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The Oxford Union Debate on War in 1933: Rhetoric, Representation, Political Action

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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 entitled to make political claims. In 1933 the Union debated a motion "That this House will under no circumstances fight for its King and Country". It was carried by a clear majority, and the scandal it caused called the role of the Union and what it represented into question. It is argued here that there were two rhetorical levels in operation, the rhetoric of representation and the rhetoric of debate. Regarding the former, the Union was blamed in the national press for lacking the representative qualities attributed to it, and regarding 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 proclaimed 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 extensive publicity, both nationally and internationally, not least due to the commonly shared perception that the Union was an integral part of a prestigious English university representing the national character (cf. Soares,

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1999). The Oxford debate was influential by setting "an example" (Mannin, 1933). A similar motion had been debated in the Cambridge Union,[1] but only after the scandal surrounding the Oxford debate were similar motions 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 for the outbreak of the Second World War. Among the most influential voices supporting this claim 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 dire consequences of their actions (Churchill, 1949: 77).[2]

Martin Ceadel has previously argued that the harsh contemporary condemnations of the "No Fight" debate made it more infamous than its origins would otherwise suggest. This seems fairly justified given 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 carried by 79 votes to 47, and received no publicity at all (see Ceadel, 1979: 414, fn. 64). Ceadel maintained that, since the 1933 debate continued to be relevant 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, which in the 1930s was a major movement, and his conclusion was that the Union had been used as a "scapegoat" by those reluctant to concede that Britain could have done more to prevent the Nazi occupation in Europe (Ceadel, 1979: 422).

In this paper, however, a different angle will be considered on this matter focusing 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 of 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 deemed to be entitled to make political claims and *how* this is expressed in this case.

To follow up on what I have argued elsewhere (in Wiesner et al., 2017), nothing is intrinsically political or apolitical, but needs to be interpreted as such. In the language of politicians and other political agents, what constitutes "politics" or "political" is not derived from a simple entry in a dictionary or academic textbook. On the contrary, studies on the actual usage 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 necessarily political aspect, but every phenomenon can *become* political, debates can be seen as especially fruitful for the study

of politics. A debate between two opposing sides invariably presents an opportunity to analyse their respective arguments in relation to each other. (Wiesner et al., 2017: 2–3) It must be conceded therefore, that debate is not merely discussion on both sides of the question at issue, but controversy in an attempt to win the argument. This idea derives from a rhetorical paradigm that has become institutionalised in the proceedings and procedure of the British Parliament, to the arguments *pro et contra*, and can be traced back to the early modern humanist tradition that had a very systematic and influential educational programme which emphasised 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 according to rules and procedures (which were mainly adopted from the British Parliament) the Union can be considered a political assembly which came under attack due to a debate that diverted attention from that very fact.

The analysis presented here is based on extensive research on the rules applied and debating practices in the Oxford and Cambridge Unions, which showed that there had been transfers of ideas and conventions between the Unions and Parliament at least since the 1840s (Haapala, 2016). As might be expected, the practices adopted were sometimes used for very different political purposes in the Unions and in Parliament. This is largely due to the simple fact that the Unions are not representative assemblies in the same sense as national parliaments. Yet 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 identifying two parallel but disparate rhetorical levels in operation: the *rhetoric of representation* and the *rhetoric of debate*. I have used them to ascertain what types of arguments were evinced to describe the significance of the "No Fight" debate. I will show that the rhetoric of representation was present in the arguments put forward in the national press and intended for readers 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. By contrast, in the rhetoric of debate the adversarial character of the Union's debating practices was taken into consideration. It addressed an audience more likely to defend the value of public discussion or the Union's traditions of organising debates on controversial issues.

