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THE OXFORD UNION DEBATE ON WAR IN 1933:
RHETORIC, REPRESENTATION, POLITICAL ACTION

ABSTRACT:

This paper shows how a debate conducted in the Oxford Union, the leading student debating society in Britain, was used to make a point about representation and politics in the national press, and what it means in terms of political action and who can be considered to make political arguments. In 1933 the Union debated a motion ‘That this House under no circumstances will fight for its King and Country’. It was carried by a clear margin, and the scandal it caused put the role of the Union and what it represented into question. It is here argued that there were two rhetorical levels in operation, rhetoric of representation and rhetoric of debate. With the former, the Union was blamed in the national press for lacking the representative qualities it was assumed to have, and with the latter, its rules and traditions were defended as part of the functions of a political assembly.

Keywords: Oxford Union, politics, King and Country, rhetoric, representation, *ethos*

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the famous Oxford Union ‘King and Country’, or ‘No Fight’, debate that took place in 1933. The debate was held on 9 February, only ten days after Hitler had been declared Chancellor of Germany. The motion, ‘[t]hat this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country’, was carried by 275 votes to 153. The resolution caused a scandal with wide publicity both nationally and internationally, not least of all due to the commonly shared perception that the Union was an integral part of a prestigious English university representing the national character (cf. Soares 1999). The Oxford debate had influence by setting ‘an example’ (Mannin, 1933). A similar motion had been debated at the Cambridge Union¹, but

¹ At Cambridge, a similar resolution had been passed a few years earlier. In March 1927 Arthur Ponsonby, England’s leading pacifist of the time, had proposed ‘That lasting peace can only be secured by the people of England adopting an uncompromising attitude of

only after the scandal around the Oxford debate similar motions were proposed in a number of other student debating societies in England and Wales, including Birmingham, Manchester and Cardiff. The Oxford debate was later even blamed for having been one of the causes to the outbreak of the Second World War. Among the most influential voices to claim so was the former prime minister Winston Churchill who had condemned the Union resolution soon after its passing and, in his post-war biography, called it a serious portrayal of ‘a decadent, degenerate Britain’ by ‘foolish boys’ who had no idea of the serious consequences of their actions (Churchill, 1949: 77).

Martin Ceadel has previously argued that the harsh contemporary judgements presented against the ‘No Fight’ debate made it more infamous than its origins would otherwise suggest. This seems a rather justified statement due to the fact that the same people involved in the organisation of the ‘No Fight’ debate, namely Frank Hardie and David Graham, had already proposed a similar motion in May 1931 that was passed by 79 votes to 47, which did not receive any publicity at all (see Ceadel, 1979: 414, fn. 64). Ceadel maintained that, since the 1933 debate bore relevance until well into the 1970s, the scandal around it merits further analysis. He studied the controversy over the debate from the point of view of pacifism that was a major movement in the 1930s, and his conclusion was that the Union had been used as a ‘scapegoat’ by those who were not willing to consider that Britain could have done more to prevent Nazi occupation in Europe (ibid. 422).

pacifism’ which was passed by 213 votes to 138. The resolution did not, however, attract any public attention.

In this paper, however, a different angle will be offered on this matter that focuses on the use of language for political purposes. It strikes me that the public debate on the incident was more preoccupied with reputation (of Oxford, the Union and the nation as a whole) than with the actual motion. In order to better understand why this was so, I will present a rhetorical analysis on the controversy surrounding the ‘No Fight’ debate focusing mainly on the aspect of *ethos*. In this way I want to draw attention to *who* is considered authorised to make political claims and *how* this is expressed in this case.

To follow up on what I have argued elsewhere (together with Wiesner and Palonen, 2017), nothing is political or apolitical ‘by nature’ but must be interpreted as such. In the language of politicians and other political agents, what constitutes as ‘politics’ or ‘political’ is not derived from a simple entry in a dictionary or academic textbook. On the contrary, studies on the actual usages of vocabulary related to politics can easily illustrate how the concept has multiple aspects, dimensions and historical layers that cannot be strictly separated from each other (see e.g. Crick, 1962; Marchart, 2007; Palonen, 2006).

