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Commentary on Martha Cheng: “Undoing Common Ground: Argumentation in Self-Help Books”

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Martha Cheng has selected a most interesting and challenging object for argumentation analysis: self-help books. She concentrates on the persuasive aspect of this kind of writing, wondering how it can modify people's beliefs about themselves and induce them to improve their own life by modifying the misguided principles upon which they used to act. Undoubtedly this is, in Martha Cheng's own words, "a daunting persuasive task". There is much to be said about the very project of this persuasion enterprise, and I would like to dwell on it a little longer.

If we follow the tradition exemplified by Perelman's *New Rhetoric*, we can say that "The new rhetoric, like the old, seeks [...] to obtain an adherence which may be theoretical to start with, although it may eventually be manifested through a disposition to act" (Perelman 1979, p. 11). In other words, the shift from theoretical adherence to action is not an immediate, obvious one and it seems even more problematic when it concerns one's private behavior and ordinary way of life. How can a book, in the short time dedicated to its reading (and even if one cares to re-read it), accomplish a revolution in one's life by re-orienting dramatically his habits and his very behavior? Although this question is inherent to any persuasion enterprise, it is particularly problematic in this kind of extreme case verging on conversion.

Martha's contention is that the transformation in behavior is achieved by undermining doxa, namely, the set of beliefs and ready-made ideas that dominate public opinion in a given society at a given period of time. This is an important insight, and a major contribution to the understanding of self-help books' rhetoric. A change in attitude and behavior necessarily emerges from a change in values and beliefs. It follows that the persuasive enterprise mainly aims at doing away with the doxa in which the old, bad ways are grounded. However, the radical transformation of doxic opinions so deeply rooted that they become obvious, is highly problematic. The task assigned to the self-help book – undermining doxa – thus raises even more strongly the question of its feasibility. Is it possible to defeat a collective system of representations and beliefs, a common way of perceiving and interpreting the surrounding world? How does one proceed to achieve this ambitious goal? It is in the framework of these challenging and stimulating questions for argumentation research, that a thorough analysis of the use of doxa is called for.

Before examining how doxa can be undermined in the texts, or rather how Martha Cheng analyzes it, I would like to start with two points showing how doxa is exploited to make the persuasion enterprise of the self-help books possible. In other words, my contention is that a set of shared doxic beliefs and opinions is indispensable to lay out the

foundations of the genre as such. Self-help books can exist only insofar as there is a consensus on the ability of the individual to strip himself of mistaken, socially-acquired, ideas, and on the fact that for the most part, commonplaces mislead us and have to be denounced.

First of all, it is clear that this personal belief in the capacity of a book to change one's life without exterior intervention (like a therapist, or a social revolution), namely, by self-help, is the result of a widely circulated doxa about the vicious nature of socially acquired principles and habits, and about the necessity and possibility for the individual to go back to his own natural resources, impaired or forgotten in the process of socialization -- true love, his genuine self, etc. According to this view, everyone has it in himself, and everyone can make it himself: in this respect, the individual has full control over his destiny. Needless to say, this overall conception of society, nature and the self is neither a personal discovery, nor self-evidence: it is in itself a doxa. And clearly, it is this doxa that makes possible the self-help book. Previous adherence to it is what allows the author to address his readers and to gain their attention: there can be no fruitful interaction if the two parties do not share this worldview.

In other words, the selected genre – the self-help book – depends on a shared doxa not only to present a specific thesis, but also to establish the very possibility of its attempt at persuasion. Its audience is automatically selected on this basis, and if by chance somebody who strongly opposes these principles reads the book, there is practically no hope to convince him. Unlike other genres that are framed by institutional constraints, the genre of discourse we are dealing with here is strongly rooted in doxa, since its legitimacy and its authority derive solely from a common belief in the power of the individual to help himself toward happiness and fulfillment.

It assumes, however, that this search is a guided self-help. It is in this framework that ethos plays an essential role. The writer who addresses his audience has to choose a "scenography" – in French discourse analysis, a distribution of roles (Maingueneau 1998) – that suits the expected interaction and guarantees its success. He has to acquire a legitimacy that is not granted by external factors: he is not endowed with institutional authority and has to build a reliable image of self in his discourse. In the first place, he has to comfort the reader by alluding to the credit given to self-help books and reinforce his willingness to be persuaded by them. Even if it is the principle on which the communication has been established (the rule of the genre), his task is to support and strengthen it (you can take your life into your own hands and transform it into a better and happier one). He then needs to project an image of himself that will guarantee his reliability and his ability to guide the readers on their journey. In rhetorical terms, he has to construct his ethos – and we know how important the image the orator constructs of himself in his discourse is for Aristotle. In ancient rhetoric, ethos alongside logos and pathos is considered a major means of proof. Martha Cheng has shown that one author, Peck, plays the role of the expert while the other, McGraw, exerts his authority as a coach. In so doing, both embody the character of the guru called for in the guidance of self-help. This ethos is even more influential if the previous ethos of the writer, namely his public image and reputation, confirm the authority produced in the practice of discourse – as in the case of Philip McGraw described by Martha as a "celebrity self-help guru".

