

## A Terrorist Education: A Response to the Fear of Deconstruction in Educational Debate

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Academic complacency has driven critical theory out of our educational model. In this paper I will discuss the implications of this dismissal and its influence on our social and environmental crisis. I believe that academic debate is afraid to undertake critical debate despite its appropriateness for our forum. A process of educational terrorism is suggested to disrupt dominant social paradigms and create new pathways toward a sustainable future.

### The Problem: Education, Objectivity and Subjectivity

Our current model of education stresses knowledge transmission over critical thinking. Simply passing information on to the next generation is no longer sufficient to educate a multicultural world. The role of student as knowledge receptacle is not appropriate because our planet needs creative, critical thinkers in order to survive. We need to transform our expectations of learning from the acquisition of information to the skills of exploration. Given the complexity of the problems which face our planet, the educational model of knowledge transition is insufficient. The failure to teach independent and critical thinking skills is inexcusable.

To transform education we have to join the personal with the political and challenge the importance we place on objective knowledge. Too long the twin dynamics of objectivity and subjectivity have precluded alternative perspectives. Objectivity puts our faith in facts and "truths," leading us to believe we can divide ourselves from nature, control nature, and that the warning signs of our approaching destruction are not "empirical enough." Subjective knowledge is placed above debate and discussion. The feelings and experiences of other people are removed from the arena of challenge (Barthes, 7-8). This is a danger, because personal choice is part of the driving force behind our consumptive and destructive nature. If we remove a major cause of the problem from the discussion then we preclude any possibility of solving that problem.

We need to simultaneously open up the "objective truths" to alternative perspectives and create an environment where personal choice can be discussed and debated. This arena is critical theory, where underlying assumptions and ideas are subject to discussion and criticism. Increasing critical theory in debate would change the nature of argumentation from the simple horizontal perspective, to a vertical approach, where we look above and below ideas and arguments. Critical debate can explore complicated ideas in new ways. Instead of the traditional model of linear refutation, a more comprehensive process should be adopted, where we examine claims and the underlying values and concepts behind those claims.

Debate should encourage students to engage in critiques, but fails for four reasons. First, the participants are not interested in the goals of critiquing because they like the format of traditional debate. Second, the structure of competition pushes these goals away or mocks them in the quest for the "win." Third, individual debaters and coaches refuse to entertain debate at these levels. Finally, coaches and debaters are not educated in the importance and power of these kinds of arguments. Behind all of these arguments is one assumption, the dislike of the complexity and "messiness" that critical debating entails. I think judges and debaters fear critical arguments

because they fear the open space of deconstruction. The deconstructive element of critiquing opens up every argument to a myriad of criticisms that require more preparation. Behind critical arguments, is the implicit jab that the debater doesn't know everything about her text. This turn to debating on a horizontal level is a radical change from the static format that participants are used to. Critical arguments are frightening and frustrating for even the best trained debate student or coach because they require a more complicated view of the debate and more preparation.

Unfortunately, the dislike of certain arguments is not an excuse to disregard critiques as important arguments. We should not dismiss critiques for the sake of comfort or ego. There are two reasons to expand the use of critiques in academic debate. First, and most importantly, we are currently mired in a social and environmental crisis. The state of our existence is precariously balanced on the way that our generation chooses to live. Brian Tokar writes: "No place on earth remains unaffected by the ruthless practices of an ecocidal global order. An expansive worldwide monoculture of accumulation and greed threatens the planet's very ability to sustain life. . ." (176). Never before have the implications for personal choice been so dramatic in their influence on the rest of the world. We need to discuss environmental, political, and social controversies with renewed complexity in regards to our own personal action. The simultaneous worship of objectivity and bracketing of subjectivity pushes away the conversations we desperately need to have.

The second reason we need to utilize critiques in our activity is to open the space to alternative points of view. When we view a text as having one meaning (or a limited number of meanings), we commit violence on other interpretations that exist within the text. More than ever we need to have a multiplicity of voices to adequately describe and approach the catastrophe that we face. Other perspectives contain alternative conceptualizations and potential solutions to our problems. By ignoring the voices that exist above and below the arguments we make, we march headlong toward our own destruction.

I wish debate would move closer to critical theory to find some of its arguments, because debate is the perfect forum for these kinds of discussions. The level of complexity, and the format of the activity (the construction and refutation of arguments) make it a great arena for critiquing.

There are almost no other avenues to challenge the "rules" under which our society and fellow citizens operate. Media and personal interaction are insufficient to challenge the norms that are fast leading to our destruction. The academy has relegated critical theory and radical politics to inaccessible spaces. In the political world, real transformation occurs at the level of social movement interaction and protest. We need a bridge between social activism and the academic theories that expand our capacity to think. I believe that with critical theory, debate can become that bridge, but it is heading in the wrong direction.