As no phenomenon has a necessary political aspect, but every phenomenon can become political, debates can be seen as especially fruitful for the study of politics. Whenever there is debate between two opposing sides, the possibility also arises to analyse their arguments in relation to each other. (Wiesner et al., 2017: 2-3) It must be taken, therefore, that debate is not about mere discussion on both sides of the question at hand but controversial interaction in an effort to win the argument. This idea derives from a rhetorical paradigm that has become institutionalised in the procedure

of the British Parliament, to the speaking of *pro et contra*, and can be traced back to the early modern humanist tradition that had a very systematic and influential educational programme which emphasized the adversarial character of politics (see e.g. Skinner, 1996; Mack, 2002; Peltonen, 2013: 69).

Debates conducted outside political assemblies, however, offer a very different framework for political action, as there are no fixed rules or procedures to guide them. As will be illustrated below, this is a key point in order to better understand the controversy surrounding the Oxford Union debate. It will be suggested that, since the debates were conducted with rules and procedure (which were mainly adopted from the British Parliament) the Union can be considered as a political assembly which came under attack by a debate that took attention away from the very fact.

The analysis presented here is based on extensive research of the rules applied and debating practices in the Oxford and Cambridge Unions, which showed that there were transfers of ideas and conventions between the Unions and the Parliament at least since the 1840s (Haapala, 2016). As you might expect, the adopted practices were sometimes used for very different political purposes in the Unions than in Parliament. This is mainly caused by the simple fact that the Unions are not representative assemblies in the same sense as national parliaments. But, it does not mean that political action in the Unions is any less valuable for a rhetorical analysis of British politics.

My interpretation is based on analytical tools which I have selected after having identified two parallel but different rhetorical levels at operation: *rhetoric of*

representation and *rhetoric of debate*. I have used them to find out what types of arguments were made to describe the ‘No Fight’ debate’s significance. I will show that rhetoric of representation was present in the arguments put forward in the national press that were intended for readers who were concerned about the state of national politics and international security. It was used, for example, to portray the Union debate as representative of Oxford views, especially in relation to national values and interests. In contrast, with the rhetoric of debate the adversarial character of the Union’s debating practices was taken into consideration. It addressed the audience that is more likely to defend the value of public discussion or the Union’s traditions of organizing controversial debates.

By using the analytical tools I will show that the rhetoric of debate was sidelined or largely misinterpreted in the press and the rhetoric of representation was used for political purposes in an attempt to undermine its significance. The sources to which this approach is applied include mainly newspaper reports of the debate which are complemented by Oxford Union minutes and various writings of people who were present in the debate, including the Union president Frank Hardie and one of the guest speakers, Cyril Joad.

THE IDEA OF DEBATE IN THE UNION SOCIETIES

To provide background for the following analysis of the ‘No Fight’ debate, I will first briefly elaborate on the foundation of the Oxford Union and how the idea of debate can be understood in that context. In 1933 the Oxford Union had already been in existence for 110 years. It was founded in 1823 by a group of students whose aim was to create an extracurricular platform to debate current political issues. The University,

however, was not supportive of its activities. The sister organisation at Cambridge, established already in 1815, had been barred from debating political issues. In March 1817 an Act of Parliament was passed restricting free association and meetings, and all societies called 'Union Clubs' were considered suspect based on reports of a secret commission set by the government concerned of revolutionary conspiracies in London (House of Lords, 18 February 1817: 40). Finally, in 1821 after the coronation of King George IV, tension subsided and Cambridge debates were resumed under the rule that only political topics before the year 1800 could be discussed. The restriction did not mean, however, that the debates on historical topics had no political reference at all. In his *Autobiography* John Stuart Mill mentioned the Cambridge Union as being at 'the height of its reputation' in the 1820s as 'an arena where what were then thought extreme opinions, in politics and philosophy, were weekly asserted, face to face with their opposites' (Mill, 1874: 76-77). As long as the Union did not raise any suspicions with the university authorities, debates were allowed to continue.

