

# Policy Arguments and Coalition Building

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## **Abstract**

This article stems from a simple observation: policy analysts have paid little attention to the question of persuasion, communication and argumentation. It is generally taken for granted that political actors talk a lot. Yet despite the obviousness of this social practice few have questioned its modality and effectiveness. Indeed, as argued in this paper, little has been done since the argumentative turn advocated by Fischer and Forester in the early 1990's. We put forward that a second wind could be brought to the "argumentative turn" by focusing on what has curiously remained a blind spot: persuasion understood, in a good pragmatic fashion, as a social practice embedded in a specific context of interlocution.

# Introduction

This article stems from a simple observation: policy analysts have paid little attention to the question of persuasion, communication and argumentation. It is generally taken for granted that political actors talk a lot. Political leaders deploy a great deal of energy in order to convince their constituencies that they should re-elect them or support their policies. Besides, it is also generally taken for granted that politics is the realm of power, that power is best defined as an asymmetric social interaction (Dahl), and that actors rely on language in order to interact with one another. Finally, several authors have convincingly argued that discourse plays a great role in policy coordination: policy actors rely on discourse and natural language in order to find allies and build a common understanding (whose depth has to be assessed) of what “ought to be done” (Schmidt 2000). Yet despite the obviousness of this social practice few have questioned its modality and effectiveness. Indeed, as argued in this paper, little has been done since the argumentative turn advocated by Fischer and Forester in the early 1990’s (Fischer 1993). We put forward that a second wind could be brought to the “argumentative turn” by focusing on what has curiously remained a blind spot: persuasion understood, in a good pragmatic fashion, as a social practice embedded in a specific context of interlocution.

The first argumentative turn occurred in a context marked by the growing hegemony of rational choice theory, technocratic thinking and positivism. This led a first generation of scholars to engage in a heated debate at a very high, i.e. normative and epistemological, level. To quote Majone, there was no more urgent a task than “re-humanizing” policy analysis by bringing the “normative” back into the analysis (Majone 1989: 23). To be sure, this argumentative turn tackled the most vital problem of the time: overcoming the “technocratic tendencies” of the discipline (Fischer 1993: 21); it contributed to the challenging of the growing hegemony of modelization in policy analysis and to freeing a space for what J. C. Passeron calls a “*non-poperian space of argumentation*” (Passeron 2006: 25). As we will see, the argumentative turn also brought some answers to the questions raised in this article: do policy actors try to persuade each other? Do they (sometimes) manage to do so? And what does this tell us about policy processes?

However, to the best of our knowledge, little has been done in order to understand the weight of context on persuasion processes. Persuasion in policy-making has little to do, we argue, with the classical (habermasian) model of communication. Policy actors are not (ideal-

typical) policy analysts: they do not let themselves be persuaded by the best argument. Efficiency in policy arguments has to be found elsewhere, i. e. in the social situation of interlocution. This means that we have to change the focus point of the analysis: to move from the question “is this argument convincing?” to the question “what is at stake in this interaction?” To a certain extent, arguments and statements belong to the listener, as much as to the speaker (Ricoeur 1985). To put it metaphorically, arguments and statements behave like viruses (concerning the range of this metaphor, see (Colander and Coasts, 1989)). Incapable of existing alone, they depend upon a host to keep them alive and growing. And to avoid eradication (“vaccination”), they must also repeatedly mutate and evolve into new forms.

The paper is divided into three sections. After having shown that most policy analysts largely ignored the question of argumentation and persuasion, we will highlight in a second section that the partisans of the argumentative turn of the 1990 tackled this issue at an epistemological level. Finally, we will elaborate on the central point of this paper, namely the idea that policy arguments play a crucial role in coordination and that they should be studied in its specific context of interlocution.

# Why Most Policy Analysts Ignored the Question of Persuasion

As stated in the introduction, most policy analysts have shown little interest for the question of persuasion in policy processes. Although many authors have noted that actors talk, argue and try to persuade each other, few considered that this phenomenon deserved closer examination. This section aims at elaborating on this diagnosis and offering some possible explanations. We will proceed as follows: first, by reviewing the « classics » (the first generations of policy analysts) who, as we shall see, were more interested in identifying the external determinants of policy change than the subjective reasons expressed by the agents. Then, we will argue that the increase of rationalist approaches in the 1970's and 1980's reinforced this "objectivist prism". Finally, we will investigate why the authors who came the closest to this research agenda - the so called "social learning literature" - did not examine more carefully the question of argumentation and persuasion.

## *The Classics: An Objectivist Prism*

The first generations of policy analysts (to put it roughly, those who retired in the 1980's) did not pay much attention to the problem of argumentation. Although it is difficult to subsume such a rich corpus in a few paragraphs, one can observe some common trends. It emerges that they all placed scholarship in orbits alien to this research agenda: they strived to identify the objective (external) constraints on policy change.

Harold Lasswell played a key role in the development of policy analysis. In his famous "stages approach" he suggests distinguishing seven stages (which correspond to chronological sequences and/or anachronous logics at work in policy making). Interestingly enough for our study, three of these stages deal with the question of knowledge or idea diffusion (the "intelligence", the "promotional", and the "invocation" stages). Yet, Lasswell never mentions the question of argumentation or persuasion.

