justifying this research in light of education, training for gifted and talented youth, and adolescent culture specifies the social and institutional locus of debate, a crucial feature of any social world. Yet, specifying the location of this research should not downplay the behavior itself. Debate involves not only the acquisition of knowledge, but a set of verbal and research skills that all persons, not only debaters, use: techniques of persuasion and reasoning. To be competent, one must acquire information-processing skills: the ability to gather, organize, and present information. To induce another to ratify one’s claims demands facility with words and with evidence. Those who acquire professional skills learn to put forth a line of discourse, and to counter alternate arguments. Learning how to talk—to argue, to counter, and to persuade—is such a critical skill that an explicit focus on how this skill is acquired seems valuable but, surprisingly, has been largely ignored. I examine the process of argumentation. In this, my argument is congruent with a group of cognitive psychologists who are interested in how people argue in practice, such as Michael Billig, Charles Antaki, Adrian Furnham, and Deanna Kuhn.¹¹ An argument is not something that happens in isolation, but that happens in a social and strategic context. Humans situate themselves in social life through argumentation, creating allegiances and divisions. As these writers note, argumentation is as social as it is cognitive, a linkage of the mind to systems of interaction. My goal is to produce a social psychology that takes rhetoric seriously. As high school debate makes clear, it is people, not minds, that make arguments. Unlike this group of cognitive social psychologists,

I do not attempt to understand the nature of thought, but to treat argument as a form of behavior.

Of course, the value of an activity, even as seemingly worthy as debate, should not be taken for granted. Some worry about the effects of a brutal and disputatious culture of argument in which discourse becomes a game, and question the notion that the conflict between ideas is necessarily a social good. Certainly this activity favors those with the cultural capital to engage in claims making. Further, such activity privileges competitive models over cooperative ones; individualism over communalism; empiricism and efficacy over faith and morality. Competitive high school debate is an activity that is largely limited to the United States, and reflects American values, as linked to the American system of politics and law with their emphasis on game-like conflict and winning at all costs, even if this means that the larger community is harmed. The American oppositional system in which two sides fight with whatever weapons are at hand is found in debate, as well as in legislatures and courtrooms. This leads some to suggest—somewhat harshly—that even with the presence of women and minorities, high school debate models the value system of white male hegemony. Recognizing this counterperspective (part of the debate about debate), little doubt exists that given our current social structure, the ability to present one’s perspective effectively serves one well. While I discuss the political implications of debate in the conclusion, I argue that it fits easily into American culture.

In understanding how these adolescents acquire information-processing skills, I focus upon four aspects of their training. First, I address how adolescents learn to “talk”—orality is a social challenge. Second, I examine the means by which students create arguments that they perceive as persuasive, given a logical structure. Third, I examine the evidence on which adolescents draw to develop meaningful arguments. Finally, I recognize that debate is a competitive activity, in which two-person teams rapidly construct strategic discourse to persuade a judge, given a set of rules.

I begin by examining the activity itself, as well as the ways that the world of high school debate models the use of persuasion. Debate involves oral presentation, and this orality, while highly stylized, is central to the doing of the debate. Adolescents must learn—again—how to talk. Yet, as noted, this talk has different standards from those that make effective oral communication. In preparation for debate tournaments, instructors teach students skills of oral presentation, although in the debate itself these rules are transformed in the guise of presenting as much information as possible.

However, talk does not fully constitute debate. Ultimately, the justification for debate is that adolescents learn how to create arguments with underlying logical presuppositions. While the rules in practice are

both similar to and different from formal rules of argumentation as presented by rhetoricians and logicians, the rules of arguments as ideal types legitimate the practical doing of argumentation. Further, debate is argumentative talk that uses evidence to persuade. But what constitutes effective, persuasive, good evidence must be determined.

