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Commentary on Luis Vega and Paula Olmos: “Deliberation: A Paradigm in the Arena of Public Argument”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Luis Vega and Paula Olmos provide a „logic of public discourse“ (p.3) that is essentially social. The paper undertakes a very complex endeavour to lay out the conditions (regulative as well as constitutive) for deliberation as plural agent argument. They do so by taking up the concept of deliberation in order to shed light on public argumentation, that is argumentation in the public and by the public. To me, the compelling point of the paper is the distinction it makes between individual (“monologic”) and interactional (“dialogic”) reasoning. By arguing against a monological perspective on argumentation in deliberation, they turn their attention to argument as the product or enterprise by a plural agent. I shall concentrate on two issues in my response: the role of deliberation in argumentation studies and the concept of public put to use.

2. DELIBERATION

The concept of deliberation, Vega and Olmos state in their opening sentences, has been absent from argumentation studies and has „never played a leading role. Not even today” (1). This finding, I have to admit, took me rather by surprise. The authors point out that deliberation features as one of the three genres Aristotle distinguished in his *Rhetoric*. But apart from its treatment by Aristotle, deliberation (next to the judicial genre) has been the pivot of the development of rhetoric in the Hellenistic and Roman tradition. And rhetoric was (at least at that time) the home of what one could call the beginning of argumentation studies. Hence, for the beginnings of rhetoric, the opposite argument to Vega’s and Olmos’ could be sustained: deliberation has played a leading role in argumentation studies. One could, however, argue, as Vega and Olmos do, that the notion of argument sustained in this rhetoric is that of a single speaker presenting arguments, hence a monologic notion.

But also for contemporary argumentation studies the statement of the absence of deliberation from argumentation studies seems at least too strong. Contemporary rhetoric has a strong focus on public argumentation and public discourse. The studies on the rhetoric of social movements might feature as an example. Also, Goodnight’s suggestion for a “New Rhetoric” (1993) as responsible public argument employs deliberation as a key concept. However, Vega and Olmos are interested in a different aspect of public

argumentation, they aim for a “*logic of public discourse*”. The authors define deliberation as “argumentative interaction in which information, options and preferences are weighed and handled in order to take a practical decision or resolution, in a responsible and reflective way” (1). This definition seems closely linked to Habermas’ theory of communicative action and argumentation (1981, 1983), which is also referred to in the paper. Habermas’ theory is closely interwoven with his theory of the public as well as his theory of democracy and has deliberation at its core. Also the regulative conditions named on p. 6 are very much in accordance with Habermas theory of the ideal speech situation. However, Vega and Olmos advance this notion of argumentation by stressing that deliberation has at its focus not the exchange of single arguments but a dialogic construction of a shared argument.

3. PUBLIC OR AUDIENCE?

Vega and Olmos put their interest in deliberation on a level with an interest in the “*logic of public discourse*”. The concept of public underlying this paper is central. At the same time, “public” is an uneasy concept. Warner (2001) names two predominant notions of “public”: that of *the public* and that of *a public* (p. 413). The former sense refers to a concept of public as a social totality – it includes all individuals in a certain (most of the time spatial) category like nation or state. The latter sense is close to the notion of audience. Once *a public* is addressed, this public is concrete, preformed and might also be in bodily co-presence, whereas *the public* is not an audience but a relation among strangers. Warner also gives an alternative, if you will third definition, describing a public as existing “by virtue of being addressed” (p. 413). In this sense it is discourse itself that organizes the public space by the attention to (p. 415) and the reflexive circulation of discourse (pp. 420-421).

Vega and Olmos seem to have different kinds of public in mind when they, for example, name as issues for public discourse “atmospheric pollution, sustainability or the Third World Debt” (p. 5), which seem to relate to the sense of *the public*. But at the same time they state that this kind of public discourse involves “an interpersonal confrontation of the different participants” with “real bodily presence” (p.5). The latter quote suggests to understand public as audience, that is *a public*, in the sense of a specific group of people. The uneasiness of the concept of the public becomes especially clear when the authors distinguish between negotiation and deliberation: I would take it that an important difference between both forms lies in the notion of public. Negotiation is a form of interaction. Hence it is a frame that always includes specific persons (maybe as representatives).

These diverse notions of “public” imply different notions of circulation of discourse (by different media or orally, temporally stretched or temporally compact) and of participation (participation by giving attention of by being bodily co-present with other interlocutors). They also ask for very different methodologies for empirical work. Where public argument in Warner’s sense or in the sense of a social totality would demand a focus on longer time-spans and could be understood as a process in time, argument in *a public* could be researched in short time frames and could rather be conceptualized as events. I would suggest that answering the question of what empirical research in this area could look like, would probably lead to a sharpened concept of public.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Vega and Olmos employ the concept of deliberation, that has a long tradition in rhetoric, for their take on public argumentation. Their notion of argumentation as a shared task offers the opportunity to view arguments exchanged and evaluated in public as flexible, that is as not-yet-products, is quite intriguing. It would be beneficial to formulate the questions posed by the authors also as empirical questions. An empirical twist, I suggest, would sharpen the concept.

[link to paper](#)

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