This is all the more striking if one considers that Lasswell proved himself aware of the importance of discursive dynamics in policy making. For instance, he notes that it is essential to study carefully "*all those who interact in a social context chosen for policy analysis*" (Lasswell, 1971). More surprisingly still, he highlights the importance of certain forms of

discourse which he calls "statements" and defines as follows: "[a statement is] *a complete unit of meaning: an assertion, command, question and so on. Functionally, the statement is primary and the individual symbol derivative: we classify statements by their function, symbol by the kinds of statements in which they characteristically occur*". However, when he switches from the individual to the group, Lasswell abandons the question of persuasion. This is probably due to how he conceives politics as the realm of "influence" (Lasswell 1936). Lasswell's interest for propaganda, which "consists of political symbols manipulated for the control of opinion", reveals his top-down conception of discursive logics. Argumentation and persuasion have no space in the policy processes he depicts.

In his studies on bounded rationality, Herbert Simon proposes to conceptualize decision-making as an imperfect attempt to provide a solution to a problem (Simon 1947). He points out that objective and full rationality is impossible and stresses that rationality is bounded by the actors' incomplete knowledge of the situation, their incapacity to calculate all the consequences of their actions, and their inability to rank preferences. In other words, Simon brings decision-making back to what it really is: something which takes place in an individual's mind.

It is worth noting that Simon pays due attention to social interactions. He mentions several times the importance of the relationship between the agent and the group in the organization. Moreover, his description claims to be particularly attentive to what behaviours "really are". This "sociological" stance could have led him to observe the role of discursive interactions in policy processes. This is, however, hardly the case. He only catches a glimpse of communicative practices when he stops observing the individual / group relationships and focuses on the inter-individual level. He then highlights that contrary to what one might think, organizations are not only the realm of authority (defined as a relationship between one person who gives orders and expects obedience, and another who suspends judgment and agrees to obey). He shows that most often individuals seek to persuade and convince each other. Simon's conception of persuasion seems nevertheless highly debatable. Indeed, he defines persuasion as "*the social transmission of a statement of fact, even in the absence of evidence*" and stresses that "*status or positions suffice in order to manage to persuade. No need for proof*". Hence, argumentations are not only evaluated according to their own merit; their strength also depends on the position of their authors.

The literature on agenda setting (Jones, Easton) is not much more explicit on the role of persuasion in policy processes. In David Easton's work, for example, policy change results from what he calls "inputs", i.e. individual demands that gain the support of a group before

being translated (Easton, 1965). His description of the policymaking process is comprehensive, paying due attention to the question of legitimacy and the role of beliefs. However, Easton never considers the very issue of persuasion. He does not explain, for instance, why some actors manage to impose their views while others do not.

Nor does this question lie at core of the “incremental approaches” whose main hypothesis is that major policy change barely occurs in the short-term. The state of a policy at T is normally explained by (or close to) its state at T-1 (Lindblom 1958; Lindblom 1958; Lindblom 1979; Lindblom Charles E. and Woodhouse J. Edward 1993 [1968]). According to Lindblom, this is due to what Simon calls “bounded rationality”: individuals have neither the cognitive abilities, nor the time, nor the energy to reinvent the world every morning. Hence, they would rather get ahead bit by bit, trying to learn little by little from their previous mistakes. Finally, Lindblom addresses the issue of persuasion in only one specific case, the so called "supporters" case, when he puts forward the notion of "mutual adjustment". He defines mutual adjustment as the influence of social interactions on individual choices and opposes this notion to the phenomenon of authoritative coordination. Unfortunately, Lindblom does not specify the concrete mechanism through which “*the various [and] somewhat autonomous participants mutually affect one another*». More generally speaking, studies on incrementalism do not directly apprehend the question of persuasion. Instead, they focus on the individual and the cognitive and institutional constraints he has to face.

A final group of studies must be mentioned: all approaches that investigate the role that networks and policy communities play in policy making (Heclo 1978; Wildavsky 1979). Network policy analysis departs from the observation that political systems are institutionally fragmented, and that policy change depends on the ability of actors to overcome those vertical barriers by establishing horizontal and informal relationships (networks). This focus on interpersonal relationships could have brought those policy analysts to investigate the role of communication and persuasion in network building. Yet again, this is hardly the case. This literature provides comprehensive descriptions of existing policy networks but remains surprisingly silent on how those networks are constituted. In most cases, the authors only observe that a given network exists and that its members share some common values, ideas or interests.

As above examples demonstrate, the first generations of policy analysts seem to have been inspired by an “objectivist prism”. Most of them highlight the role of objective constraints on policy change. Hence, arguments are often considered as a veil the researcher has to raise in order to discover the "real determinants" of social behaviors (Boudon 1995).

Whatever the justifications of the actors, the real reasons for their actions have to be found in their external world. Harold Lasswell depicts, for instance, the political sphere as the realm of influence (a question which he surprisingly disconnects from the issue of persuasion). Charles Lindblom stresses the importance of constraints which restrict possibilities of choice and shape the actors' preferences (Lindblom 1958). Aaron Wildavsky shows that public policies often impose their own logic on the actors (Wildavsky 1987). This focus on the external determinants of individual choices allows little space for the investigation of the actors' personal arguments and justifications. In the following paragraphs, we will try to assess how more recent schools of thought have apprehended the question of persuasion in policy processes.

### *Rational Choice: a Methodological Blind Spot*

The rise of rational choice theories and methodologies in Political science is certainly one of the most striking events of the last decades. In this section, we try to assess how this trend affected the development of the argumentation research agenda. We point out that this paradigm cannot fully tackle the issue of argumentation for methodological reasons.