By using these analytical tools I will show that the rhetoric of debate was sidelined or largely misinterpreted in the press while the rhetoric of repre-

sentation was used for political purposes in an attempt to detract from its significance. The sources to which this approach is applied consist mainly of newspaper reports of the debate complemented by Oxford Union minutes and various texts by those present at the original 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 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 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 up by the government eager to search for revolutionary conspiracies in London (House of Lords, 18 February 1817: 40). Finally, in 1821, after the coronation of King George IV, the tension subsided and Cambridge debates were resumed under the condition that only political topics before the year 1800 could be discussed. The restriction did not, however, mean 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: 76–7). As long as the Union aroused no suspicions among 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 to assume the form and to follow the terminology and conventions of the House of Commons. Inevitably, they also had an effect on the Union members' views on how to conduct a 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,[3] they were able to 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 on my earlier research, I consider the Unions as an integral part of mid nineteenth-century British parliamentary culture (Haapala, 2016; see also Haapala, 2012) in which the idea of debate was pivotal, not only 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 slight, its significance was that it ushered in a new political era which involved far-reaching 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 contingent upon its ability to assume leadership in issues that were publicly discussed. Walter Bagehot called it "government by discussion" and Thomas Macaulay likewise 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 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 middle of the 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 role of Parliament was to guide and form public opinion on issues of national importance. The publicity surrounding the debates in the House of Commons was seen as a means to that end. A parliamentarian's reputation came to depend on his skills as an orator, and debating societies became instrumental in providing training (Grainger, 1969: 15).

The Union Societies were among the first to adopt parliamentary procedure in their debating practices. Their minute books show that both Oxford and Cambridge Unions had 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 carry motions. 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).

In the 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 came to be 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 also came to be 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 proposed it ceased to belong to its proposer, and became of the House instead (Redlich, 1908: 220). Members of the House of Commons are, however, at 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 the contemporary University College London Debating Society,[4] the Unions had adopted more parliamentary customs. 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 circumstances, whereas motions in the parliamentary form are proposed in the form of a resolution thereby establishing a link to the debating practices in 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, which always carefully recorded who spoke for and against a motion.

Even though the debating culture was clearly extended to debating societies such as the Oxford Union, their debates had a very different status from those in Parliament. The Union was not a national political assembly whose aim was to educate the populace. Obviously, its debating practices did not correspond exactly to those of the House of Commons. One of the main differences was that the Unions debated 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 less firmly established than in the interwar period. In the nineteenth century Oxford debates could potentially sway party political opinion among students and academic circles, thereby influencing the outcomes of local and general elections. This was also acknowledged by representatives of the press, who would regularly attend Un-

ion debates. 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 results of the votes.

Members of Parliament usually referred to debating societies in rather pejorative terms, portraying their activities as the very opposite of what was appropriate in keeping with 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: 27–8).

Indeed, the difference was also recognised by other former Union members who had subsequently been elected as MPs. One of them was Sir John Mowbray, who had 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 abundantly 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 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: xvi), 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: 20–1) In other words, an assembly can be considered to constitute 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 exemplified by the British Parliament, consisting as it does of "two distinct assemblies" and the Head of State.

According to Bentham's definition, the 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, that does

not change the idea of its being a political body with the power to proclaim 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 customary in a Union debate of the period, guest speakers only appearing on special occasions.

In terms of undergraduate attendance, the event proved successful. 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 in the press, with only reporters from the university journals and the *Oxford Mail* present. (Ceadel, 1979: 400–3)

The guest speaker opposing the motion was Quintin Hogg, 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, a well-known pacifist and philosopher. Both had been members of the Union, Hogg having served as its president in 1929. He had been called to the Bar in 1932 and was elected 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 later became 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. He was also a 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 been decisive for the outcome of the debate (see e.g. Smith, 1933). In the 1930s the pacifist cause was very prominent, not least due to the widely available internationalist education, mainly organised by the League of Nations Un-

ion, its purpose being 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, the "war 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 Joad's turn came to speak in favour of the motion, he mentioned that he had attended a similar debate in 1913 and that the opposing arguments about national honour were still 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 could only 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 over which the Union had no control, even though Hardie as president and others engaged in it tried to explain their side of the story. As Hardie wrote in a commentary published in *The Political Quarterly*, hardly anyone was interested in finding out the actual arguments in support of the motion (Hardie, 1933a: 269). The lack of interest in what had actually occurred, or why, gave rise to arguments that distorted the original discussion. In other words, what had started out as an attempt by Hardie to organise an interesting and well-attended Union debate, ended up as something completely different.

