

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

GARY ALAN FINE, *Gifted Tongues: High School Debate and Adolescent Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, 328 p. Index, \$65 (US) hardcover, \$21.95 (US) paper.

As a graduate of an Indiana high school debate team, I was eager to review Gary Alan Fine's *Gifted Tongues: High School Debate and Adolescent Culture*. Unfortunately I report here my disappointment with it. The book is methodologically wanting, haphazardly organized, and is inscrutable to persons who have not participated in debate in a United States high school.

The book has nine chapters with an appendix that clarifies much of what precedes it. It would benefit the reader if Fine had presented a more extended overview of debate than he offers in the introduction, to teach the conspicuously strange argot that debaters use and that peppers much of the work. Instead of defining terms, giving a more thorough methodological summary, and moving from debate as a formal activity to competitions to the debaters' social world, Fine hops among these and to other topics in a manner that might be creative but left me confused. He also emphasises the less relevant in favour of what should be foundational for a sociological analysis. For example, he makes virtually no reference to debaters' family lives and too little to their socioeconomic backgrounds (despite the absurdly evident privilege that wealthier students enjoy), but he addresses far too much the various challenges facing coaches, including his example of a hypothetical coach's difficulty focussing on competitions when confronted with "an attractive eighteen-year-old with a tight sweater and a miniskirt" (151). Given what Fine ignores it is troubling that he includes unwholesome comment such as this.

Debating is a peculiar activity, one in which one set of participants argue for "plans" that support resolutions calling for changes in United States government policies (as with a recent resolution calling for a decrease in overcrowding in prisons). Their competitors argue against these plans with claims that, for example, prisons are not overcrowded, and reducing prison populations would result in harms as outrageous as mass starvation or nuclear war. Speakers do not stereotypically "orate," but rather attempt to overload the ability of competitors to respond. This means that debaters speak astonishingly quickly, in eight-minute speeches that can be stunning in their incomprehensibility. If debate is not an activity that can be adequately described, it is an activity that can be *transcribed*, and here is my second criticism of Fine: Some of his methodology misses the mark, and as such, the reader gathers little about how debate is a unique activity.

Fine conducted fieldwork at two Minneapolis-area high schools, attended debate tournaments, sent open-ended questionnaires for coaches and students to more- and less-esteemed programs around the United States, and references "personal communication" as well as many, many contributions to a debaters' web community. None of these sources captures the essence of debating *as an activity* as transcription of debate rounds might. The emphasis is on narrative of the social world surrounding debate. This environment does not appear very different from many others for adolescents. For example, Fine offers the note that debate teams "differ from other groups... because ... the teams have goals that are simultaneously task oriented and socioemotional" (150). Remarks like this as well as discussions of the place of dating relationships among debaters, the time crunch experienced by those especially devoted, the hierarchies that favour rich schools over poor ones, and the tendency for female debaters to have to overcome sexist hurdles all suggest that debate is like practically every other arena of human social activity. Fine manages to gloss over much of what is special about debate and even when he remarks about that specialness, his accounts, like the quote above, do nothing to make debating sound distinctive.

Fine cites mostly predictable sources concerning discourse analysis, adolescent development, social psychology, and much of his own, redoubtable work in the ethnography of childhood and adolescence. However, these references, while marking the book as scholarly, often come off as forced and tacked-on and in almost every case slow the text down palpably and even painfully. Perhaps the reason for the apparent superfluousness of sociological background is that so much of what Fine says rehashes old territory from other studies of high school life.

My last criticism of Fine is that the book is just not very interesting. It fails to emphasise the distinctiveness of debate. Debate resolutions decided by national organizing bodies and debated in every round for the entire season always and only concern United States government policies. A Canadian reader will have to be well acquainted with these policies to more fully take in the cultural implications of Fine's book.

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