Argumentation and communication are not central objects of the rationalist research design. This approach is interested in understanding the role of strategic thinking in the social world. To do so, rational choice theorists usually borrow postulates from microeconomics. For example, they hypothesise that actors have fixed preferences that are transitive (if I prefer A to B and B to C, then I also prefer A to C) and that actors always look for the best way to achieve their goals (some rationalist models add some hypotheses concerning the bounded rationality of the actors). For this reason, the character postulated by rational choice has often been depicted as "asocial", "acultural" and little inclined to engage in such a complex activity as communication (Vandenberghe 1997; Vandenberghe 1998).

Yet, it would be unfair to affirm that rational choice is completely allergic to the problematic of argumentation, persuasion and communication. Game theoreticians noticed early on that communication lies at the core of strategic interactions because you cannot interact with somebody if you do not share some mutual ground rules. Indeed, a game where A would play chess and B would play draughts seems as unlikely as impossible to modelize. This is why all rationalist models highlight that players have to communicate and agree upon the rules of the game before acting. They also claim that communication plays a key role

during the process itself. In the “cheap talk models”, players use language in order to settle a win-win agreement or to cheat each others. Hence, Schneider is probably right asserting that communication plays a role in rational coordination (Schneider 1994).

Is that all what communication and persuasion is about? In response to Schneider, Risse argued, after Habermas, that communication does not only imply that Ego uses language in order to obtain something from Alter (Habermas 1987; Risse 1995). It also means that he agrees (or is susceptible) to be personally affected by the process of communication. Hence, the discursive practices rationalists deal with are only a subcategory of communicative processes which he calls “rhetorical action” and defines as follows: “*actors use arguments to persuade or convince others that they should change their view of the world, their normative beliefs, their preferences and their identities (...) But actors engaging in rhetoric are not prepared to change their own beliefs or to be persuaded themselves by the better argument*” (Risse 2000: 8). Still, there might be many situations when political actors try to convince others without being prepared to change their own beliefs. But as Risse ironically puts it, this cannot be the alpha and omega of the social world because rhetorical action is possible only if one person, at least, is ready to let himself be persuaded.

The point was well taken and some rationalists took up the challenge of conceptualizing situations in which actors changed their beliefs after having interacted with others. Studies on the so called “rational learning models” developed in several directions. However, this research agenda has not reached outstanding results. The main reason for this failure lies in a constraint rationalists impose upon themselves: mathematical formalization. Language sciences and more precisely pragmatics have shown that meaning transmission is not simply a matter of sign exchange and decoding (which can be modeled). The meaning of a simple sentence like “the reds will be here tomorrow” can refer to Liverpool’s next game or to a communist threat. It cannot be only inferred from its “linguistic sense”, i.e. the grammatical decoding of the literal meaning of its words. Because it is mainly shaped by its context, meaning transmission resists any attempt of formalization. This is why communication is certainly one of the darkest blind spots of rational choice (Schneider and Aspinwall 2000: 26).

Is this sufficient to explain why the first “argumentative turn” only occurred in the 1990’s? Although rationalistic approaches tended dominant during the 1980’s, they did not rule out all alternative perspectives. In the following paragraphs, we will try to explain why constructivists waited so long before engaging in this research agenda.

## *The “Social Learning” Literature: an Ontological Defiance*

One can wonder why constructivists and sociologists waited so long before taking seriously the problem of argumentation in policy analysis. Contrary to rationalists, constructivists have at their disposal all the necessary methodological and conceptual tools needed to deal with this question: they believe in the role of “ideas” in policy processes (Braun and Busch 1999); they do not see mathematics as the only legitimate analytical tool in policy analysis (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993); they are aware of the importance of the context on social and political action (Haas 1991), etc. Our hypothesis, which might sound more speculative than the latter (about rational choice), can be formulated as follows: constructivists do not believe that policy actors can persuade each other; influenced by the postmodernist *Zeitgeist*, they assume that values systems and frames of interpretation are incommensurable so that people are better off not engaging in futile (and sometimes dangerous) debates on truth and justice. We will elaborate on this point taking the “social learning” literature as an example.

P. Sabatier and H. Jenkins-Smith’s Advocacy Coalition Framework provides an interesting first case (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith observe that policies are usually conceived and implemented by groups of individuals and organizations called “advocacy coalitions” that share a common “belief system”, i.e. similar “*value priorities, perceptions of important causal relationships, perceptions of world states (including the magnitude of the problem), perceptions of the efficacy of policy instruments, and so on.*” (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993: 17). One of the main arguments of this framework is that social learning can easily occur inside an advocacy coalition, but hardly ever “between” coalitions. The reason for this important limitation lies in the fact that actors do not readily abandon their “deep” or “core” beliefs: “*although policy-oriented learning is an important aspect of policy change and can often alter secondary aspects of a coalition's belief system, changes in the core aspects of a policy are usually the results of perturbations in non-cognitive factors*” (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993: 20). Changing one’s core or deep belief, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith write, would amount to a “religious conversion”. Hence, policy brokers (individuals who try to bridge the gaps between coalitions) do not waste their time trying to persuade others at this metaphysical level. Their “*concern is [simply] to find some reasonable compromise that will reduce intense conflict*”. Although they do not phrase it explicitly, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith assume that several incommensurable “justice

regimes” exist, and that any debate on ultimate values would immediately spark off what Max Weber beautifully called a “war of gods” (Weber 1992; Mesure and Renaut 1996).

