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RESEARCH ARTICLE/ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

The Constitutive Power of Public Debate

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Abstract

Public debates structure election cycles, feature in news media, and are privileged as a form of academic exchange. Yet, public debate is poorly understood from the perspective of political theory. While theorists often talk about "public debate," they usually mean diffuse discussion on a topic in the public sphere. This article considers how literal public debates—multisided, publicly accessible and publicly oriented performances of reason-giving—may be normatively distinct from other forms of rhetoric. Drawing on the "constructivist turn" in the scholarship on representation and the philosophy of Gadamer, I offer a hermeneutical approach for assessing public debates. I argue that public debates do not merely provide a platform for opinions to be broadcast, they also purport to provide a representative spectrum of opinions. In so doing, they help to construct the borders of the public sphere itself. I conclude by considering the significance of protest to public debate.

Résumé

Les débats publics structurent les cycles électoraux, font l'objet de reportages dans les médias et sont privilégiés en tant que forme d'échange académique. Pourtant, le débat public est mal compris du point de vue de la théorie politique. Si les théoriciens parlent souvent de « débat public », ils entendent généralement par là une discussion diffuse sur un sujet dans la sphère publique. Cet article examine comment les débats publics littéraux - des performances de raisonnement multilatérales, accessibles et orientées vers le public - peuvent être normativement distincts d'autres formes de rhétorique. S'inspirant du « tournant constructiviste » des études sur la représentation et de la philosophie de Gadamer, je propose une approche herméneutique pour évaluer les débats publics. Je soutiens que les débats publics ne se contentent pas de fournir une plateforme pour la diffusion d'opinions, mais qu'ils prétendent également fournir un spectre représentatif d'opinions. Ce faisant, ils contribuent à construire les frontières de la sphère publique elle-même. Je conclurai en examinant l'importance de la protestation dans le débat public.

Keywords: public debate; representation; Gadamer; protest; rhetoric

Mots-clés: débat public; représentation; Gadamer; protestation; rhétorique

In November 2018, a high-profile Munk policy debate occurred in downtown Toronto. Two speakers took to the stage: David Frum (former George W. Bush speechwriter and alleged author of the term the "axis of evil") and Steve Bannon (former Trump White House Chief Strategist and former Chief Executive of the far-right publication, Breitbart News). The topic: *"Be it resolved, the future of western politics is populist not liberal"* ("The Rise of Populism"). Public responses to the debate were heated and divided. Within minutes of tickets being posted for sale, all 2,800 seats were sold out, and hundreds of thousands watched the debate online. At the same time, the debate was met with large and impassioned protests, calls for the event to be cancelled, and general outcry and condemnation both from the public and prominent politicians (The Canadian Press, 2018). For its proponents, the debate was an expression of democratic praxis at its finest—two influential figures discussing the future of Western democracy and resolving their differences with words as opposed to arms. For its detractors, the debate legitimized and gave voice to dangerous far-right ideologies. What is more, by having only right-wing perspectives represented, the debate appeared to reinforce the right as the authoritative frame for considering what "the future of western politics" may hold.

Public debates of this kind are a persistent and highly esteemed feature of the democratic public sphere. They structure our election cycles, feature in our news media, and are privileged as a form of academic exchange. Yet, despite their prominent place within democracies, literal public debate is poorly understood by political theory. This article considers how public debate may be normatively distinct from most monologic forms of rhetoric, asking: what are the distinctive or characteristic constitutive features of public debate? Drawing on the "constructivist turn" in the scholarship on representation, as well as the philosophy of H-G Gadamer, I offer a hermeneutical approach for assessing public debates. I argue that public debates do not merely provide a platform for particular opinions to be broadcast, they also purport to provide a representative spectrum of opinions. Public debates thereby lay claim and help to constitute the horizon of available opinion on those matters which are "up for debate." Public debates, thus, act not merely as representative claims but as "meta-representative" claims, stipulating horizons of representation. In so doing, they help to construct the borders of the public sphere itself. This makes which sides appear in a public debate normatively consequential. I conclude by considering the significance of protest to public debate.

The Parameters of Public Debate

It is not uncommon, both in political theory and colloquially, for something to be described as a matter of "public debate." Generally, however, the concept, "public debate," is used metaphorically. Rather than referring to actual or literal debates, the term is most often used to describe diffuse conversations within the public sphere. For example, deliberative theorists frequently celebrate such diffuse "debates," highlighting their importance for sustaining deliberative systems (Chambers, 2012, 2022; Warren, 2017). While it is noteworthy that debate is the chosen metaphor for such diffuse conversations (a topic to which I will return), in-depth discussions of actual or literal public debates within political theory are rare. Indeed, there are descriptive empirical studies of public debates (particularly

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candidate debates),[1] and there is an abundance of public discourse on debates (particularly candidate debates) in the form of newspaper op-eds (Blouin, 2018; Blow, 2020; Carlin and McKinney, 2020; Drew, 2020; Ellis and Hovagimian, 2019; Frum, 2018; Jacoby, 2020; Lerer and Ulloa, 2022; Older, 2019; Wherry, 2022). Further, there are scholarly studies of interpersonal debates, including analyses which view interpersonal debate as a mechanism for cultivating deliberation (Chung and Duggan, 2020). However, critical and normative scholarly analyses of literal public debates are hard to come by. This absence is curious, not only because public debates feature so prominently in our democracies but also because debate has been wrapped up in republican and democratic politics from its beginnings.[2] Scholarly work is therefore needed to unpack the value and, more importantly, the function of this common and privileged practice. To this end, this article examines the distinctive or characteristic constitutive feature of public debate as a specific type of rhetoric, particularly in relation to monological forms of rhetoric.