Within a policy debate round there are eight turns at talk, plus three-minute cross-examinations that occur after the first four speeches. The debates that I observed in 1989–1990, before rebuttals were lengthened to five minutes, were structured:

- First Affirmative Constructive (8 minutes)
- Cross-Examination of the First Affirmative by the Second Negative (3 minutes)
- First Negative Constructive (8 minutes)
- Cross-Examination of the First Negative by the First Affirmative (3 minutes)
- Second Affirmative Constructive (8 minutes)
- Cross-Examination of the Second Affirmative by the First Negative (3 minutes)
- Second Negative Constructive (8 minutes)
- Cross-Examination of the Second Negative by the Second Affirmative (3 minutes)
- First Negative Rebuttal (4 minutes)
- First Affirmative Rebuttal (4 minutes)
- Second Negative Rebuttal (4 minutes)
- Second Affirmative Rebuttal (4 minutes)

A debate reflects an hour of talk. However, a critical difference exists between the first speech in a debate round (the first affirmative) and those that come later. The first affirmative is a “canned” address, which some speakers memorize. The later turns of talk are locally constructed, reacting to what has been said previously. While debaters often use fully or partially canned responses to particular issues (what they label briefs, following legal jargon), the whole of the discourse constitutes a “spontaneous” response.

In a given round a team of two debaters is assigned either to the affirmative or the negative side of a topic. The affirmative team has the responsibility of making a positive argument: a case. They must present a plan that achieves the end for which the debate resolution calls. During the year in which I observed, the topic involved reducing prison overcrowding, and so every affirmative team had to present a scheme to achieve this end, and then defend this plan. Of course, they had an advantage—the benefit of surprise—in that the negative team was unaware at the outset of the round of the details of the case that the affirmative would

make. This ability to create an affirmative plan and then back it up contributes to instrumental attitude change. While our legal system finds a negative argument sufficient in the establishment of a *reasonable doubt*, in most domains action depends on a plan.

Debaters lug heavy boxes (called “oxes” or “tubs”) that are filled with evidence, but how is this evidence used, and what does it mean to the debaters? Throughout the year this material is created and processed, much as we process fact and opinion, but what does this processing mean to participants? Evidence reflects a truth claim: the allegation that there is a direct and transparent relationship between what is said and the world out there. The evidence must be seen as relevant, rhetorically resonant, recent, and reliable. Further, the evidence must have a warrant, connected to some moral model of what ought to be. Some truth claims carry more weight than others, and the novice debater must learn the rules for truth, as defined by debaters, coaches, and judges.

Debate is ultimately competition, dependent upon a situated performance. The activity is known not only by the preparation of adolescents, but by their activity within the round. Two teams compete in real time, under enormous temporal pressures. During the round, four young men and women make arguments, and respond to the arguments of others. They speak and prepare to speak. To understand high school debate requires that one understand the strategies that permit debaters to persuade a judge that they have presented a better and more complete set of arguments than their opponents—strategies that are both substantive and presentational. Debate is organized so as to produce a definitive outcome, given a set of criteria.

Ethnographic Ears

This research is based on participant observation and in-depth interviews that I conducted for an academic year with two high school debate squads in the suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota. The location is not a trivial matter, as high school debate is organized on a state level (in Minnesota by the Minnesota Debate Teachers Association). States differ widely in the vigor of high school debate and in the type of debate permitted. Although I shall have more to say about the regional peculiarities of Minnesota debate in the appendix, debate in Minnesota was still popular among public high schools (although the number of teams had significantly diminished over the previous twenty years), and debate was more “conservative” in what arguments were considered permissible than many other states with strong debate competition, such as Texas, Illinois, or Georgia. These factors affected the specific observations of my

research. Although I consider my observations generalizable in their sociological analysis, the particular analysis of debate styles is tied to my research sites in Minnesota.

I name my two research sites Randall Park High School and Greenhaven High School—pseudonyms, as is true for the names of Minnesota coaches and students. Randall Park serves an upper-middle-class first-tier suburb; Greenhaven serves an outer-ring middle-class suburb, which, during the course of research, was undergoing a transformation from farmland to development.