A rapid review of the literature on social learning reveals that this is not an isolated assumption. Most authors go even further and state that even dialogues on facts (not only on values) are likely to be dialogues of the deaf. This is for instance explicit in Rein and Schön’s notion of frame: *“Policy controversies cannot be settled by recourse to facts alone, or indeed by recourse to evidence of any kind. Because they derive from conflicting frames, the same body of evidence can be used to support quite different policy positions”* (Rein and Schön 1993: 148). One finds similar ideas in Haas, Hall, Hajer and Surel. Whether they refer to notions such as “episteme” (Foucault) or “paradigm” (Kuhn 1972), these authors agree that the fragmentation of the ideological world strongly limits the possibilities of argumentation and persuasion. Argumentation and persuasion can only occur among members of a same “epistemic/paradigmatic community” (Haas 1991; Hall 1997; Surel 1997; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

It is worth noting that this scepticism concerning the actual possibility of social learning and persuasion is not specific to policy analysis. As stated by Bellenger, the question of argumentation and persuasion is one of the most surprising blind spots of social sciences (Bellenger 2005). Social scientists seem to have abandoned this issue to philosophers and normative thinkers. This emerges from the little interest they have shown so far for the works of authors like Perelman or Habermas (see below). It also emerges from their blindness about the normative issues raised by their assumptions (or observations) concerning the irremediable fragmentation of the ideological world. This blindness was pointed out by Ricoeur and, more recently, by Latour (Ricoeur 1995; Latour 2002). The existence of several incommensurable “regimes of justice” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) leaves only two options to humankind: shaky compromises and war. Contrary to what Max Weber seemed to assume, nothing proves those “wars of gods” will remain metaphorical.

To sum up, most policy analysts have blindspotted the question of the role of argumentation and persuasion in the policy process. One can notice, as a preliminary conclusion, that this is surprising if one considers the place that argumentation and persuasion plays in policy analysts’ professional practices. “Speaking truth to power » (Wildavsky 1979) (or to one’s readers) means trying to convince. In other words, policy analysts engage in persuasion and argumentation all the time. It is therefore surprising that they did not pay more attention to political actors who also try to do so.

## Why the “Argumentative Turn” Only Partly Tackled this Question

In the previous section, we saw that policy analysis remained largely impervious to the question of the role of argumentation and persuasion. However, a change occurred in the 1990’s when, following Habermas’s linguistic turn, several authors decided to shine a light on the role that language plays in social practices and the social sciences. In the following paragraphs, we will try to assess how these approaches conceptualized the role of argumentation in policy making. To do so, we will first review Majone’s seminal *Evidence, Argument and Persuasion in the Policy Process* (Majone 1989). Then, we will engage in a discussion with the authors who advocated an “argumentative turn” (Fischer 1993) in policy analysis and planning. Finally, we will close the section with a few remarks about the so called “narrative policy analysis” approach.

### *Evidence, Argument and Persuasion in the Policy Process (1989)*

In *Evidence, Argument and Persuasion in the Policy Process* (Majone 1989), Majone raises most of the questions that became salient in the following decades: What role do ideas play in policy processes? How can we understand evaluation in a pluralistic world? Are policy instruments interchangeable and value-free tools? etc. The answers he provides are not outdated. If one had to sum up the bringing-ins of this work, one could say that Majone laid the ground for the constructivist research design in policy analysis. From this point of view, his definition of public policy still seems topical: "*policy is an intellectual construct, an analytic category the contents of which must first be identified by the analyst. Hence, our understanding of a policy and its outcomes cannot be separated from the ideas, theories, and criteria by which the policy is analyzed and evaluated*" (Majone 1989: 147).

Yet, this seminal work also clearly shows the signs of its context of elaboration. At that time of writing, Majone was engaged in a controversy with his epistemological and theoretical enemies of the moment: neo-positivists and rational choice theorists. This polemical context is revealed in the very first pages of the book - "*We miss a great deal if we try to understand policy making solely in terms of power, influence and bargaining, to the exclusion of debate and argument*" (Majone 1989: 2) – and becomes a leitmotiv of the flow of

the book: "By restricting the role of reason to discovering appropriate means to given ends, instrumental rationality relegates values, criteria, judgment, and opinions to the domain of the irrational or the purely subjective" (Majone 1989: 23). It is important to highlight this point if one wants to understand how Majone conceptualizes argumentation.

Majone primarily sees argumentation as an epistemological and methodological practice: "The purpose of this book is to discover the main implications of a dialectic conception of policy analysis. In it I attempt to develop a single idea: the notion that in a system of government by discussion, analysis - even professional analysis - has less to do with formal techniques of problem solving than with the process of argument" (Majone 1989: 7). Although he does not make this relation explicit, Majone takes up Jean-Claude Passeron's attempt to create a "non-popperian space of argumentation" (Passeron 2006). He wants to oppose the epistemological imperialism of the "rats" (rational choice theorists) and rehabilitate "natural reasoning" (instead of mathematical reasoning) as an "unavoidable tool" if one wants to account for the specific historical contextualization of all social phenomena (Passeron 2006: 18).