The members found a simple solution to keep their debates orderly – they decided to adopt parliamentary procedure. The debates in the Unions gradually began taking the form and following the terminology and conventions of the House of Commons.

Inevitably, they also had an effect on the Union members' views on how to conduct political debate. By the end of the century, both Unions had become commonly known as training grounds for future Members of Parliament (Harris-Burland, 1894: 502; Skipper, 1878: 6) and inspired many similar organisations all over the country.

Although the Unions were not the first academic debating societies,² they were able to

² It is the College History Society of Trinity College in Dublin that has been named as the oldest collegial debating society in the UK (Burtchaell, 1888: 391; Cooke, 1898: 273). Co-founded by Edmund Burke as The Club in 1747, its aim was the self-improvement of its

establish themselves and become integral parts of their respective universities. They were not, however, taken very seriously as political assemblies.

It is important to note that the Unions' political activity was not mere imitation of parliamentary politics. Rather, it derived from a shared idea of debate that was transferred to the Unions through the adoption of parliamentary procedure. Drawing largely from my previous research, I consider the Unions as an integral part of the mid nineteenth-century British parliamentary culture (Haapala, 2016; see also Haapala, 2012) in which the idea of debate was central, not just to the political and constitutional context of the period in which parliamentary reforms were undertaken to ensure the functioning of the legislature, but also to the legitimisation of political practices in public assemblies.

The period after the 1832 Reform Act marked the beginning of procedural revisions in the British Parliament. Although the Act itself was a political compromise and its effects on representation remained relatively minor, its significance was that it ushered in a new political era which involved broad changes in the system of representation (Seymour, 1915: 9). In this era of reforms, the role of political parties and the importance of debate in the House of Commons increased. A government's fate was tied to its ability to take leadership on issues that were discussed publicly. Walter Bagehot called it 'government by discussion' and Thomas Macaulay equally spoke of 'government by speaking' (Bagehot, 1872; Macaulay, 1859). In practice, the government now had to enjoy the confidence of the majority of the House of Commons. As Earl Grey wrote in 1858, 'success as a Parliamentary debater' is

members to engage their 'minds and manners for the functions of Civil Society' (quoted from The Club's minute book in Samuels, 1921: 204).

helpful for a minister to secure his position (Grey, 1858: 34). Grey's views on parliamentary government were later echoed in Bagehot's *The English Constitution*, which was first published in 1867, where he called Parliament 'the great scene of debate, the great engine of popular instruction and political controversy' (Bagehot, 1867: 14).

By the mid-century, parliamentary government had become the dominant constitutional form affecting the way politics was framed and understood (Hawkins, 1989: 656). It was connected to an educational aim: the parliament's role was to guide and form the public opinion on issues of national importance. The publicity of the debates in the House of Commons was seen as a tool for the purpose. A parliamentarian's reputation became dependent on his oratorical skills, and debating societies became instrumental in providing training (Grainger, 1969: 15).

The Union Societies were among the first ones to adopt parliamentary procedure in their debating practices. Their minute books show that both Oxford and Cambridge adopted parliamentary forms of debate by the late 1840s. The terminology they used was also derived from the parliamentary context. The term 'house' was adopted to denote meetings with legitimate powers to make resolutions. From 1845 onwards 'house' was mentioned in the Cambridge Union Society laws in connection with the parliamentary formulation 'a motion put to the house' (see CUS laws, 1845 Lent & Easter: 9). At Oxford Union Society the minute books could be referred to as 'Journals of the House' (OUS rules, 1837: 33). In its rules, questions under debate became called 'motions' in 1837: 'The question shall be put in form of a motion; when it shall be competent for any Member to move an amendment' (OUS rules,