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The second point is that common beliefs on the negative influence of commonplaces pave way for the writer's enterprise at undoing doxa. In other words, to undo doxa and fight socially acquired notions, the author paradoxically has to rely on doxa. Let us first make this point clear. Drawing on several theoreticians, and among them on my own work, Martha reminds us that doxa, as opposed to episteme, can be positively or negatively valued. In the rhetorical perspective, it is the indispensable ingredient of argument building and persuasive communication. The orator has not only to start with accepted premises, he also has to build his argumentation on topoi considered either as underlying rational schemes (what is true for the more is also true for the less), or as widely circulated opinions and common beliefs – what modernity called commonplaces, although they were Aristotle's specific *topoi* (Amossy 2006). So doxa is at the heart of argumentation: there can be no persuasion enterprise without the reliance on a common stock of shared opinions and beliefs. But doxa, as a synonym of public opinion, has also been criticized in modern times as prejudice, ready-made and uncritical ideas. This is the conception that culminated in the essays of Roland Barthes who equated it with stupidity and denounced in it the hidden power of ideology (Barthes 1975). In this perspective, common ideas and uncritical beliefs are to be unveiled and undone: they are commonplaces in the modern, not in the rhetorical, sense of the word.

It is because this point of view is widely admitted, that self-help books can efficiently criticize doxa and the way of life it induces. To undo doxa is to follow the common opinion according to which doxa is to be scrutinized and mostly condemned, because it is rooted in passive acceptance of widely circulated so-called "truths". This is exactly what self-help books do: Martha shows that the reader is encouraged to challenge his old conceptions and understand that they are neither obvious nor natural – but rather the outcome of inherited misconceptions. The "scandal of doxa" seems here to be that the urge to criticize common opinions and beliefs derives itself from a doxic position: the modern belief in the vulnerability of tradition, in the duty to reject the banal views on which society thrives.

However, self-help books do not care for the scandal of doxa: they are intent not on fighting banality and prejudice as such, but on replacing a set of common opinions considered untrue by another set of opinions. They believe in revealing the truth and in forcefully promoting a point of view. To do so, they have to rely on a set of principles that are opposed to the ones they are attacking. The question here is not where these ideas spring from and to what extent they are new. It is to what degree they correspond to a better understanding of life and to what extent they are helpful. These books are guru-like and there can be no guru without a capacity to reveal an inner truth. So there is an attempt to replace a wrong set of doxic beliefs by another set of beliefs meant to become in turn the dominant doxa. The suspicion of banality cannot destabilize such an enterprise, because it is based on the need to unveil, once and for all, an essential truth. Self-help books, as I have already said, are not sensitive to the scandal of doxa. Needless to say, a critical mind prompt on denouncing it can by no means adhere to their message.

Given the fact that the communication is aimed at a change in beliefs and attitudes initially accepted by the reader, that the latter is aware of the tricky nature of common and banal opinions and ready to denounce them, that it looks for a truth embedded in the text - we still have to check how a self-help book can persuade its audience (1) that the specific principles it feeds on are indeed mistaken and (2) that the principles it sets forth

are the best and can have a decisive effect on one's life. This is where the argumentative strategies come forth. Martha Cheng suggests that doxa is undone by the use of explanatory logic, a notion borrowed from Fairclough's *Analyzing Discourse*, namely, an elaborate tracing of a causal relation between changes (95). No doubt, the use of causal relations can be an efficient argumentative tool. If we want, however, to explore argumentation in depth, it seems to me that tracing causal and concession relations cannot constitute in itself a thorough rhetorical analysis. Or, to put it differently: to pinpoint causal explanation does not suffice to account for the complexity of the texts' argumentative moves.

So I would suggest, in the scope of a broader work on the rhetoric of self-help books, to analyze the means through which doxic opinions and beliefs are undermined. Let me allow one more word on the notion of doxic opinion. Martha claims that personal beliefs can be considered doxic on the ground that self-deliberation, in Perelman's treatise, splits the self into two parts – it is both the orator and the audience. I would suggest that these beliefs are rather doxic insofar as they contain a social evaluation: to believe that I am fat is no doxa, but to believe that being fat is negative and prevents me from succeeding in social life is doxic. It is thus possible to analyze personal beliefs about oneself in terms of doxa, but it is important not to confuse merely individual beliefs with social ones.

As to argumentative moves meant to undermine doxa, Martha herself suggests that the author uses the means of definition to make his point. He redefines love, then proceeds to show how and why people mistake dependency for love. This can be viewed as a process of dissociation: as Van Rees shows it in her work, the arguer "splits up a notion considered by the audience to form a unitary concept into two new notions", one being central and true (love as an extension of oneself nurtures spiritual growth), the other apparent –love and falling in love as dependency. This is only an example of what is needed to continue the work: an in-depth analysis of the means by which doxa can be undone, with an examination of the doxic elements that are in turn mobilized to fight the so-called misconceptions.

To conclude: Martha Cheng's work on self-help book is extremely stimulating for argumentation theory in general, and for a study of the functioning of doxa in particular. I hope she will go on with her exploration of doxa's functions in the genre and carry it a few steps further.

[link to paper](#)

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