Does this mean that Majone did not investigate how policy actors use natural language in order to persuade one another? He certainly took a step in this direction by laying the ground for a pragmatic theory of persuasion. On page 34, for instance, he states that a speaker cannot rely exclusively on the linguistic apparatus (a finite number of signifiers + several combinatory rules) in order to communicate. Meaning is shaped by the context, and the same must be true for persuasion. This is why Majone proposes, contrary to Descartes and modern cartesianism, to dissociate the question of argumentation from the question of truth, and restore notions such as "plausibility", "likelihood", and "verisimilitude" their lost dignity. As we will see when we will elaborate on Perelman, this has serious and interesting consequences for the study of argumentation. Yet, this line of thought only appears on the fringes of the book. Majone did not go further in the sociological study of this phenomenon.

### *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning (1993)*

In many aspects, *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* (Fischer 1993) appears like the American response and complement to Majone's proposals. *The Argumentative Turn* is an attempt to counter the methodological and epistemological domination of the "technocratic" tendencies of the discipline. In their introduction to this

edited volume, Fischer and Forester argue, like Majone (and Passeron), that one should understand policy analysis as a “practical process of argumentation”. They contest the neo-positivistic argument according to which formalization and mathematics would be the alpha and the omega of scientific practices. They therefore propose to restore “practical reasoning” (Dryzek 1993: 314) and argumentation their epistemological dignity.

*The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* also systematizes a line of thought which was only fragmentary in Majone’s book, namely the idea that mainstream policy analysis is highly anti-democratic. To quote Fischer: “*The need to bring citizens back into the policy-making process is widely recognized as one of the primary challenges to both democratic theory and practice*” (Fischer 1993: 36). Conceiving policy analysis as an argumentative practice presents the advantage of bringing into light the values and hidden axiomatic assumptions that underpin any scientific enterprise. This is necessary if one wants to give the possibility to readers and citizens to “*examine closely the communicative and rhetorical strategies that planners and analysts use to direct attention to the problem and options they are assessing*”. In a chapter prefiguring his famous book *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond* (Dryzek 2000), John Dryzek states that “*a vindication of the argumentative turn in policy and planning therefore requires its radicalization in the form of relentless efforts on the part of the analyst to counter these agents of distortion*” (Dryzek 1993: 28). In the chapter entitled “Discourse and Policy Think Tank”, Frank Fischer brings to light one of these agents of distortion, namely American conservative think tanks whose technocratic discourse became hegemonic in the 1980’s: “*It has been estimated, for example, that some two-thirds of the policy ideas advanced by the staff at the Heritage foundation were adopted by the Reagan administration in its first term*” (Fischer 1993: 31). As one of Fischer’s more recent books shows, this democratic concern is still topical (Fischer 2007).

By situating the question of argumentation at this epistemological or theoretical (in the sense of “political theory”) level, argumentative policy analysis does not directly tackle the questions we raised in the introduction: do policy actors try to persuade each other? Do they (sometimes) manage to do so? And what does this tell us on policy processes? To quote Herbert Gottweis: “*Argumentative policy analysis takes a different approach. In its view, language is not only an instrument of communication, it is also constitutive of policy (Benveniste, 1972), and this has serious implications for policy analysis*” (Gottweis 2006: 464). In the end, perhaps those who came closest to this question are narrative policy analysts, i.e. authors who conceive policies as stories.

## *Narrative Policy Analysis (1994)*

As its label suggests, narrative policy analysis (Roe 1994) departs from the idea that policies take the form of narratives, i.e. "*stories [which] have a beginning, a middle, and occasionally even a moral conclusion. In narrative, events are presented in a coherent plot that suggests one course of action instead of another*" (Radaelli 1999: 99). What does this imply for the study of persuasion and argumentation?

Although narrative policy analysts hardly evoke it, the question "how do policy actors try to persuade each other?" does lie at core of the approach. Indeed, its main argument is that policy actors use this mode of expression because stories/narratives have two interesting characteristics. First, they "speak to people". As Kaplan puts it, "*Stories embrace the circularity of principled human thought and serve as powerful engines for moving us towards conclusions*" (Kaplan 1993: 182). More precisely, they moralize action by predicting the worse ("doomsdays scenarios", as Radaelli puts) if one does not follow a specific course of action. Second, and this is more specific to policy analysis, they would reduce uncertainties. According to this approach, a social agent who is able to state an argument in a narrative way is likely to convince others to follow it. This idea was comprehensively phrased by E. Roe in his seminal work: "*stories (called policy narratives in the book) often resist change or modification even in the presence of contradicting empirical data, because they continue to underwrite and stabilize the assumptions for decision making in the face of high uncertainty, complexity, and polarization*" (Roe 1994: 2).

In his study on European fiscal policy, for instance, C. Radaelli shows that the European Commission managed to convince member states to let it develop a European fiscal policy by formulating a policy narrative which "played" with these two persuasion factors. Radaelli argues that no scientific certainty had been reached concerning the effects of independent fiscal policies: "Economic literature, for example, posits that capital does not move freely from one country to another because of asymmetric information and uncertainty" (Radaelli 1999: 105). Yet, the policy narrative "*translated [scientific uncertainty] into political certainty by the use of dominant stories in the policy process*" (Radaelli 1999: 106). The policy narrative prophesied doom, i.e. general unemployment, if the member states did not try to harmonize their fiscal policies.

