

MEMO N°1 : SCIENCES PO, SCHOOL OF ARGUMENTATION

1. ARGUMENTATION IN A WORLD OF CRISIS

Our “postmodern” societies and educational systems are faced with a challenge, well summarized by two contemporary specialists of argumentation, Philippe Breton and Gilles Gauthier.

« Modern western societies, defined as democratic, expect from their citizens a high degree of requirement, since they are not only expected to understand most of the issues they are given to reflect on, including within the framework of political votes, but also to participate to the corresponding debates. Yet, these debates use massively the technics of argumentation. In this perspective, the situation nowadays is not far, in its foundation, from the one of ancient Greeks who invented in the same time democracy and argumentative rhetoric. But for the latter, both must go hand in hand. The almost general void, let alone certain precious exceptions, of a solid and structured teaching of argumentation, based upon a wide general culture and concerned with practical use, make our youngest citizens, citizens expected to take the plunge without any preliminary learning, and then reproached not being capable to swim. Teaching systematically argumentation would do more than add a new discipline to already heavy coursework. This would allow to decrease blatant inequality in this domain and bring more rationality in a world that perhaps lack of it »¹.

We measure thus the imbrication between democracy, education and argumentation. The latter can only prosper in a framework, which excludes violence (destruction of social links and the very conditions of dialogue) and dictatorship (unique solution vertically imposed), i.e within horizontal relationships between citizens within which **deliberation** primes.

This theoretical proximity between argumentation and democracy is historically verified: rhetoric was born in Sicily during the 5th century B.C. during “property trials” between owners who have been dispossessed by tyrants to the benefit of their armies’ veterans. This juridical and political origin was always part of rhetoric, including in the early rise of the “judicial” genre and of the “deliberative” (political) genre. From here, oratory art will conquer Athens and find there, like democracy, a first apogee, notably as a core teaching in education, with the sophists’ success. We know how Plato will then counter their influence and propose the exercise of “dialectic”, deemed to set out and determine the philosophical issues, notably in the political domain (*The Republic, The Laws*). Nonetheless, this dialectic (the word itself comes from the Greek “dialog”) was indeed a sophisticated argumentative genre aiming to get to agree a targeted audience (the very aristocratic followers of Socrates).

It will belong to Aristotle to give the first systematic theory of the genre, equally distant from the excess of sophistic and from the Platonist mistrust : “*The action of rhetoric is applied on questions of a nature to be discussed and which do not encompass technical solutions (Rhet, I,1) [...] Rhetoric is defined as the ability to see what is possibly persuasive in every given case [...] the proper nature of rhetoric, is to acknowledge what*

¹ P. Breton and G. Gauthier, *Histoire des théories de l’argumentation*, La Découverte, Paris, 2011, p.111-112.

is probable and what only has the appearance of probability.”(Rhet, I,2)

The rehabilitation of argumentation therefore takes all its meaning in the current period, in which the rise of intolerance expresses the denial of the “negotiation of the distance between individuals on a given issue” (Michel Meyer), and where the return of political violence at the core of democratic societies threatens the foundations of the *polis*. Far from rejecting argumentation to the “museum of antiquities” as coined by Engels, the rise of social media requires more than ever the necessity of its mastering. In the face of the perils of a situation in which invective and insult triumph in the favor of brave anonymity, the rules of moderation of web forums insist righteously on the necessity to provide arguments (*“either you provide arguments, or you shut up, or you leave”*²).

Not less dangerous than the return to fanaticism, skepticism and relativism, which are often preached under the cover of “postmodernity” blurs the distinction between “what is probable and what only has the appearance of probability” (Aristotle) in a general equivalence of opinions and personal preferences. Fake news or deliberate lies, flourish in a time of “post truth”: an expression that significantly entered the *Oxford dictionary* in 2016 as the “word of the year”.

Yet as Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, two of the founders of the “New rhetoric” advocated, both skeptical and fanatical positions must be rejected, since both of them *“misunderstand that argumentation aims at a choice between available possibilities; by offering and justifying their hierarchy it aims at making a decision rational. Fanaticism and skepticism deny this role of argumentation in our decisions. They both tend to make way to violence, in the absence of constraining reasoning...”*³.

Therefore, our time requires, maybe even more than others, a rich and elaborate argumentation.

2. FROM OBJECTIVES TO MEANS

In order to take up this challenge, which is both democratic and intellectual, Sciences Po seems to be the designated institution in the French academic landscape. On the one hand, because its birth at the very beginning of the IIIrd Republic corresponded with the rebirth and progressive rooting of liberal democracy in France of which the School became a pillar. It also evokes the will of its founders to rekindle a nation which collapsed in 1870. And, to their eyes, this breakdown was first and foremost of an intellectual nature, and the reaction should therefore be an educative one, with the creation of new “leaders of the people” (Taine). On the other hand, **“questions that have not a sole answer” (Aristotle) are indeed the one raised in the management of the polis:** be it the crucial issue of peace or war, a judicial decision, the choice of a fiscal policy or of a urban setting, argumentation always aims at collective decision-making. And the negotiation of distance between individuals on a given issue is indeed the ultimate objective of all technics of management of human societies, which are taught at Sciences Po. To this extent, it is the common denominator of our professional training, from Sciences Po School of Journalism to Sciences Po Law School, as well as continuous learning programs. It is at the center of the mission of the new Sciences Po School of Public Affairs in which the ways and means of a “common good” are must precisely be deduced from the confrontation of particular interests. To put it in other words, simultaneous objectives are pursued through the learning of argumentation, citizen, intellectual and pedagogical engagement, central to Sciences Po are at stake: the

² <http://ufo-scepticisme.forumactif.com/t1036-moderation-de-la-section>

³ C. Perelman et L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *Traité de l’argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique*, Editions de l’université de Bruxelles, 5^e édition, 1988, P.88. (Our translation)

refusal of intolerance, the seek of “common good”, the relevance of questioning; intellectual courage and rigor; transdisciplinary ambition; the fight for equality of chances; and finally a certain brand which is essential in the international academic competition.

Lastly, the techniques and imperatives of argumentation constitute the underlying basis of every pedagogical exercise in Sciences Po, including in the most theoretical contexts and in research training: **a course, a presentation, an essay (“dissertation”), a thesis, a scientific article, the “Grand Oral” and a Phd thesis, are, ultimately, exercises of argumentation.**

Contrary to a popular belief among foreign students, but also among the supporters of a certain “French exceptionalism”, there is no “Sciences Po methodology”, nor any “French” methodology of argumentation. Beyond peculiar rules of formal presentation, the expectations are the same everywhere. It is true in the Western world, because of a common Christian and humanist legacy which has long maintained the knowledge of antic rhetoric; but it is as well true far beyond this, on one hand because of cultural transfers (so goes the aristotelician rhetoric which was translated at a very early stage in the Muslim and Arabic world), and on the other hand because of the anthropological trend of these cognitive processes which are at play in argumentation and more generally in all communication. Other civilizations did not wait for the Western world to discover deduction or authority argument. Only and significantly enough, codes and cultural references differ.

The exercises proposed at Sciences Po easily find their *mutatis mutandis* equivalent in other educative systems: the “exposé” is an “oral presentation”, the “dissertation”, a *short essay*, the “mémoire”, a *paper*, the “plan”, is nothing else than the *outline* of the argument and the “problématique” is a universal requirement known elsewhere under the name of *research question*, etc.

Therefore, we are pleased to offer hereby some methodological advice for the preparation of the « Grand Oral » to our candidates who come from various academic and cultural backgrounds.

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