1837: 6). They became also treated in the parliamentary manner. As was customary in the House of Commons, the issue proposed for debate, once accepted for deliberation, was considered to be in the possession of the house. Once the motion had been moved it ceased to belong to its proposer, and became of the House instead (Redlich, 1908: 220). Members of the House of Commons do, however, have the liberty to withdraw motions they have proposed by asking leave of the House. Permission is granted only if the House is unanimous (Hansard, 1857: 32). Both Unions applied this rule by the 1850s.

Compared to the proceedings of University College London Debating Society of the same time period³, the Unions had adopted more parliamentary qualities. The minutes of the London debating society show that their public debate topics were delivered in the form of informal questions: ‘Does a monarchical form of government tend more than a republican to the prosperity of the people?’ (UCL debating society, 16 December 1858). The main difference between debating on so-called informal questions and in parliamentary form has to do with the cultural and institutional connection. ‘Informal questions’ could be presented in any place or circumstance, whereas motions in the parliamentary form are put in the form of a resolution and, by so doing, establish a link of debating practices to Parliament. Moreover, the proceedings do not show on which side the speakers were while delivering their speeches. This practice also differs from that of the Unions that always carefully recorded who spoke for and against an issue.

³ The UCL debating society was formed in 1856 but it was first founded as Literary and Philosophical Society in 1829. In 1893 the Debating Society subscribed to the newly formed UCL Union Society and in 1909 was incorporated into the Union.

Even though the debating culture was clearly extended to debating societies such as the Oxford Union, their debates had a very different status than in Parliament. The Union was not a national political assembly whose aim was to educate the populace. And, obviously, its debating practices did not correspond exactly the ones in use at the House of Commons. One of the main differences was that Unions debated on issues that would not have been possible in the Commons. For example, they would frequently debate motions *on behalf* of the House of Commons. They would propose motions on whether a given government or government policy enjoyed the ‘confidence of the House’. This practice was still in use in Oxford Union in the 1930s but has its origins in the nineteenth century when the political parties were not as established as they had become by the period between the two World Wars. In the nineteenth century Oxford debates could potentially sway party political opinion among students and academic circles and, therefore, could have effect on the outcomes of local and general elections. This was also acknowledged by representatives of the press who would attend Union debates regularly. After 1856, when the Union changed its rules to allow the publication of its debate topics, they were frequently published in newspapers accompanied by the voting results.

Members of Parliament usually referred to debating societies in rather pejorative terms, portraying their activities as the very opposite of what was suitable for the dignity of the Commons. Especially those who had been Union members themselves, however, noted that the debates could be more demanding than in Parliament. In his biography of prime minister Asquith, Harold Spender, a Liberal MP and journalist, maintained that he had not been the only experienced parliamentarian who had declared ‘that the Oxford Union Society was to them a more difficult place of debate

than the House of Commons' where every speaker was challenged to such an extent that '[t]hose who survive such an ordeal by fire have little to fear in after life from the ribaldry of mobs or the insolence of elected persons'. (Spender, 1915: 27–28)

And, indeed, the difference was also recognised by other former Union members who had become elected as MPs. One of them was Sir John Mowbray who served a long political career as a Conservative MP, representing Oxford University from 1868 to 1899. While speaking in the Oxford Union's fiftieth anniversary in 1873, he made it distinctly clear that, from the perspective of 'imperial politics', the Union seemed nothing more than a 'deliberative society'. But if 'regarded on the side of Union politics', it was 'a great school for the development of the combative element' (Oxford Union Society, 1874: 6).