I begin by establishing a general definition of public debates. For my purposes, an exchange may be considered a public debate if it meets three general criteria. First, public debates must be *multisided* performances of reason-giving. Debates must feature two or more participants, advocating for two or more positions, which are, to some degree, different from each other.[3] The sides can be for and against a certain proposition, as is the case with the Munk Debates, but this need not necessarily be the case. Arguing for one policy or political candidate relative to alternatives, which are also represented, meets this criterion. Second, public debates must be *publicly accessible*. That is, debates must be made available to broad audiences and addressed to more than just the debate participants themselves, moderators or appointed judges. Finally, public debates must be *publicly oriented*. Debaters must aim to persuade or affect a general audience and not merely their fellow debaters, an appointed judge or a prescribed set of specialists.[4]

Defined in this way, public debates operate differently than similar phenomena such as private, interpersonal or diffuse debate. For example, in contrast to high school or university competitive debates, public debates may not have clear winners, and "winning" in a formal sense is not the only motivating objective for participants. Instead, what counts as a "win" may be distinct for each participant. For some, winning may mean converting as many audience members as possible to their "side," for others, it may mean either gaining legitimacy by appearing alongside more established perspectives or de-legitimizing an opposing view.[5] More generally, by meeting these three criteria, public debates are differentiable because they speak to the public (by broadcasting to the public) and because they mimic the public (by representing different publicly accessible perspectives). Public debate is, as the name suggests, a public phenomenon.

Because the three criteria are general, public debate can take different forms. The Munk Debates—a high-profile policy debate series featuring public intellectuals, politicians, and journalists—are a particularly formal case. There is a pre-arranged topic, participants are given ample time to prepare a case, and there are established rules. Similar debates include publicly oriented on-campus debates, which have long been a feature of university life across North America, such as the "Janus Forum" series hosted by Brown University's Political Theory Project and the University of Chicago's satirical "Latke Hamantash" debate. A far more common

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and less formal example of public debates are television "talking head" debates, which occur regularly on news media, particularly 24-hour news channels. In the US, it is common to see a Republican and a Democrat spokesperson debate the headline of the day, and analogies exist in other countries. A third form of public debate is political candidate debates. These often-times "high stakes"[6] debates generally air during "prime time" and are an established part of the democratic process in democracies across the globe. Candidate debates are somewhat unique as a form of public debate in that the topic which is "up" for debate is often the character or suitability of the candidates themselves rather than their policy prescriptions.

This article looks at what is normatively distinct about public debates in comparison to most other forms of political rhetoric, especially monological rhetoric. My aim is not to downplay the constitutive effects of other forms of rhetoric but to highlight the specific effects of public debates. I focus on two significant features of public debates that enable significant political effects: debate's regular exaltation as a revered democratic practice and debate's claim to representativeness, which I discuss from a hermeneutic perspective. Prior to this, however, I consider typical normative and critical arguments for and against public debates. I argue that these justifications and criticisms, while useful, are importantly limited because they fail to capture public debate's most significant constitutive effect.

Arguments For and Against Public Debate

The reasons given for conducting public debates are diverse. Generally, however, public debates are justified for one of three reasons: they are alleged to provide deliberative, epistemic or political benefits. That is, public debates may be defended on the grounds that they spur deliberation and discourse on topics of public concern, educate the public or provide some form of political gain.

Regarding deliberation, if a debate is well organized and well moderated,[7] it provides space for reasons to be presented, challenged, and defended—some of the primary defining features of deliberation.[8] These reasons may prompt audiences to re-evaluate a previously held opinion or pattern of behaviour and engage in internal or interpersonal deliberation in turn.[9] That is, public debates may provide a vehicle for what Brian Garsten (2006) calls "deliberative rhetoric"—persuasive appeals that motivate citizens to engage in deliberation and judgment. Indeed, because debates publicly broadcast multiple perspectives and reasons for holding those perspectives, debates can theoretically contribute to important democratic processes of perspectival transmission and moral vetting, something which is seen as valuable in both Habermasian[10] and Arendtian[11] versions of democratic theory. Debate participants (or moderators) may prompt their fellow debaters to provide reasons, thereby compelling them to fulfill the norms of intelligibility and publicity that some deliberative theorists see as necessary for maintaining a functioning deliberative system (Chambers, 2022). And, even if debates feature "immoderate" and unsettling speech, which one could argue is regularly a feature of public debates, debate could still function to further deliberative and democratic ends by facilitating practices of imaginative judgment spurred by moments of rhetorical disruption or dissonance (Goodman, 2018; Lambek, 2023). All told, debate could be said to increase the level of deliberation within a system (Mansbridge et al., 2012), and they can

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help with the formation of "collective agendas and wills," one of the core democratic functions for "problem-based" approaches to democratic theory (Warren, 2017).