During my observation, both schools had strong debate teams; each won local tournaments. I began the year by planning to focus on a single debate squad, that of Randall Park, but during the year I came to know the debaters at Greenhaven quite well, and when the debaters at Randall Park did not win the preliminary tournament that would permit them to attend the National Forensic League Championship, I followed the Greenhaven debaters as they prepared, and I later attended that tournament with them. I attended debate class at Randall Park, and the after-school activity that followed the class, on most days from September to February. I also traveled with the team to tournaments on most weekends from September until February, including one tournament in South Dakota. In February, I began attending practices with Greenhaven High School, typically two afternoons a week. I also traveled with the team to the Tournament of Champions at the University of Kentucky and to the National Forensic League Championship at San Jose State University in California.

My ethnographic field notes were bolstered by interviews with fourteen members (all but one) of the Randall Park team, and with fourteen Minnesota high school debate coaches.¹² I also read the publications of the National Forensic League during this research project. Subsequently, with the aid of a student at the University of Minnesota, Patrick Schmidt, a former Minnesota debater and assistant debate coach, two questionnaires were sent to a random sample of schools. One questionnaire was completed by high school coaches. We also sent questionnaires for student debaters, and requested that coaches distribute these questionnaires to their student debaters. For several years I also read all the messages on an on-going e-mail discussion list for debaters and coaches. While these messages by no means represented the views of the typical debate participant, they provided an insight into some of the divisions in the activity.

At both Randall Park and Greenhaven, the debate team was coached by an English teacher (Mrs. Annette Miller at Randall Park and Ms. Janice Nyberg at Greenhaven); each had coached debate for many years. Both women were well liked by students, respected by peers, and had

successful records as coaches. At each school, debate was cocurricular, organized as both an academic class and an extracurricular activity. In each school, approximately fifteen students debated, with about eight regularly attending weekend tournaments. Both schools had two varsity debate teams, and several junior varsity and freshman teams.

During my research, two types of debate were practiced in Minnesota: policy (two-person) debate and Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debate. The latter, also known as values debate, is a newer form, in which individual debaters face each other, arguing a topic that changes every two months. In LD debate, evidence is not of primary importance; moral argumentation is more central. For my research, I observed policy debate. As noted, policy debaters work in teams of two and have a single topic assigned for the entire year. During the 1989–1990 academic year the topic was: Resolved: That the federal government should adopt a nationwide policy to decrease overcrowding in prisons and jails in the United States.

In the typical tournament, lasting five preliminary (“prelim”) rounds, the teams switched sides, debating both affirmative and negative. Each tournament has a set of “break rounds” (quarterfinals, semifinals, finals) for the teams with the best records in the prelims. In a round, debaters attempt to persuade the judge that their argument is stronger than their opponents’, but this evaluation is made in the context of the standards of the activity. The winner is not the team that presents the “best” argument—in the sense of the argument that the judge most agrees with—but rather the team that presents the strongest argument given the rules of the game. What constitutes the rules of this game can be a matter of contention.

The History of Debate

If debate refers to a structured oral contestation between several participants on a limited topic, then the history of debate surely recedes into the mists of time. The Socratic dialogues presented by Plato from ancient Greece are, in effect, debates—although admittedly one-sided in Plato’s self-interested account. Monks in Middle Age monasteries indulged in interminable discussions and arguments, and rabbinical debates about the meaning of the Torah and the Talmud are widely known and treasured. In the nineteenth century, the debating societies, literary societies, and lyceums that flourished throughout America (including the Chataqua movement) serve as models for high school debate as it later developed.¹³

Both legislative activity and legal engagement can properly be thought of as debates—rivalrous, competitive, with structured outcomes. These

events, capturing the cut and thrust of opposing sides, involve debate, and provide models for the history of debate, as did the Lincoln-Douglas debates of the Illinois Senatorial Campaign of 1858. Indeed, today when many people think of “debates,” they frequently refer to presidential debates—a style that debate purists often consider to be little more than joint press conferences, with participants talking past each other.¹⁴