In Jeremy Bentham's *Essay on Political Tactics*, based on the British parliamentary practices and intended as a manual of parliamentary procedure for the use of the Estates General of France in the months just prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution (see e.g. James et al. eds., 1999), it was argued that an 'assembly, or collection of individuals' is a 'body' as they are 'found united together, in order to perform a common act'. It follows that a 'body-politic' is formed of the 'concurrence of many members in the same act' which 'announces an opinion or a will'. The expression of that will is a 'declarative act' which begins 'by being that of an individual' and 'may finish by being that of a body'. (Bentham, 1843, §3) In other words, an assembly can be considered as a political body when its members are joined together and have the power to announce their united opinion by a declaration. There

can be 'simple' or 'compound' bodies, the latter of which is exemplified by the British Parliament that is formed of 'two distinct assemblies' and the head of State.

According to Bentham's definition, Oxford Union can be seen as a 'simple' body, but a political assembly nonetheless. Even though the Union occasionally conducted debates on behalf of the House of Commons, it does not change the idea of it being a political body that has the power to announce its opinion. It is another matter, however, how this 'declarative act' is received and portrayed.

THE 'NO FIGHT' DEBATE

The 'No Fight' motion, as it came to be called, was drafted by the Oxford Union librarian David Graham. But the responsibility for its selection was taken by the Union president, Frank Hardie who was at the time Scholar of Christ Church, who had taken a First Class in the Honours School of Modern History in 1932, and had served as Chairman of the University Labour Club (Foot et al., 1934: 138). Hardie decided to invite guest speakers in order to have a balanced debate on both sides of the question. As Ceadel noted, this was not the usual custom in a Union debate of the period. Guest speakers were only appearing on special occasions.

In terms of undergraduate attendance, the event turned out to be a success. The record number of fifty-eight undergraduates, more or less equally divided between for and against, put their names forward to speak in the debate. But, initially, the topic itself did not attract much attention from the press, there being only reporters from the university journals and the *Oxford Mail* present. (Ceadel, 1979: 400-3)

The guest speaker representing the opposing side of the motion was Quintin Hogg who was a former president of the Oxford University Conservative Association and the son of Viscount Hailsham, the Secretary of State for War. The second guest, speaking in favour of the motion, was Cyril Joad who was a well-known pacifist and philosopher. Both had been members of the Union previously, Hogg having served as its president in 1929. He had been called to the Bar in 1932 and was elected as a Member of Parliament for Oxford in 1938, defeating A. D. Lindsay, the independent candidate and Master of Balliol College.

Joad was the Head of the Philosophy Department at Birkbeck College and became later known as ‘the Professor’ of the BBC *Brain’s Trust* radio programme that started airing during the Second World War. After the war, he became a member of the Executive Committee of the Federal Trust and prolific writer who, for instance, published a pamphlet entitled “The Philosophy of Federal Union” in 1941 in which he argued against ‘the worship of the State’ (Joad, 1941: 36).

Some commentators pointed out that it was Joad’s ‘eloquent’ speech that had made all the difference on the outcome of the debate (see e.g. Smith, 1933). In the 1930s the pacifist cause was very prominent, not least of all due to the widely available internationalist education, mainly organised by the League of Nations Union, of which purpose was to induce more informed public debates on foreign policy (McCarthy, 2011: 6). The British pacifist movement was established during the First World War and inspired by socialist and Christian ideologies (Ceadel, 1981: 31). During the war, which was supposed to end all wars, the government slogan for conscription had been ‘for the King and Country’. This was referred to by the first

speaker of the 'No fight' debate, Kenelm Digby, an undergraduate who was the first to speak in support of the motion. (Ceadel, 1979: 403) When it was Joad's turn to defend the motion, he mentioned that he had attended a similar debate already in 1913 and that the opposing arguments about national honour had remained much the same. Although the Great War had been justified in the name of 'democracy and to make England a place fit for heroes to live in', the country was now spending over a million pounds each year in preparation for the next war. He, therefore, maintained that 'those who oppose the motion are opposing it in the interests of an anachronism' (quoted in Smith, 1933: 8).