Public debates can also enable important or influential ideas to be broadcast to the demos, providing citizens with an opportunity to get to know and scrutinize those ideas.[12] This is a justification for public debates posited by David Frum (2018) and the Munk Debate organizers (in Blouin 2018)[13], who argue that public debates provide a mechanism for opinions, including problematic ones, to be broadcast to audiences. If the opinions and perspectives presented over the course of a debate are dangerous or misguided, then the combative nature of debate provides an opportunity for those ideas to be exposed and defeated. Mark Warren (2006) refers to this kind of argument as one of "deliberative agonism," where the broadcasting of offensive speech can expose commonly held yet unacceptable opinions, which might otherwise survive below the surface of polite conversation.[14]

Politically, debates provide a space for contestation, which is unlikely to devolve into mere antagonism, force or violence. If something is up for debate, it is contestable and subject to persuasive appeal, and it is something about which free people can disagree. Hence, Arendt (2006: 236–37) contrasts that which is up for debate with that which is "despotic" or "coercive,"[15] hinting at a justification for debate that seems to fit well with some agonist conceptions of politics.[16]

These arguments notwithstanding, there are good reasons for critical and democratic theorists to be suspicious of debate as a useful democratic practice. To use Simone Chambers' (2009) terminology, debates may enable "plebiscitary" rhetoric (rhetoric which seeks to "win" rather than convince with reasons) more than they enable "deliberative" rhetoric. When debaters are "in it to win it," they may be more invested in delegitimizing the other side, whatever the costs, than persuading audiences with convincing reasons. There is no assurance that a debater is motivated to achieve mutual understanding, and there is every reason to believe that they are motivated to have their side appear the strongest. As Jonathan Ellis and Francesca Hovagimian (2019) write in an op-ed, competitive debate "may contribute to the closed-minded, partisan and self-interested nature of so much of today's public and political dialogue." While these commentators are talking about competitive rather than public debate, they argue that debate "is an exercise not in deliberation but in reasoning with an agenda." Debaters are not there to be swayed by the force of the better argument; they are there to win, even if they find aspects of their opponent's arguments admirable.[17] The lesson for audiences: good discourse does not arise from humility but from rhetorical ruthlessness.

W. V. Quine is particularly hostile to debate for this reason. He writes, "The debater's strength lies not in intellectual curiosity nor in amenability to rational persuasion by others, but in his [sic] skills in defending a preconception come what may. His [sic] is a nefarious knack of disregarding all the discrepancies while regarding every crepancy" (1989: 183).[18] Debates may simply be a venue for partisan rhetoric, and, if this is the case, all of the criticisms leveraged against rhetoric by Platonic and enlightenment thinkers may be applicable to public debate. Insofar as debates are strategic rather than communicative, their deliberative effects may be negative.[19] Public debates, in such instances, may lessen the deliberative quality of the "system" (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

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More generally, debates can be harmful because they can function to render positions equivalent, which should not otherwise be viewed as equal. Debates do this, first, by pushing back against the idea of settled or final knowledge.[20] If a debate is being held, it is because the topic is one for which there are multiple potentially valid interpretations. The common idiom, "it's up for debate," is revealing. Second, inclusion in a debate itself presupposes that a side possesses potential validity. If a side is not potentially valid, why feature it in a debate? Finally, if a debate is fairly moderated, the various sides are presented equally, and receive more-or-less equal amounts of allotted time.

The consequences of this equivalency can be dangerous. Including a harmful position in a debate may enable it to gain more societal traction than it previously enjoyed. In an op-ed concerning his participation in the Munk Debate, Frum (2018) suggests that, through debate, bad reasons will be exposed, revealing their hollowness and inferiority to audiences. Such a desire ignores the effects of debate as a *form* of rhetoric and not merely a *venue for* rhetoric—namely, the equivalence of sides, a phenomenon that Mark Kingwell (2018) refers to as "bothsidesism." Indeed, the inclusion of a dangerous position in a debate may contribute to the delegitimization or calling into question of the other sides represented in a debate. Mark Navin, for instance, highlights how debates concerning the safety of vaccines do damage by placing the science of vaccines in doubt. Writing prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Navin (2016: 64) states, "When someone watches a debate between vaccine denialists and vaccine advocates, the loudest message the media may communicate is that 'vaccination is controversial.'" For Navin, debates concerning vaccines play with our cognitive biases and heuristic forms of reasoning, perpetuating a culture that accommodates vaccine denialism. In an era of rampant conspiracy theories and the politicization of science, debates which place fact or science on one side of the ledger may do more harm than good.[21]

I see these arguments for and against public debate as helpful for considering the normative place of these events within democratic public spheres. But the accounts presented so far are also importantly limited. This is because they do not take into account public debates' broader constitutive effects within modern democracies. While useful for helping to understand the normative effects of *particular* debates—as generators of deliberation vs tools of manipulation or as enablers of epistemic gains vs promoters of dangerous equivalencies—they fail to capture the unique normative feature of public debates *in general* within contemporary democracies, to which I now turn.

A Constitutive Approach

My approach to debate hinges on a *constitutive* (as opposed to instrumental) approach to language, grounded principally in hermeneutic philosophy. From a constitutive perspective, language is not merely a vehicle for transmitting discrete information or opinions—a tool like any other—but is, more importantly, something that structures and continuously reshapes shared forms of human life. Human life happens within and through language; we find ourselves always already inhabiting linguistic worlds to which we contribute and alter from within.

This approach to language has its origins in eighteenth-century Romantic philosophy—notably the work of J. G. Herder—but finds its full expression in

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the hermeneutic philosophies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Contributors to this tradition include Martin Heidegger, H-G. Gadamer—whom I discuss below—Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor, whose monograph, *The Language Animal* (2016), provides a holistic defence of the constitutive view. These theorists see language as historical. That is, language is something which changes over time, subject to human innovation, alteration and recitation. We inherit the language passed onto us by those who came before us, and we pass on language to future generations, altering it constantly through use. Understanding does not emerge from nowhere but always arises from within the horizon of what our historically situated language and social positions enable. Individual speech actors use inherited language and deploy that inheritance anew, hoping to find agreement or favour with interlocutors and audiences. What is effective in relaying meaning, understanding or, alternatively, ideology, is then passed down to future generations, shaping their horizon of understanding.