Competitive speech events pitting teams of students against each other are more recent. According to one source, the first recorded intercollegiate debate occurred between Harvard and Yale in 1892;¹⁵ however, my colleague David Zarefsky informs me that in 1872 Northwestern University debated the old Chicago University. The Harvard-Yale match serves as a nice origin myth, legitimating the activity, except, of course, here in Evanston. Within a few years, intercollegiate debate had spread across the country, to large universities, smaller colleges, and eventually to high schools.¹⁶ The National Forensic League, the organization regulating high school debate, was founded at Ripon College in Wisconsin and began its national tournament in 1931. Rhetorical skills were valued and were considered, in the early decades of this century, central to an adequate education. While high school debate has waxed and waned during the twentieth century, it has played a major role in preparing elites for positions in the professions and in politics. At one point the majority of members of Congress had been high school or college debaters.¹⁷ While this proportion has fallen, in part a function of the increasing diversity of our representatives and in part because of the decline of debate, many politicians received their rhetorical training through this activity.

Who Debates?

Before turning to the plan of the book, additional background issues need to be addressed to set the activity in its proper context. Who are the children who come to the world of debate? How did they come to find this corner of the social world? What are the characteristics of high school debaters, and how are they recruited?

Characteristics of Debaters

In the spring of 1990, I surveyed a sample of debaters to determine their demographic and social characteristics.¹⁸ With the assistance of Patrick Schmidt, I mailed brief (four-page) survey questionnaires to two sets of coaches: all those schools that sent policy debate teams to the 1989 National Forensic League tournament (approximately 150 schools) and an-

other 150 randomly sampled schools with NFL charters, but which had not qualified for the national tournament. Each coach received six questionnaires for his or her debaters to fill out (the results of the survey of coaches are discussed in chapter 7). A total of over 400 students completed surveys.¹⁹

Of the debaters who responded, 64 percent were male. Eighty-three percent of the students were Caucasian, and approximately 10 percent were Asian; the latter is a significant overrepresentation. African-Americans represented just 2 percent of the total, although there are now attempts to establish debate programs in inner-city schools. In general, families of debaters are financially comfortable: upper middle class. The majority came from families that earned over \$45,000 per year, indicating that debaters do not represent a cross section of American youth.

Debaters are not representative in another way. Just as they are children of privilege, they have used that privilege well. If debaters are not always the best and brightest, they do surpass many of their fellow students. On average, those who responded to our questionnaire ranked in the top tenth percentile of their high school class. While this may in part be a function of the nature of the sampling (coaches may have distributed the six questionnaires to their brightest or most responsible students), it accords with my observation. These debaters also perform well on standardized tests. The average SAT score²⁰ was 1270 (math 650, verbal 620), and their ACT scores averaged 29. These numbers are well above the national average. Over 99 percent said that they expected to enroll in college. Only three claimed to be undecided. Of those who had selected a career, a plurality (40 percent), planned to become lawyers. In contrast, only 5 percent indicated a desire to become teachers, suggesting difficulty in replenishing the ranks of debate coaches.

Politically, high school debaters are difficult to define. Of those who link themselves to a political party, more classify themselves as Republicans than Democrats (52 percent to 26 percent), yet their attitudes are more liberal than the general public, at least on issues of criminal justice (the debate topic that year), as measured by Gallup Surveys. Whether this is a result of discussing prison overcrowding for a year or because of previous background is uncertain. Of the general public, 16 percent oppose capital punishment; for debaters, the figure is 34 percent. Among the public, 83 percent feel the courts are not harsh enough in dealing with criminals; only 47 percent of debaters feel the same way.

Several striking findings differentiate successful from less successful programs. Students in the two sets of schools were not significantly different in their gender, race, academic performance, and career goals. There was no intellectual gap between the two groups. Not surprisingly,

competitive teams participate in many more tournaments that require overnight stays, their school budgets are significantly higher, and they have coaches with more experience. Members of competitive teams seem more dedicated to debate. Students on competitive teams were more than twice as likely to have attended a summer institute than their counterparts. Beyond this, more competitive schools are those in communities that have higher incomes. Of the competitive schools, 57 percent were in communities where, according to the coaches, the average household income was over \$35,000. The comparable figure for the less competitive schools was 30 percent. Apparently, community wealth facilitates conditions that encourage successful participation in debate.