The official records of the debate are quite limited because the Union minutes do not contain verbatim accounts of what was actually said in the meetings. Most importantly, they do not reveal the argumentation for and against the motions. The Union public debates were usually documented as follows: first, the date of the meeting as well as the name of the chairman were given; then, the motion and its proposer, and the speakers for and against; and last, the final vote (or 'division') showing the majority for or against. For that reason, outsiders had no other choice but to rely on the reports of the 'No Fight' debate.

After the debate, various reactions were voiced in the press that seem to have constituted a completely different debate altogether, one which the Union had no control over, even though president Hardie and others took part in it trying to explain their side of the story. As Hardie wrote in a commentary published in *The Political Quarterly*, hardly no one was interested in finding out what the actual arguments were in support of the motion (Hardie, 1933a: 269). The lack of interest toward what had

actually occurred, or why, contributed to arguments that distorted the original discussion. In other words, what had started out as an attempt by president Hardie to organise an interesting and well-attended Union debate, ended up as something completely different.

THE DEBATE IN THE NEWSPAPER PRESS

It has been previously argued that the Union debate would probably have gone unnoticed without a letter in the *Daily Telegraph* two days after (Ceadel, 1979: 405). The letter published under a pseudonym “Sixty Four” was, it was later discovered, written by Mr Firth, a member of the editorial staff. It claimed that ‘the committee who selected’ the motion had ‘obviously intended’ it as ‘a jibe on loyalty and patriotism’ and, therefore, should ‘be ostracised for perpetuating an outrage on the tradition of the Union and of Oxford’. It was also said to be a travesty ‘upon the memory of those who gave their lives in the Great War’. Finally, the motion was declared to be ‘not only a foul joke but a serious declaration of foul opinion’. (*Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 1933)

This letter not only set the tone of the ensuing public debate but also included the first arguments containing rhetoric of representation. With a reference to a ‘tradition’, it was assumed that the Union was supposed to uphold and represent certain values of Oxford. The Union was accused of offending the ‘loyalty and patriotism’ attached to its reputation and to those who had lost their lives in the First World War. Going even further, the motion was condemned as a ‘joke’ and of ‘foul opinion’, thus portraying the intentions of the proposers of the motion as contemptuous and malign. In other words, with these allegations, the *ethos* of the Oxford Union was put into question.

The attack against the Union can be partly explained by the relationship it had with Oxford University. The two old English universities at Oxford and Cambridge were considered as ‘nurseries for gentlemen, statesmen, and administrators’ (Ashby 1958, 68). This perceived function of academic life was transferred to the reputation of the Union Societies as well. And, so long as they did not create controversy, they were appreciated for a perceived service provided to the state and the empire.

According to the Union president Hardie, the letter published in the *Daily Telegraph* signed by “Sixty-Four” was ‘the most violent attack on the Union’ (Hardie, 1933a: 268). In his reply that was published two days later he corrected that the motion had not been selected by the committee of the society but by himself, which was ‘the custom’ of the Union. He also made it clear that it was not at any point intended to be ‘a jibe on loyalty and patriotism’, as the accusation was put, but to offer ‘an opportunity for a serious discussion’ on pacifism: ‘It was not “a serious declaration of foul opinion.” It was a serious declaration of serious opinion.’ (Hardie, 1933b)

Hardie’s comment shows that the writer of the letter had failed to take into account the intentions related to making the proposal. But his reply did not help to defend the Union’s reputation in the press.

If the subsequent commentators did not outright condemn the Union for making the controversial resolution, they were of the opinion that it was of no importance. In *The Times*, for example, the debate was referred to as ‘the children’s hour’. It was claimed that the resolution was nothing more than a childish exercise, and there was no cause for concern as the Union was ‘in no sense representative of the University’ (*The*

Times, 13 February 1933: 13). Although the Unions had become well-established parts of the national narrative through their affiliation to their universities, their activities were denounced as childish and irresponsible and, therefore, should not be taken seriously.