New instantiations or uses of language affect future thought or action by shaping the linguistic constitution of people moving forward in time. For those who come later, current linguistic formulations can, therefore, have profound and diffuse long-term effects, rendering some thoughts and actions more likely or more available, and rendering others less likely and less available. For normative or critical theorists influenced by a constitutive/hermeneutic approach, the relevant question when evaluating a given piece of rhetoric, therefore, is not only, "what are the immediate effects?" but also, "what world transformation does this rhetoric enable?".

Moving beyond a study of debate's immediate ramifications, I adopt a constitutive frame to examine the lasting, cumulative, and constitutive effects of public debate. Additional questions follow: How might public debates and the ways in which we talk about public debates shape future thought and action? How might public debates alter our public spheres and the conversations that occur within them? And, finally, the question that motivates this article: what are the distinct or characteristic constitutive effects of public debate as compared to most forms of monological political rhetoric? To answer these questions, I explore two relevant features of public debate: the reverence bestowed on debate as a privileged democratic practice and debate's claim to representativeness.

Debate as a Revered Democratic Practice

Debates are frequently understood to be important or prestigious exemplars of democratic exchange. That is, debates are often granted a kind of reverence or seriousness that other forms of rhetoric may lack, amplifying the reach and credibility of the claims made within debates. This is so much the case that Hannah Arendt remarks that "debate constitutes the very essence of political life" (2006: 236–37).[22]

This is clearly the case for candidate debates, like US presidential debates, French presidential debates, or leadership debates ahead of Canadian federal elections. These events have become expected and routine features of the representative democratic process across all levels of government around the world. Candidate debates tend to air during primetime and are broadcast across television, radio and digital platforms, soliciting large viewership along with countless commentaries. In the United States, presidential debates are routinely viewed by tens of millions of

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people and are some of the most watched content in households across the nation.[23] Likewise, US primary debates are a recurring feature of the seemingly ceaseless election season. Indeed, in representative systems, candidate debates are core rituals of the democratic process, and empirical research suggests that they have real effects (McKinney and Warner, 2013).[24]

Moving beyond candidate debates, public policy debates, like the Munk Debates or the Holberg Debates, which feature leading and influential academics, politicians and journalists, are also treated with reverence and significance. The way Frum discusses the Munk Debates is telling. He writes, "The Munk Debates hold a special place in Canadian public life. For more than a decade, they have brought the learned, the preeminent, and the notorious to Toronto's 2,800-seat symphony hall to test controversial ideas before a highly informed audience" (2018). The Munk Debates, claims Frum, hold considerable esteem in Canadian society. They feature highly acclaimed speakers (the "learned, the preeminent, and the notorious"), they take place in a large, rarified space (the "symphony hall") and their audiences are erudite and sophisticated (they are "highly informed"). The Munk Debates may not feature Demosthenes or Pericles arguing in front of the Athenian assembly, but for debate organizers and participants, it might not be a stretch to suggest that this is the guiding ambition. Indeed, the Munk Debates website describes their "mission" accordingly, writing that it is "to help the world rediscover the art of civil and substantive debate by convening the sharpest minds and brightest thinkers to weigh in on the big issues of the day" ("Debates"). For both the debate organizers and for Frum, the lofty and grandiloquent space of the Munk Debates is where big ideas are weighed and measured by the best and brightest; they are where "civility" is restored. The audience is the modern analog to the citizens of Athens, and the speakers are the great orators of the day.[25]

Finally, the esteem associated with the form of debate is often echoed in academia, where scholarly debates become the subject matter of countless books, articles and dissertations. Decades later, those of us interested in hermeneutic, critical, and deliberative theory still talk about the Habermas-Gadamer "debate." Similarly, the liberal–communitarian "debate" profoundly shaped democratic theory and is still the subject of significant intellectual work. International Relations is known for having been defined by a series of "great debates." The discipline of anthropology has a much-appreciated yearly debate hosted at the University of Manchester, organized by the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory.[26] Academic journals too often feature "debates" as a type of publishable article, as is the case with *The Journal of Political Philosophy*. Further, public-facing university institutes and centres often host debates for crowds of academics, students and the general public. The aforementioned "Janus Forum" is an example of this kind of public-facing debate, where audiences observe contrasting and competing approaches to a given problem and interrogate the speakers. One could even consider author meets critics panels at academic conferences as a form of public debate, as the author defends their text against the intellectual jabs of a panel of experts while a moderator oversees the process to ensure fairness. The structure of academic articles also often mimics the form of a debate, with authors situating their contribution as an intervention in an ongoing "debate" within the literature. Indeed, the "submission guidelines" sections of journals frequently ask that authors do this.

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Scholarly debates are not simply opportunities for the delivery of academic rhetoric, they are serious episodes of ideational exchange and contestation.

All told, debates are generally understood as a privileged form of mediation. This privileged position, for better or for worse, amplifies the reach as well as the force of claims which occur within their confines. If a claim makes it into a debate, audiences may well assume it is because the claim is serious—why else would it arise in a debate? If it has survived debate, it has survived critical scrutiny; it is, for audiences, an opinion of which they should take notice, regardless of its quality.

