

MEMO N°4 : EXTENDING YOUR ARGUMENT

The main types of arguments are¹ :

1. SUBSTANTIAL ARGUMENTS

One must first of all note that the most frequent arguments in the public sphere are of an immediate empirical nature : daily experience, common knowledge or “people’s wisdom”, which is present in sayings and proverbs. Aristotle himself advised to “restrain to common knowledge when speaking to the multitude”. **These arguments must by no means be set aside or forgotten**, because they represent the common opinion (the Greek doxa) but should be critically examined with the help of social sciences.

The most frequent arguments at Sciences Po, and particularly at the « Grand Oral » are evidently drawn from the latter. Furthermore, **the teachings of natural sciences are increasingly important in argumentation**, given the interaction of ethical, political and natural issues (see bioethics, cognitive sciences, global warming, etc.)

The main types of arguments are :

1. Political/ideological
2. Historical
3. Juridical
4. Ethical
5. Economic
6. Sociological / psychological
7. Scientific (biology, physics, etc.)

Of course, certain types (“fields”) of arguments will be privileged according to the disciplines : economic and financial arguments in the Economics and Business Master, or legal in the Public Affairs Master. But the spirit of the “Grand Oral”, which concludes five years of theoretical and practical teaching, requires a diversified argumentative strategy using many fields of knowledge around one dominant field. It is the practical translation of the interdisciplinarity, which is at the core of Science Po’s educative project.

2. ARGUMENTS OF OPPORTUNITY (OFTEN SET ASIDE)

They are linked to the temporal dimension, the “timing”, an essential dimension of political action, as we know since Machiavelli.

¹ There are many classifications of arguments available. according to the various theoretical and disciplinary approaches of argumentation. We stay here in a ready-for-use pedagogical framework : ANY fact, as long as it is used in an argumentative sequence (i.e. supporting a CLAIM), is considered as an argument.

① Objective context

« *The deficit of public finances does not allow to implement an expansionist macro-economic policy* ».

Conversely : « *The low growth rate requires an active budgetary policy* ».

② Subjective context (the public opinion)

« *One cannot raise taxes anymore, given the feeling of excessive taxation* ».

Conversely : « *given the current economic hardship, the public opinion want the richer to take their due share* »

③ Scheduling of policies

Too early or too late ; taken in the wrong order, etc. : “*Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande took a great risk in raising taxes at a low point in the economic cycle*”. Conversely : « *the rise of taxes between 2011-2014 was a necessary prerequisite to rebalance the budget* ».

NB : The good use of the argument of authority. It can perfectly be invoked in the case in which the authority has a legal basis, making its opinion directly operative. Its word is an act in itself. In this case the authority argument becomes purely and simply a substantial argument. It is the case for instance of a decision of the Conseil d'Etat or the Conseil Constitutionnel, a regulation of the European Commission, a promulgated law, or a ratified treaty, etc.

When it is a simple opinion, be it from Aristotle, Tocqueville, Marx, or a Professor at Sciences Po, the prestige of their author is not a guarantee of its truth : the precious function of a quote is therefore to introduce, illustrate and formulate one's own argumentation. **References must therefore stimulate reflection and not replace it.**