The Debate in the Press

It has been argued that the Union debate would probably have gone unnoticed except for a letter in the *Daily Telegraph* two days after (Ceadel, 1979: 405). The letter, published under the pseudonym "Sixty-Four", was, it was later discovered, written by a 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 for the ensuing public debate but also included the first arguments containing the rhetoric of representation. Reference to a "tradition" suggested 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 mockery and of being "foul opinion", thus portraying the intentions of the proposers of the motion as contemptuous and malevolent. In other words, with these allegations, the *ethos* of the Oxford Union was called into question.

The attack against the Union can be partly explained by its relationship with Oxford University. The two old English universities at Oxford and Cambridge were considered "nurseries for gentlemen, statesmen and administrators" (Ashby, 1958: 68). This perceived function of academic life was extended to the reputation of the Union Societies. As long as they created no controversy, they were appreciated for a perceived service rendered to the country and the British Empire.

According to the Union president, 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 published two days later he pointed out 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 at no point had it been intended as a "jibe on loyalty and patriotism", as the accusation claimed, 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 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 had himself been present at 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 deliberately 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 was "the new era of self-respecting citizens" who were "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" which 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).

There was also discussion on whether or not the resolution represented the "true" voice of university undergraduates. In the *Daily Mail*, for example, it was argued that even though the Union "has great traditions" and could boast of having provided early political 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 represents "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 made 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". Such 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 pretentious 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 granted to the *Manchester Guardian* less than a week after the Union debate, the 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 undergraduates. 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 using the 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 a use and value for the country. Its loyalty was called into question, which undermined its authority to make political claims in the first place. In other words, the Union was judged on the basis of whether its motion was representative of certain values and principles or not.

Arguments containing the rhetoric of debate, by contrast, accentuated the value of public discussion and the Union's right to conduct debates on controversial issues. In a letter by the Marquess of Donegal 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 in Oxford 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" (*The ISIS*, 15 February 1933). It was 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 were "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 context of debate.

It was rather difficult for the general public to make fair judgment of the contents of the original debate solely on the basis of 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 arguments presented during the debate. The problem was that the press reports of the debate were framed for political purposes other 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 the rhetoric of representation, with which the attention was directed at the *ethos* of the Union, making it easy to overlook the importance of the original debate. At the same time, the rhetoric of debate was used by those wishing to stress 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 was 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 that generation had for declarations of war previously made 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 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 itself became embroiled in a controversy, 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 few reports paid any attention at all to the conventions of the Union proceedings. The newspaper reports on 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 the rhetoric of representation than is related to a deliberative assembly. It was easier and more profitable for some of the newspapers to fuel 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 also a convenient rhetorical tool for those who did not wish to debate on the actual causes of anti-war sentiment. In this way, any chance of a more profound analysis of the underlying issue was actively denied and aspersions were cast on the reputation of the Union.

Endnotes

1 At Cambridge, a similar resolution had been passed a few years earlier. In March 1927 Arthur Ponsonby, at the time England's leading pacifist, had proposed "That lasting peace can only be secured by the people of England adopting an uncompromising attitude of pacifism" which was carried by 213 votes to 138. The resolution did not, however, attract any public attention.

2 Churchill's interpretation of the Oxford debate was no doubt affected by Randolph Churchill's, his son's, campaign against the Oxford resolution, which was inspired by the accusations launched in the published letter of "Sixty–Four". For details, see Ceadel, 1979: 406–13.

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

4 The UCL Debating Society was founded in 1856, but originally as the 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.

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