Debate's Claim to Representativeness

The second and most significant feature of public debates from a normative perspective is their claim to representativeness. Debates do not feature just one "side," they feature multiple competing sides. Organizers generally aim for those sides to be representative of available opinion (within the confines of the organizer's mandate or worldview)[27] on the matter up for debate. If the debate takes the form of an adjudication on a given proposition—as is the case with the Munk Debates—the debate features a for-side as well as an against-side, sometimes with multiple for and against representatives. If the debate is a candidate debate, all candidates who meet a certain threshold (of electability, legality, or some other factor) are invited to participate. If an important side is either not invited or declines to show up, then the legitimacy of the debate may be called into question. In policy debates, organizers often aim either for all potentially valid or reasonable sides to be included or for the participating sides to represent the extreme poles of opinion on a given issue—for example, a left and a right-wing approach but perhaps not a centrist one—given the organizer's mandate or general agenda. The Munk Debates are, again, helpful in illustrating this point. The Munk Debates website states, "Everyone should have the opportunity to hear *both sides* of an issue argued free of spin, focused on the facts, and then make up their own mind about where they stand [emphasis added]" ("Our Mission").[28] The Munk Debates may have in mind a dualistic world, but "both sides" of the binary are represented—at least according to the debate organizers.

Public debates, therefore, present a representative horizon of positions on a topic to an audience and invite audience members to locate themselves in light of that horizon. My claim is that this has a world-constitutive effect, and one that extends beyond the typical world-building effects of monological rhetoric.[29] This is because debates do not provide *one* perspective which may shift the interpretive horizons of audiences to better incorporate that one perspective; debates lay claim to the very horizons of interpretation themselves. Their constitutive effect is, therefore, not to shift an interpretive horizon in any one given direction; their constitutive effect is to alter (whether widen, narrow or reshape) the boundaries of acceptable, permissible or even representable opinion altogether. Debates help to constitute the horizons of interpretation itself.[30]

For Gadamer, "horizons" are crucial to the process of interpretation and understanding. Understanding does not occur in a vacuum but in a historically and culturally situated context, which is shaped by the prejudgments that we bring with us prior to any one act of interpretation. When I read a text, I do so by situating it in a

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language that I already know, in a cultural context that I already know, in facts about the author that I already know and in a whole host of other associations. I bring with me prior judgments or "prejudices," which enable me to place and make sense of that which I am confronting. Gadamer writes: a "hermeneutical [interpretive] situation is determined by the prejudices that we bring with us" (2013: 316). Our prejudices enable us to make sense of those things which we confront; they disclose a world and, in so doing, foreclose alternatives. For Gadamer, prejudices "constitute, then, the *horizon* of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see [emphasis added]" (2013: 316).

This does not mean that horizons are closed. Quite the contrary, for Gadamer, "the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed" (2013: 317). With every new act of interpretation, our horizons shift, expand, contract, or "fuse," affecting future interpretations. Our horizon and our place within that horizon are in a continual state of flux. When we hear monological rhetoric—political speeches for example—that rhetoric will leave an impression on our horizon, potentially pushing it to the left or, alternatively, the right. My claim is that, by presenting a representative spectrum of opinions, debates do not just shift our horizon in one or another direction, but rather make a claim to and thereby help to constitute the very boundaries of the horizon of available opinion. Debate is more than just a venue for rhetoric to be expressed, it is a form of mediation that is distinct insofar as it stipulates the boundaries of available opinion, thereby helping to structure the very boundaries of the public sphere itself.

To see an example of this horizonal effect in action, it is useful to revisit the quote concerning vaccine debates that I highlighted earlier. Navin (2016: 64) writes, "when someone watches a debate between vaccine denialists and vaccine advocates, the loudest message the media may communicate is that vaccination is controversial." Vaccine debates do not necessarily persuade audiences that any particular side is right per se, they persuade audiences that the two sides form the horizon of available opinion on vaccines. The message passed on to audiences is that both sides have potential validity and are within the horizon of reasonable opinion. The contours of a public sphere that incorporates both vaccine advocacy and vaccine denialism are, thus, entrenched. This has consequences for future thought and action.

Given the constructivist turn in the politics of representation over the last decade, debate's claim to representation may be especially significant. Lisa Disch writes of this turn that it "emphasizes the effects of representation on constituencies, arguing that they do not precede acts of political representation but are, rather, figured by them so as to solicit them into being in relationship with a particular representative" (2012: 115). She writes that this turn is necessary because too often political theory analyzes "what representation is, at the expense of what it does" (2012: 114). For a constructivist account, representation should not be understood as "presence," but, rather, (like with debate) it should be understood as "event" (Saward, 2010). Representation, that is, is always performative, and representative claims, like those found in debate, do not merely reflect a pre-given order; they help to constitute that very order. To borrow Disch's (2011; 2021) terminology, claims of representation "mobilize" the public into various camps. As such, representative claims help to construct those very publics which they claim to represent.

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Public debates occupy a special place in this representative process. They are not merely a venue or site where "representative claims"[31] are made. Rather, public debates make what I call a *meta-representative claim*.[32] That is, public debates make a claim to the boundaries of representation. Unlike in a monolocutionary speech wherein a politician or orator claims to be speaking for a public (or claims that someone else represents a public) and thereby helps to construct that public (what occurs within a representative claim), public debates broadcast or figure possible publics that exist regarding a debate topic. These debates do not offer a single represented public which they help to construct, they provide audiences with a spectrum of possible positions in which they can situate themselves. To use Gadamerian language, public debates provide and thereby help to construct a horizon of represented positions. This means that public debates possess a distinct constitutive (or constructivist) effect relative to most monological representative claims,[33] a feature of debate which is missing from literature on representation and democracy.[34]

Reverence and Representation

When these two features of public debate—its respected status and its claim to representativeness—are combined, the full normative weight of the debate's impact is illuminated. Debate's form ensures that those sides which are represented in a debate lay claim to the borders of the public sphere. Debate's status means that such laying claim is likely to be taken seriously. Taken together, public debates may well have significant constitutive effects.