According to A. D. Lindsay, Master of Balliol College, who himself had been present in the Union debate, a distorted view of the society and the motion had taken hold in the press. His argument was that ‘the feeling of those who voted for the motion’ had not been ‘that of disloyalty to King and country, but one of protest against the prevalent idea that King and country should be used as motives to make them fight’ (Lindsay, 1933). In his view, those who took it as a sign of disloyalty had intentionally interpreted the debate out of context. Some commentators pointed out that the Union motion only reflected the atmosphere in the country. Among them was Lord Cecil, a well-known proponent of the League of Nations, who said that the Union debate had merely shown that this is ‘the new era of self-respecting citizens’ who are ‘ready and determined that their Government shall pursue a policy of peace for the preservation of order throughout the world’. Moreover, he connected the outrage against the ‘No Fight’ debate to the ‘suppression of individuality’ that had increased with ‘a tendency to think that a man was disloyal or insane who did not accept the views of the political party to which he belonged’. (*Week-End Review*, 11 February 1933)

It was also discussed whether or not the resolution represented the ‘true’ voice of university students. In the *Daily Mail*, for example, it was argued that even though the Union ‘has great traditions’ and can boast of having provided early training for

Gladstone ‘and many other British statesmen’, ‘no one would pretend that it is truly representative of the University to-day’. Besides, it was added, the resolution only mirrors ‘the real or affected sentiment of a number of posturers and gesturers, not of genuine Oxford undergraduate’. (*Daily Mail*, 11 February 1933: 10) A similar argument was published in the *Morning Post*. Signed by one T. P. Williams, a comment was presented that ‘the results of these debates do not represent Oxford opinion in these days, although they may have done in the past’. The reason was that the Union had been ‘captured by a band of petty politicians, mainly half-baked youngsters, very often ill-mannered, self-assertive, and contemptuous of their elders’. These types of students did not represent the ‘far larger band of the solid, well-balanced kind who stay away, and really run the colleges’ (Williams, 1933).

In these comments, the Union was portrayed as a place for the insincere and attention-seeking that had lost its connection to the glory of its past. Its authority as a voice of university students was simply denied with the use of rhetoric of representation that started to frame the discussion in the press. In an interview to the *Manchester Guardian* less than a week after the Union debate, president Hardie confirmed this by uttering that, ever since the press became interested in the resolution, he had been asked whether or not the Union represented the views of Oxford or its students. He responded that ‘the Union is definitely not representative of the whole of undergraduate opinion, though it is probably more representative of it than any other single body and that the Union does quite fairly represent the views of those undergraduates who are interested in politics’. (*Manchester Guardian*, 14 February 1933)

What the majority of arguments that used rhetoric of representation showed was that, for those who were concerned about the state of national politics, the Oxford Union was considered to represent the university that had its functions and value for the country. Its loyalty was put into question, which undermined its authority to make political resolutions in the first place. In other words, the Union was judged on the basis of whether its resolution was representative of certain values and principles or not.

Arguments containing rhetoric of debate, in contrast, accentuated the value of public discussion and the Union's right to conduct debates on controversial issues. In Marquess of Donegal's letter published in the *Sunday Express* the main concern was the motion having been 'worded in the most offensive possible way'. However, he considered the Union as a debating society 'like any other' and wished not to 'belittle' it. He maintained that it was 'good that young men should blow off steam', and, according to him, 'at times, the Union has given out constructive thought'. (Marquess of Donegal, *Sunday Express* 1933)

The majority of the commentators in Oxford and Cambridge student magazines also took the Union's side and claimed that the debate would hardly have attracted any attention among university students if the wording of the motion had been less provocative. According to R. B. McCallum, who was then a college tutor in history and a member of the Union, there was no clear majority of students who supported pacifism as such, but the topics were 'by tradition' formulated 'in a very challenging form, extreme assertions being favoured'. Provocative motions were put forward as 'the pegs for a debate, for the Society is a club and its debates are a school of rhetoric

and nothing more'. (McCallum, 1944: 178) Similarly, an Oxford student under the initials N.A.M.L argued that 'if it had put the issue of pacificism in a less arbitrary form, there would have been nothing to debate about' as the 'verdict would have been unanimous' (N.A.M.L.: *The ISIS*, 15 February 1933). It was further added that it was the president's duty to ensure lively debate.