Recruitment to Debate

Given that high school debate does not, in most circles, have high visibility, how do adolescents come to judge this as an activity in which they would enjoy participating? Americans do not read debate results in the newspaper, debate is not broadcast on ESPN, and pep rallies are rarely held to encourage debaters. Somehow, debaters must overcome public apathy and lack of publicity to decide that this is an activity in which they might thrive. Indeed, according to accounts of many debaters, they were unaware of what they were becoming involved in when they joined the team. From my observation, the drop-out rate is high—far greater than would be found in such culturally validated activities as football, basketball, band, or even chess. Of the eighteen students signed up for debate at Randall Park, only eleven were actively involved in the activity by the middle of the season. Many debaters told me that they joined with a group of friends, and that by the end of the season they alone remained involved as others discovered that debate was not for them. Not only do most students not know what is involved, but often they are unaware of the large time commitment that active and successful participation requires. One championship debater explained why he joined:

I wasn't doing much. I was doing theater-related activities at the time, and I enjoyed that. I really had no idea what debate was going to be. People were suggesting it to me. It looked alright. I don't think I knew anybody that were debaters at the time, and I don't remember really an intent to do it.
(Interview)

Despite lack of publicity about this world, recruitment routes are similar to those that we find in other leisure worlds and social movements. Some individuals join because of a perceived strategic interest (it will be instrumental for their future goals), others join because the activity seems plea-

surable (it meets their expressive needs), but most join because of personal networks (friends, teachers, or family members).²¹

STRATEGIC INVOLVEMENT

To the extent that debate is known to the outside world, it is often linked to the worlds of politics and law. Several students indicated that their desires to follow those career paths made debate a “logical choice.” For some, the goal was simply to add a line to their résumé that would look impressive on college recommendations or law school applications. One coach noted that these students debate “for all the wrong reasons,” even if their strategies often result in considerable occupational success.²²

For others, the connection is more substantive and idealistic:

I suppose at that point in my life [ninth grade] I had aspirations of being a lawyer, so I thought this was the thing to do—be a debater. (interview)

I kind of wanted to be a politician. . . . My eighth grade social studies teacher did a big thing on JFK and I really admired how JFK was a speaker, and I read that he was a big debater, and I thought that maybe I’ll take debate. I’ll be able to learn some really good speaking skills. (interview)

Indeed, many politicians and attorneys had their start in high school debate, and so this argument, grounded in the value of anticipatory socialization to one’s future occupation, has some surface validity, even if we cannot be entirely certain as to whether debate produces better lawyers or politicians or whether, simply, those with such orientations select debate.

LOOKING FOR FUN

The number of students who join because “I always liked to argue” is considerable. Perhaps debate is an effective way to push adolescents away from their soapbox at the dining room table. Parents have been known to suggest debate for just this reason. Obviously, if the clash of ideas were unappealing, this would not be an activity one would pursue. One former debater notes of the first round he watched:

I remember I liked the clash of arguments. . . . I can see these guys very clearly still debating and they were very witty, and I liked the clash of ideas. . . . I think they impressed me intellectually; they impressed me with the argumentation, and they just seemed cool or something. (interview)

Of course, debate is not free-form arguing, but a stylized clash of ideas with rules for evidence and standards of claims. When potential

debaters learn that the activity is not merely expressing one's opinion, many leave.²³

NETWORK RECRUITMENT

Most debaters had contact with others who teach, participate, or once participated in the activity. These other individuals indicated that the activity is both worthwhile and enjoyable (instrumental and expressive) and, further, that the recruit is likely to find participation personally satisfying.

Friends are particularly effective recruiters in that they know the talents and tastes of the potential recruit:

Some friends of mine when I was coming from junior high to high school just said that we should join. They were in it, and they were having fun, and we said okay. . . . For the first few weeks, you know, our friends were there so it was some place to go after school where your friends were at. . . . Within the first week or so that we joined up, we were all debating and we . . . got a blue ribbon, and from that point on I was hooked. (interview)

Siblings and parents who had previously been involved in debate also serve as potent motivators. One Randall Park student joined because his mother had been a debater at the same school two decades before. Another had a father who was a successful debater and told him "good stories about debate." A third explained that his sister had been a debater and felt he would be successful. A fourth had a brother who was a successful debater; he came to respect those analytical skills that his brother claimed he learned from the activity.