These effects are reflected in the way "public debate" is used in ordinary language. Indeed, it is noteworthy that those conversations, declarations, and speeches within the public sphere wherein people advocate for different positions on important issues like gun control, immigration, or public health measures are often constructed as part of a broad "public debate." The term "public debate" is used, though there is no actual or literal "debate." "Public debate" in this instance, as was mentioned earlier, is a metaphor, and it is a metaphor that is so engrained that it often does not even register as such. As rhetoric scholars have argued for decades, the metaphors we use matter, as they shape our experience of the world.[35] When diffuse conversations, declarations and speeches are seen as politically important, it appears as only natural that we come to frame these conversations, declarations and speeches as constituting a "public debate." Given that, as Arendt claims (2006: 236–37), debate is so important that it can be understood as "the very essence of political life," a topic being classified as a matter of public debate implies that it is one of the central political questions of the day.[36]

What is more, when this metaphor is used, the positions being espoused in the public sphere are understood as constituting the "sides" of the "debate." These "sides" are drawn from and make a claim to the horizon of available opinion. When someone stipulates the sides of the "gun control debate," they are making a claim regarding the horizon of available opinion on that issue. If audience members are persuaded that the invoked sides are, in fact, the legitimate poles of the debate, then those audiences will come to situate themselves in light of that horizon. Calling something "a matter of public debate" does real political work; it is

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a meta-representative claim which elevates the importance of a topic and stipulates what the claim-maker perceives to be the significant sides of the issue.

I argue, then, that public debate is neither good nor bad in and of itself. The crucial normative importance of debate is not whether a specific debate solicits deliberation or enables manipulation, it is the question of which positions are included or excluded from debate. When high-profile public debates include potentially dangerous or nefarious perspectives,[37] it is not simply a matter of those perspectives persuading audiences and therefore facilitating harm. It is also not merely a matter of providing legitimacy to those perspectives. The inclusion of dangerous or nefarious perspectives in public debate is damaging because it enables the incorporation of those perspectives into the horizon of available perspectives in the public sphere. This is what is at stake when the question of including far-right parties in established political debates is raised.[38] It is also what makes the exclusion of progressive perspectives from debate so damaging from the vantage point of progressive politics, as it contributes to those perspectives being rendered beyond the horizon of available opinion. Disch (2011: 111) desires system reflexivity as a normative standard for good representation, which she argues requires "contestation," but—as this article shows—which perspectives engage in that contestation is of the utmost importance. Who is included and excluded from debate is normatively significant as it has the potential to affect future thought and action.[39]

Protesting Debate

I want to conclude by considering one tactic for responding to debates that are perceived to be dangerous or nefarious: disruptive protest. The case of the Munk Debate featuring Bannon and Frum is again illustrative. This debate was met with disruptive protest. Citizens and prominent left-wing politicians voiced strong criticisms of the debate, and audience members interrupted its proceedings. Some, including Frum (2018), were highly critical of those who protested the debate, accusing them of attempting to censor the free exchange of ideas. I have an alternative view. I see protests concerning public debates as potentially significant political acts. Because public debates make an inherent claim to being representative, protests can function to expose a debate's partiality by alerting the public that other perspectives are available. Protests, thus, can disrupt the debate's presumed representativeness.

Rather than suppress speech, protest in this instance can contribute to the expansion of speech. Audiences who witness the protests are given notice that the bounds of available opinion exceed those represented on the debate stage. As is argued by Clarissa Hayward (2020), disruptive protest can alter political agendas and combat ignorance even when the protesters themselves are not particularly sympathetic. This is because disruptive protests compel audiences to take notice of the protesters and their claims. In the case of the Munk Debate, audiences' horizons were forced to expand to account for the presence of protesters, whether or not individual audience members found the protesters sympathetic. Protests, in such scenarios, do not close horizons; they expand them. As Disch writes, "no official or unofficial body could claim to speak for the people absolutely and definitively, so that dissent would be a norm rather than a betrayal" (2011: 111). The protesters of the Munk Debate featuring Bannon and Frum communicated to

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audiences that Bannon and Frum did not constitute the horizon of available opinion on the "future of western politics." The protests demonstrated that other perspectives were left out and rendered invisible by the debate, ensuring that this erasure would not occur without a struggle.

In his commentary reflecting on the controversy, Frum describes the protesters as silencers, as perpetrators of "forceful interruption," but this misunderstands the potential critical impact of protest. If protesters are successful in closing debate, then the constitutive effects of debate itself do not occur.[40] This may be a good thing if, for example, one or multiple sides of the debate are especially dangerous, or if the debates are willfully or egregiously under-representative.[41] If protesters are successful in simply disrupting debate, then the protests alter the constitutive effects of the debate. Protests, in this instance, can modify the horizon of debate to include those sides that are otherwise excluded and call into question the legitimacy of those sides that are featured.

Of course, protest can also backfire. Protests can draw media attention to what would have otherwise been an overlooked debate and thereby amplify the reach and constitutive power of the event. Further, protests can cause audiences to sympathize with debaters whom they perceive as victims of unjustified protest or "cancellation." Not all protests will advance the causes of the protesters, as consequences need not map onto intentions. But, even when the aims of protesters are not achieved, their very presence challenges a debate's claim to representativeness.

All told, protests have the power to delegitimize the validity, acceptability or reasonableness of the perspectives offered, causing audiences to re-evaluate what they once took for granted. But, more than that, protests have the power to forcibly expand the horizon of available perspectives to accommodate the presence of the protesters. This is true whether or not the protest "backfires" or achieves the protesters' intended aims. It is also true regardless of the normative value of the position being advanced by the protesters.