Yet, as this example suggests, narrative policy analysts cannot claim that they capture all kinds of persuasion processes. They successfully describe how clever policy entrepreneurs

manage to persuade other actors. This is an important contribution to the field: as everybody knows, policy-making is not a democratic forum where all citizens are invited to express their preferences. In other words, persuasion capacities are not equally shared, and it might be often realistic to hypothesize that some actors (policy entrepreneurs) talk, while others (decision makers and citizens) content themselves to listen. However, this unilateral model of communication is not completely satisfying. The possibility of an interactive communication should remain, at least at the theoretical level.

Besides, one can wonder if partisans of this approach do not overestimate the persuasion power of narratives. Nobody doubts that doomsday scenarios can contribute to convince an audience that it should follow one course of action instead of another. The point according to which policy narratives would reduce uncertainties (and therefore capture the attention of policy makers) also seems well taken. However, one should not dismiss other forms of argumentation as insignificant. As we will show in the next section, policy actors do not always tell each other stories when they want to persuade each other.

This review of the literature reveals that the role of discourse and natural language in policy analysis stopped being a blind spot in the early 1990's. After the publication by G. Majone of his seminal work (Majone 1989), several policy analysts convincingly engaged themselves into this research design. However, most of them did so through a very epistemological debate. Hence, this literature only brought fragmentary answers to the empirical questions raised in the introduction: do policy actors try to persuade each other? Do they (sometimes) manage to do so? And what does this tell us on policy processes? In the next section, we argue that one can engage more comprehensively in this research agenda by sociologizing the study of argumentation in policy-making.

# Argumentation as a Cement in Order to Build a Policy Coalition

How can we develop a better understanding of the role of argumentation in policy-making? This can be done, we argue, if one conceives argumentation as an interaction embedded in a specific context of interlocution. It then appears that this social practice lies at the core of a key mechanism of policy-making: coalition building. Depending whether they share a common understanding of the problem or not, policy actors who want to find allies can either engage in an unequivocal or an ambiguous process of argumentation. This section is divided into three parts. First, we elaborate on the theoretical background of the argument: a “pragma-rhetoric” theory of argumentation (Korta 2002). Then, we investigate how policy actors argue when they want to rally the support of actors who share a common understanding of what is at stake. Finally, we turn to another scenario: how policy actors rely on the ambiguity of natural languages in order to build more heterogeneous coalitions.

## *Looking for a “Pragma-Rhetoric” Theory of Argumentation*

Partisans of the argumentative turn have remained curiously silent on the pragmatic argument (the adjective “pragmatic” refers here to pragmatics, the subfield of linguistics) according to which meaning is always shaped by its context. As Korta, Dascal and Gross put it, one can find such a line of thought in Perelman’s rhetoric (Dascal and Gross 1999; Korta 2002) and in the works of other authors who pointed out the role that ambiguity plays in communication.

Perelman proposes to understand argumentation in opposition to demonstration. He sees demonstration as the only mode of reasoning which is truth oriented. This assumption leads him to limit the range of demonstration to pure, evident and logical reasoning, in other words to mathematics. Perelman stresses that a demonstration is always right (or wrong), whatever the context. This does not hold true for another mode of reasoning: argumentation. Contrary to its close cousin, argumentation can not situate itself within the realm of truth. It has (only) to do with “likelihood” or “plausibility”. Does this mean that we should see argumentation as a second class mode of reasoning? Perelman proposes to break with this post-Cartesian contempt for likelihood - “I will hold wrong everything which is only likely”?

- and come back to an Aristotelian conception of argumentation. In doing so, he breaks with the modern opposition between rationality (the realm of incontestable evidence and logic) and irrationality (the realm of sentiment perceptions and passions).

Perelman's pragmatic stance clearly emerges from the attention he pays to the role of social interaction in argumentation. "*Prior to argumentation is a dual representation of reality where two parties, at least, participate in the deliberation.*" As Perelman's commentaries on Lewis Carroll's book *Alice in Wonderland* show, argumentation starts with the recognition of the existence of the listener and of the state of interlocution. This pragmatic view on argumentation reminds us of Olson's remarks concerning the free-will of people participating in a group (Olson 1978). The salient point of a pragmatic theory of argumentation should not be persuasion – one can even engage in an argumentation without trying to convince or, vice versa, accepting to let oneself be persuaded – but mutual recognition (Honneth 1992).

This is why the notion of "audience" is so important in Perelman's work. He stresses that an argument is always directed to a specific audience. The latter might be large. It does not have to come down to the listener. It may entail "*all people the speaker wants to influence*". Perelman stresses, however, that a "universal audience" seems unlikely in practice. The notion of "universal audience" only makes sense if one conceptualizes it as the sum of specific individual hearers. The reason for this is that arguments have no sense in themselves. Their meaning is shaped by the social relationship constituted by the speaker and his audience. As we will see in the next sub-sections, this stress on the role of the audience has interesting consequences for the study of argumentation in policy analysis.

Perelman also provides a stimulating response to skeptics who point out that most arguments are ex post justifications. Against this objection, Perelman states that we have no good reason to distinguish the process of belief formation and the process of argumentation. A speaker's ideas mature while he formulates his arguments; people construct and modify their thought during the process of argumentation.

As one can see, Perelman advocates a sociologization of argumentation theories. To sum up, he states that an argument does not exist out of context, that it is peculiar to a speaker, and always directed to a specific audience. By breaking with the notion of absolute rationality, Perelman also paved the way for other pragmatic approaches which theorized the role of ambiguity in natural language and argumentation.