Others relied on a recommendation from admired teachers who felt that the recruit had the requisite interests and talents. A dramatic example comes from an esteemed coach:

When I was younger I had a stammering problem, very severely, [I was] very shy, and I had a junior high counselor who enrolled me in a debate course in high school . . . without my even knowing it. (He laughs.) And I ended up in the debate class, and I think a lot of it had to do with self-confidence, and I ended up enjoying debate so much I overcame the stammering, and was able to communicate more effectively. (interview)

To aid in recruitment, coaches often ask other teachers which students are likely prospects. Some coaches mail letters or stage demonstration debates at the junior high school to inspire recruits. These letters and demonstrations were sufficient for some students to take the class or attend club meetings. Then they decide to stick with the activity.²⁴ The rest, as they say, is history.

The Skeleton of the Text

In this analysis I begin with an examination of the activity itself—talk—eventually analyzing those skills, such as the use of evidence and the creation of cases, and the way in which young men and women become socialized to this activity: how they learn to speak, use arguments, and rely on evidence. Through this, I examine how debate is simultaneously a game and a serious activity. From there, I examine debate as an adolescent social world, and then as an institutional world, an activity situated within educational institutions. As a result, I work from the essential activity to those domains that surround it, beginning with debate as an experienced, embodied activity, to a consideration of the world of debate as interactional domain, to a consideration of debate within the institutional order.

Within the eight substantive chapters and an appendix, I discuss (1) the acquisition and display of verbal skills, (2) learning the rules of argumentation within the context of debate, (3) skills involving the effective use of evidence and the marshaling of that evidence to create affirmative cases, (4) the nature of interaction and the immediate creation of practical reason within the context of the round, (5) the culture and structure of teams as social units, (6) the debate culture as an adolescent social world, (7) the role of adults—teachers and coaches—within the social world, and the way in which institutional pressures from the school system influence the organization of debate, and (8) the role of gifted education, and the justifications of high school debate in an educational system, exploring the reasons for the decline of the activity over the past several decades. I conclude by suggesting ways in which debate might be expanded and redefined to make it more central to the educational process and more inclusive of a more diverse range of American students. Finally in an appendix, I discuss the different cultures and styles of debate.

Central to the book is the recognition that the participants in the activity are adolescents. A central concern is explaining the reality that these people can seem simultaneously like both sophisticated adults and immature children, and in this, despite the particularities of their activities, they mirror other teens. I hope that this ethnography will permit a more nuanced view of adolescent development, and implicitly provide a challenge to those who wish to see adolescence as a distinct stage with its own unique patterns of activity. In contrast, I argue that adolescents have gained a wider set of options that they use in ways that adults may praise or condemn. Adolescents have expanded their cultural toolkit. The skills of both adulthood and childhood work for them at this social moment.

Despite its peculiarities and political ambiguities, high school debate is a valuable training ground for adolescents. Our educational system would be more successful in its goal of producing competent citizens if all, or many, students had the opportunity to participate in this activity. High school debate is a voluntary leisure and competitive sport, but it also captures the skills of competent expression, self-confidence in public activities, the use of logic, the gathering of evidence, and the presentation of policy options that we expect of all citizens. That debate can provide the grounds for the establishment of a meaningful social community is an additional nontrivial benefit for these adolescents, who otherwise face a sometimes alienating high school environment.

I consider the claims of those who suggest that the hypercompetitive-ness of the activity creates a culture based on seeing differences in value orientation as a mere game, leading to cynicism, and that debate skills serve further to stratify the social order, favoring the privileged. Ultimately, I disagree with these claims, even though they are not wholly without merit. The benefits of high school debate to individuals and to the community outweigh its troubles, and a further expansion of the activity to groups that are now excluded will serve us better than a contraction. High school debate is not a panacea for all of the ills that beset our educational system, but it is, I believe, a tool by which a school system can do well by doing good.