Conclusion

This article considers the constitutive effects of a specific form of rhetoric (public debate), highlighting public debates' normative ramifications relative to most monological forms of speech. I have argued that public debates (and public responses to debates) deserve greater normative and critical attention. Public debates are ubiquitous in our democracies, are revered as a form of democratic practice, and, most importantly, have significant constitutive power. Public debates do not merely provide a platform for particular opinions or representative claims to be broadcast, they also help to constitute or construct the horizon of available opinion. In so doing, public debates help to demarcate the boundaries of acceptable opinion on those matters which are up for debate. Public debates, thus, help to construct the borders of the public sphere itself.

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Notes

1 A literature review, composed for the "Canadian Leader's Debate Commission" (McKay, 2020), provides an overview of the scholarship on candidate debates specifically, though not public debates generally.
2 There are analogies to public debate in ancient Athens. For a discussion of debate and Athenian democracy, see Ober (1991).
3 Generally, this criterion requires participants being co-present in space and time. However, this need not necessarily be the case. What is key is that debaters genuinely do present contrasting and competing reasons against one-another in a publicly accessible and publicly oriented manner, and that the debate itself is taken as a performance, rather than a series of disparate or loosely connected monolocutions. Provided an audience takes multisided, publicly accessible and publicly oriented exchanges as a single performance, such a performance qualifies as a debate according to my definition.
4 Public debates can have "judges" and evaluative standards; however, these cannot diminish the public orientation of debate. In the case of the Munk Debates, all live audience members are invited to judge based on an evaluative standard (whether their opinion has changed over the course of debate), but debate participants address the public and understand themselves as doing so. See Frum (2018).
5 Elizabeth Warren was said to have "won" a 2020 Democratic primary debate because she de-legitimized the candidacy of Michael Bloomberg (Goldmacher and Herndon, 2020).
6 For example, Rick Perry forgetting during a debate which government agencies he would cancel if he were to become president of the United States is thought to have torpedoed his chances of winning the Republican nomination (Zeleny and Parker, 2011).
7 Moderation ideally accomplishes two goals. First, a good moderator promotes fairness, ensuring, for example, relatively equal speaking time. Second, moderators are sometimes charged with promoting the deliberative quality of debate—intervening, for example, so that propositional rather than strategic content (to the extent these are distinguishable) is foregrounded. At best, moderators perform a similar function to their equivalents in mini-publics. In practice, moderators often have other incentives. Charles Blow (2020), for example, argues that moderators in US candidate debates often make debates worse as they are more concerned with "entertainment" than substance. For a discussion on moderators and mini-publics, see Bächtiger et al. (2018).
8 For a comparative analysis of the internal deliberative quality of Western European candidate debates, see Marien et al. (2020). They argue that candidate debates, which do not feature right-wing populists, possess internal deliberative qualities that generate broader deliberative gains.
9 Davidson et al. (2017) see UK leader debates, despite a lack of internal deliberative quality, as generative of significant systemic deliberative effects for this reason.
10 From a Habermasian perspective, arguments among citizens are a crucial ethical phenomenon, as they enable the broadcasting of perspectives that may otherwise be overlooked. Habermas (1990: 57) writes, "moral justifications are dependent on *argumentation actually being carried out*, not for pragmatic reasons of an equalization of power, but for internal reasons, namely that real argument makes moral insight possible [emphasis added]."
11 For Arendtian, Linda Zerilli, judgment is a key feature of a free political community, because acts of judgment sustain and enrich our "common world" (2016). Judgment does this because it proceeds by way of the internal representation of different socially-held ways of viewing common objects of understanding. This means that acts of judgment require perspectival pluralism, in that in the absence of pluralism, individuals lack the resources necessary to see shared objects of understanding from multiple vantage points.
12 McKinney and Warner (2013) argue that voter confidence of personal political knowledge increases with debate-viewing. They also argue that debate-watching decreases political cynicism.
13 The Munk Debates organizers, when responding to criticisms of the Bannon-Frum debate, stated: "We believe we are providing a public service by allowing [Bannon and Frum's] ideas to be vigorously contested and letting the public draw their own conclusions from the debate. In our increasingly polarized societies, we often struggle to see across ideological and moral divides" (Quoted in Blouin, 2018).
14 I draw from Warren's analysis of the different normative approaches for considering what he calls "sensitive issues," where "the *who* of the speaker undermines the *what* of [a] statement" [emphasis original] (Warren, 2006: 163).
15 Arendt likely does not mean formal or semi-formal debate, but rather argument or verbal contestation in general. That she uses the language of debate, however, is notable.

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16 An additional political justification for debate specific to candidate debates: candidate debates may provide one of the few spaces for potentially unscripted and "authentic" moments, where candidates are compelled to think on their feet, thereby exposing their character to voters. More than that, candidate debates may enable mutual risk taking on the part of both the audience and the rhetor, which could produce significant political gains (Goodman, 2021). While these debates are far from perfect in practice, improved design might help. Coleman and Moss (2016), for example, see candidate debates as potentially fulfilling this role, provided they are designed to meet the entitlements of voters and not strategically advantage candidates and broadcasters. Nevertheless, even if in practice debates are currently less than ideal, a recent decrease in candidate debates in the US may be an ominous sign for the fate of US democracy, indicative of an increasing distance between candidates and constituencies (Lerer and Ulloa, 2022).