As pointed out by Perelman: meaning is always shaped by its context. What ever the richness of their lexicons, languages remain so ambiguous that speakers can never only rely

upon the linguistic tools (a finite number of signifiers and combinatory rules) in order to communicate. As stated by Grignon, the “*ambiguity and flexibility of natural language*” (Grignon 2001: 31) is puzzling: languages have tons of unutilized morphemes at their disposal. Would not it be more efficient to build a language without homonyms and polysemes? Why do all languages preserve a space for ambiguity and interpretation?

The first answer seems evident. In most cases (contexts), a sentence like “I have already had dinner” is sufficient in order to mean “I ate a short time ago. I am not hungry. I therefore do not plan to eat again tonight”. In this case, the listener infers from the context that the speaker is not a 3 hour-old baby who would mean: “it is not the first time I eat something”. In other words, it is often economical to let the context enlighten meaning.

However, this explanation does not account for the whole phenomenon. After all, objectivity and precision can be very useful in many social situations (a scientific communication, for instance). This is why P. Ricoeur (among others) has insisted on another explanation: ambiguity is necessary in order to keep a language alive, i. e. in order to leave the possibility open for semantic innovation. In his book *La métaphore vive* (Ricoeur 1997), Ricoeur argues that metaphors are the main locus of semantic innovation. Metaphors create new meaning by provoking what Ricoeur calls (metaphorically!) a “semantic crush”. A semantic crush occurs when a sentence, or a word association, cannot be understood if one relies solely on the literal sense of its words. When that happens, the reader/listener has to go through all secondary levels of signification. “Meaning sparkling” (another metaphor!) happens when the reader has found the signifieds whose combination eases the former semantic crush (in the case of Ricoeur’s own quote, the meaning of “meaning sparkling” is revealed by a secondary sense of the word sparkling: triggering, activating, initiating, etc.).

Ambiguity of natural languages may also fulfill a third, final and more vital function: they allow people to live together. This idea was beautifully phrased by Beaudelaire in his poem “Mon coeur mis à nu”: « *The world runs on misunderstanding. Misunderstanding alone allows people to get on together. If, by any misfortune, we could understand each other, we would never get on together*”<sup>1</sup>. Philosophers and social scientists have shown the accuracy of this remark in the modern world. The existence of several types of discourses (Lyotard 2001) as well as the fragmentation of the axiomatic world (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Perelman

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<sup>1</sup> “Le monde ne marche que par le malentendu. C'est par le malentendu que tout le monde s'accorde. Car si, par malheur, on se comprenait, on ne pourrait jamais s'accorder”

1997 (1977); Latour 2002) render hopeless any attempt of constituting a universal regime of truth or justice.

This is why we can radicalize Perelman's point: argumentation has nothing to do with the question of truth. As with any social practice, argumentation becomes dynamic when people start interacting. To pursue the metaphor we formulated in the introduction, arguments and statements behave like viruses. They depend upon a host to keep them alive and growing. And when they travel from one individual to another, they mutate and evolve into new forms.

### *Argumentation Among Actors Who Share a Common Understanding of the Problem*

This pragmatic approach of argumentation is useful in order to understand how "discourse coalitions" emerge. Ideal-typically, the process starts when a policy entrepreneur identifies the actors he wants to convince. The choice of the "audience" (to speak like Perelman) is always specific and crucial. Policy entrepreneurs do not want to persuade an abstract universal audience. They try to identify who has power and who does not. By writing that, we do not mean that they manage to target the right audience. Social actors have limited cognitive resources. Observations suggest that most of the time policy entrepreneurs target institutional actors or people who are officially in charge. In the case of the construction of tramway, for instance, all actors tried to convince the mayor, even if the latter had actually little power on this issue.

The question of power emerges when discussions start. The policy entrepreneur then tries to overcome his hierarchical inferior by trying to convince his interlocutor of the plausibility of his argument. As stated above, each situation is specific. However, two common "argumentative devices" (to speak like Perelman) are worth being mentioned.

A first widespread persuasion strategy consists in linking the desired solution to a problem the decision-maker is interested in. As stated by Kingdon (Kingdon 1984) and, before him, by Cohen, March and Olsen (Cohen, March et al. 1972), solutions and problems are constituted in different spaces; a policy emerges only if a policy entrepreneur manages to bridge the gap between these two logics. Kingdon remained surprisingly silent on the concrete modalities of this linkage. Our hypothesis is that the linkage between a problem and its solution takes the form of an argument. Delori has shown, for instance, that the creation of the Franco-German Youth Office (a mass Franco-German youth meeting program instituted by de

Gaulle and Adenauer in 1963) owes a lot to the rhetorical action of several policy entrepreneurs who successfully argued that this solution – organizing the meeting of whole generations of French and German young people – would best answer the problems of the German and French governments: how to counter the influence of the communists on France's youth, and how to encourage German young people to learn the French language? (Delori 2009).

A second frequent persuasion strategy consists in linking the desired solution to a new policy category. Policy instruments do not belong to one category or another. As stated by Lascoumes after Latour, a public policy is nothing but a “regime of enunciation” (Lascoumes 1994; Latour 2002). Instruments travel from one policy category to another following the taxonomic choices of the actors. Hence, a good strategy may consist in moving one instrument from a waning policy category to a more dynamic one. Re-labeling policy instruments may also prove useful if one wants to “interest” (Callon 1986) or, on the contrary, by-pass important actors. In the case of urgent housing for instance, a debate emerged whether this instrument was part of a broader housing policy or social policy. This was not a purely semantic debate. At stake was a conflict between the housing ministry and the social affairs ministry.