In the Cambridge student magazine, *The Granta*, it was argued that the events of the original debate was 'nobody's business but the Oxford Union's'. It was further pointed out that, it was often the case that a motion debated in the Union was carried even though the voting itself was 'really on something quite different'. It depended on a number of issues:

The debating ability of the proposers, an unforeseen twist in the interpretation of the motion, a simplification or complication of the issue, an omission by both sides of some of the motion's implications – any of these can make the statement "Such-and-such a motion was carried" a most misleading one. (*The Granta*, 17 February 1933)

In other words, it was suggested that it was not fair to make assumptions on the intentions of the debaters in that particular event without taking into consideration the contingency of debate.

It was rather difficult for the general public to make fair judgment of the contents of the original debate based merely on the wording of the motion. Any subsequent interpretation of the motion was not relevant after the original debate had taken place. Only those who had participated in the Union debate could know all the interpretations and nuances presented during the debate. The problem was that the

reports of the debate were framed for other political purposes than the original motion.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, what I have sought to illustrate here, is that the debate, which came to define Oxford Union and its reputation for decades to come, was not so much about the topic itself but more about who sets the agenda of public debate in questions of national importance. In my analysis I focused on the interplay of two types of rhetoric in the discussion after the ‘No Fight’ debate at Oxford Union. This wider public debate on the resolution came to be dominated by rhetoric of representation, with which the attention was directed at the *ethos* of the Union, making it easy to diminish the importance of the original debate. At the same time, the rhetoric of debate was used by those who wished to remind that the Union had its own rules and traditions of conducting public debates on controversial issues.

But, it should be further noted that both the rhetoric of representation and that of debate were used *after* the debate. The Union did not at any point claim to represent the ‘Oxford view’, if such a thing existed. In fact, the analysis shows that the question was not so much about the Union representing Oxford in the first place, but whether the Union motion was representative of certain attributed values and principles. To use Bentham’s words, the ‘declarative act’ of the Union was not perceived as corresponding to them. And, while the resolution became dismissed as childish and irresponsible, the original aim of the debate was ‘ignored, or deliberately obscured’, which was the ‘deep disgust’ that the students of the generation had for declarations

of war that had been done before in the name of ‘King and Country’ (*Manchester Guardian*, 15 February 1933: 8).

It is also worth keeping in mind that the ‘No Fight’ debate was conducted in a political assembly with its rules of debate that had been adopted from the Parliament. This means that the original debate had been guided by rules that were fair to both sides, as both the proponents and opponents of the motion had agreed to speak on the same topic under the same procedure. As the debate became part of a controversy itself, the fairness guaranteed by the procedure vanished. Thus, the original intentions of the proposer and the speakers gave way to a completely different setting.

Only a few reports paid attention to the conventions of the Union proceedings at all. The newspaper reports written about the Union debate constituted a debate of their own which was not guided or controlled by any formal rules. For this reason, they created a very different kind of space for rhetoric of representation than is related to a deliberative assembly. It was easier and more profitable for some of the newspapers to cause public outrage than to give a fair report of the Union’s rules and traditions while explaining the reasons for its members choosing the topic in the first place. Blaming the Union was a convenient rhetorical tool also for those who did not wish to debate on the actual causes of anti-war sentiment. In this way, any chance for a deeper analysis of the underlying issue was actively denied and the reputation of the Union was called into question.

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