17 Ellis and Hovagimian (2019) suggest some debate formats (for example, "ethics bowl") are free from this flaw.

18 The quote comes from the "Rhetoric" section of Quine's dictionary (1989: 183), where Quine uses a Platonic descriptor, calling rhetoric a "knack"—something unbefitting of science.

19 An additional and important criticism of debate, particularly candidate debates, is that double standards apply to non-white and non-male participants, who routinely are treated far more harshly by audiences, commentators, and critics than are white male participants. Gidengil and Everitt (1999), for example, provide a study of the gendered nature of media coverage of the 1993 Canadian leadership debates. Debate is not a reprieve from patriarchy or white supremacy.

20 There are arguments that this push-back on settled knowledge may be useful or even emancipatory. For example, from a Butlerian perspective (Butler, 1997), one could argue that debates can prompt creative forms of imagining, including forms that challenge those discourses that sustain oppression, by encouraging new and playful forms of reasoning.

21 Like with any public speech, public debates can inflict harm. If a speaker is advocating for tangible harm or violence, if they are a perpetrator of violence and are looking to commit more atrocities, or if placing the facticity of a topic in doubt can itself do harm (for example: debating the existence of the Holocaust), then there are compelling reasons to limit, silence, or condemn instances of debate.

22 As mentioned previously, Arendt likely does not mean formal debates. Nevertheless, the choice of metaphor is noteworthy. Indeed, Habermas (1991) also frequently uses the language of "debate" when writing about the public sphere.

23 For example, the first debate between Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton ahead of the 2016 election was screened by 84 million Americans (Weprin, 2016).

24 Citing a wide literature, McKinney and Warner (2013: 246) argue, "From their ability to educate voters and positively affect normative attitudes, to their engagement of citizens in the ongoing campaign dialogue, and, yes, debates ability to influence votes and elections—especially in particularly tight races—there is compelling evidence to answer in the affirmative when asked, 'Do debates matter?'" More generally, McKinney and Warner (2013: 252–53) argue candidate debates can lead to voters changing their minds regarding candidate support, but this is far more likely to occur when candidate support is not particularly entrenched. Voters are, for example, far more likely to be swayed during primary debates, when they are choosing between a set of like-minded candidates about whom they may be relatively unfamiliar, than when they are choosing between candidates during presidential election debates. In the Canadian context, Lanoue (1991), likewise has argued that Canadian leadership debates "matter," particularly under specific sets of criteria.

25 "Talking head" debates may not be revered in the way that some high-minded policy debates are, but it is likely that news media opt for debate as a form of mediation precisely because it carries with it the pretense of serious ideational contestation and exchange. Talking head debates mimic serious discursive exchange.

26 A record of the first six of these debates was published as a book (Ingold, 1996).

27 A Conservative Party of Canada leadership debate may not claim to be representative of all available positions, but they surely do claim to be representative of all available positions vis-à-vis qualified Conservative leadership candidates.

28 The website follows this "both sides" claim with: "This is why the Munk Debates is committed to providing an alternative to the media echo chambers that pass for public debate in our society" ("Our Mission"). This sentence makes clear that, for the organizers, debate is perceived as something that can transcend partisan silos.

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29 I am *not* arguing that public debates are the only form of rhetoric to have world-constitutive effects, nor am I suggesting that public debates have a larger role in shaping opinions than do other forms of rhetoric. Rather, my interest is to illuminate the distinct or characteristic constitutive features of public debates.
30 In this way, public debates do more than "frame" issues (see: Chong and Druckman, 2007). Rather, public debates offer multiple frames for given issues; they provide meta-frames.
31 Michael Saward's (2010) influential constructivist monograph on representation is entitled "The Representative Claim."
32 It should be noted that while public debate is perhaps an ideal type of a meta-representative claim, it is by no means the only type. Other forms of mediation (non-debates) can function as claims of meta-representation so long as a horizon of representation is posited within a singular performance of representation.
33 That the constitutive effect of a meta-representative claim is distinct from that of a merely representative claim does not mean that it is more powerful. Many factors determine the constructivist force of any one claim of representation.
34 Neither Saward nor Disch, the two most prominent contributors to the constructivist turn, explicitly discuss meta-representative claim making in their primary monographs on representation (Saward, 2010; Disch, 2021).
35 See, for example, the highly influential: Lakoff and Johnson (1980).
36 It is noteworthy that when pressed on her views concerning the veracity of climate change in a US Senate Judiciary Committee meeting, Amy Coney Barrett refused to respond definitively, noting that the topic is a "matter of public debate" (Quoted in: Schwartz and Tabuchi, 2020). That the topic is "publicly debated" was invoked as evidence both that the horizon of available opinion on the matter are open to denialism as well as the scientific consensus, and that the topic is one of political importance.
37 It is beyond the scope of this article to outline the criteria for determining what counts as dangerous or nefarious.
38 Examples include discussions concerning the inclusion of the Alternative for Germany (AFD) in German political debates or the People's Party of Canada (PPC) in Canadian political debates.
39 The background conditions (for example, the culture industry) that enable some positions to feature in debate and render invisible other positions are, therefore, of considerable normative and critical importance. Who sets the agenda and how is of the utmost significance. Indeed, given their constitutive power, political theorists should be attuned to who decides and on what basis which perspectives are on offer in public debates.
40 This does not mean that other constitutive effects will not occur. Additional constitutive effects could be either positive or negative as is discussed below.
41 Again, it is beyond the scope of this article to outline what precisely constitutes an especially dangerous position or an especially egregious form of under-representation. However, most observers are likely to agree that there are some criteria for determining which debates are beyond the pale.

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