### **The Solution: Educational Terrorism**

Critical theory is not receiving a fair shake, and time is quickly running out for our planet. The public and the vast majority of debaters fail to explore ideas in a critical manner because they have limited their perception of argumentation to exclude critiquing. In the debate world, the fear of debating controversial topics, the primacy given to objective truths, and a dislike of the complexity of deconstruction limit the possibilities of critical theory. In the public realm, a general preference for simplicity and the belief that subjective truths are not to be discussed, preclude critical debate. When there is no avenue for alternative perspectives to be heard in a discourse, the discourse itself must be disrupted. I believe that the meta-narrative of debate contains the seeds of great critical activism. These seeds must be watered with a new approach to achieve the paradigm shift necessary for the survival of the Earth. When there is no other option of resistance, terrorism becomes the logical response. I advocate that the debate

community should become a terrorist voice to disrupt the dominant social paradigms that are incapable of pulling us away from the precipice of destruction.

I define terrorism as the act of calling into question certain ways of thought, ideas, philosophies, traditions, norms, and actions through critical exploration. This can be called terrorism for three reasons. First, there is no other avenue for this kind of challenge, no other space or medium where this dialogue can occur. Terrorism is often used in the political sense to identify people who use guerrilla warfare to attack a dominant social system. I believe that political terrorism is primarily caused by people not being listened to. When voices are precluded from the dialogue of a community, then they will often turn to protest activity and eventually violent terrorist actions. My vision of academic terrorism starts with the understanding that the critical voice has been excluded from the dialogue of debate.

Second, the goal of educational terrorism is to disturb or cause tension in individuals, forcing them to reflect upon their interactions with dominant systems. Terrorism is effective because it calls into question the assumptions that an individual can hold about a subject. Upon viewing an act of educational terrorism, the audience must consider what is important enough to disturb the rules of interaction that we all follow daily? The answer must entail a serious exploration of the concepts raised by that act of terrorism. The interaction with terrorism makes people uncomfortable because it disturbs the norms under which they had participated. Terrorism calls into question the regimes that were accepted and operationalized without consideration. This disruption is necessary to open up space for a dialogue that would otherwise never have been heard. In the controversy of terrorism is the introspection of participants who would never have been influenced any other way.

Third, the term is suggested to inspire participants to use any means necessary -- theater, art, music, interpersonal communication, debate, narrative, personal experience, statistics etc. -- to challenge and disturb people into changing their behavior and beliefs. In this fluid understanding of mediums, the foundations of resistance can be appropriated or created. I prefer not to mandate a policy of terrorism, instead asking each participant to use their local situation to ground their struggle.

I would like to take a brief moment and stress that my idea of educational terrorism does not endorse or suggest using acts of violence. Terrorism is a strategy that does not require physical violence, and the concept of educational terrorism is intended to be entirely non-violent. The purpose of educational terrorism is to force open new dialogues within our community, undercut traditions that are destructive and allow participants to voice "deviant" beliefs. Physical violence would get in the way of these three goals. In addition, educational terrorism will create more complicated discussion and pre-empt violence that may be the requirement of the transition to a stable future. I believe that educational terrorism will force a discussion of difficult issues before they boil over. The way we live on this planet is unsustainable and the day will come when we will have to change our personal behavior and become responsible for our actions. I would like to start the discussion about our future as early as possible because the later we face our fate, the more possibility that violence will be a part of our dialogue.

The core of educational terrorism is the act of critiquing. As terrorists, our job is to open up space for alternative view points by exploding text and arguments. This is critical theory at its finest. Debate can use critiques to transform educational debate from a game into a social activity with far-reaching implications. I dream of terrorist debate that is complex, ideological, important, and relevant to the world we live in. I believe that debate can help nudge the planet into a more sustainable future, but it must undergo a dramatic rebirth to be effective.

I see the project of educational terrorism at the core of a vision of debate and pedagogy. Debate should train people to think and to advocate. Our community has fallen down by refusing to undertake critical theory and ignoring issues of advocacy. Critiques provide a place for advocacy about important values and ideas that would previously have never been heard because they were raised in the "wrong forum". Critiquing has larger implications for the rest of the

world. As educators and critical thinkers, we have to bring this critical pedagogy to the outside world and attempt to remedy some of the destruction our species has wrought. Debate can spread critical argumentation from the academy to the public, but it needs to grow. Each success of critiquing and educational terrorism is a dramatic step in the right direction by breaking ground for the arguments which can now come after them. Every single debate round holds the capacity to transform our world, but participants need to change their minds about what is important. Once the debaters and coaches undertake educational terrorism, a more general transformation of public voice can begin through the introduction of these same kinds of arguments to the public sphere. I believe that we will either accept critical theory as an important argument or one day we will exterminate our planet because we were too proud to look at our own actions with a critical eye.

I have attempted to put forward a project of educational terrorism which can remedy some of the flaws in the current educational model. Through educational terrorism and a more active process of critiquing, the twin enclaves of subjectivity and objectivity can be undermined to make space for new ideas. The result of this project will be a dramatic change in academic debate and if successful, the real world.

#### Work Cited

- Barthes, R. (1989). *The Rustle of Language*. Berkeley: University of California Press.  
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