In the end, one can observe that arguments do not escape the process unharmed. As stated by the Actor Network Theory (also called “sociology of translation”), meaning evolves throughout the process of intersement (Callon 1986). In the aforementioned case of the tramway, the arguments of the main policy entrepreneurs did not only spread out; they evolved every time they were tested.

These empirical elements suggest that argumentation plays a key role in coalition building. Policy entrepreneurs can rely on contextualized arguments in order to convince policy makers or citizens of the desirability of their solution. Of course, the validity and range of this observation must immediately be circumscribed. Powerful forces oppose the “logics of communication”. Social actors may prove immune to persuasion when strong material forces are at stake. Moreover, as stated by the social learning literature (see above), persuasion seems only likely to occur if people “speak the same language”, i.e. if they share the same “value constellation” (Weber 1924), “cité” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) or “world” (Latour 2002). Does this mean that actors with different material interests and/or different “belief systems” can not talk to each other and coordinate their actions? We argue in the next subsection that coalition builders have another linguistic resource at their disposal: they can

rely on the “ambiguity and flexibility of natural language” (Grignon 2001: 31) in order to “phrase” a solution convenient to everybody.

### *Argumentation Among Actors Who Do Not Share a Common Understanding of the Problem*

The role of ambiguity in policy making has been recently pointed out by Bruno Palier in his study of the reform of the pension system in France (Palier 2003). What was at stake in this reform was the introduction of a dose of capitalization in the French repartition pension system. This was a clear and concrete goal. As a matter of fact, the first partisans of the reform (banks and unions of employers) did not hide their objection at first: they wanted the government to authorize the creation of “French hedge funds” in reference to the United States. As this proposal encountered a strong opposition, these first partisans of the reform rephrased their objectives in a much more equivocal way. The reform did not aim at authorizing the famous “hedge funds” but something nobody had heard about before: “saving pension funds” (“fonds épargne retraite”). B. Palier shows that this ambiguous watchword allowed the coordination of at least three contradictory interests. Banks and employers thought that this instrument would encourage the development of financial savings. The main political parties were won over by argument that such a “saving pension funds” would help French capitalism to compete with its American counterpart. Some trade unions eventually joined the partisans of the reform after having understood that this instrument would increase firm democracy through employees’ interestment. Thus, “*fuzziness and vagueness about the sense of the initiative*” did allow “*divergent and even contradictory interests to aggregate*” (Palier 2003: 18).

B. Palier is not optimistic about the life expectancy of “ambiguous consensuses”. He believes that actors can only be satisfied with ambiguity during the first stages of policy-making. Contradictions are destined to break out when “ambiguous consensuses” are put to the test of policy implementation. Banks, associations of employers, and politicians understood that corporatist forces impeded the deployment of the reform on a large scale; trade unions realized that the reform eventually served the interests of the “great capital”, etc. Translated in terms of pragmatic sociology (B. Palier’s theoretical background): the focus point of the debate moves from the “technical” (the policy instrument) to the “political” (the

policy objectives), and actors realize that they do not live in the same “cité” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991).

B. Palier’s framework foresees two possible levels of agreement or disagreement: the (often consensual) level of instrumentation, and the (often controversial) level of political objectives. This division of “belief systems” into two categories proved to be pertinent in the case the author examined. This is, however, only a heuristic categorization. As Latour puts it, technology (and morality) is nothing but a “regime of enunciation”: *“What can we do to give the technology the dignity equal to that of morality so that we may establish between them a relation which would no longer be that of the tool to the intention? First of all, by redefining the technical, which I will here consider to be an adjective and not a substantive.”* (Latour 2002: 248). Actors can always re-qualify the “technical” and move up to a more general principle in order to justify their actions (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991).

In his recent study on France’s cultural policy in Germany, Delori has shown that actors solidified their ambiguous coordination by enunciating a more general justice principle (Delori 2008). France implemented a surprisingly important cultural policy in Germany in the immediate aftermath of the war (1945-1949). The French reformed the German school system of the regions under their administration in a democratic way. They reconstructed the university of Mainz, organized several high end cultural exhibitions such as the traveling exhibition “Goethe et la France”, subsidized hundreds of youth meetings, etc. At least two coalitions of actors participated to the formulation and implementation of France’s cultural policy in Germany in. As shown by Henke, a first group saw this policy as a “Zuckerbrot” (a sweet bread) which would help appeasing the resentment caused by the harshest aspects of the occupation policy (the dismantling of the economy, the annexing of border territories, etc.) (Henke 1982). The second group of actors had very different motivations: they thought that this policy would pave the way for what the Swiss theologian K. Barth had already called a “policy of friendship” (Barth 1945). Although they had very different political interests, both coalitions agreed that it was France’s moral duty not to treat the Germans as they treated the French (during the German occupation of France in 1940-1944). France was a “humanity soldier” (Chuter 1996); it was to pick up the thread of its old civilizing mission.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed at understanding if policy actors try to persuade each other, if they (sometimes) manage to do so, and if this social practice has implications on policy processes. In the first two sections, we showed that little has been done in order to answer these questions since the argumentative turn advocated by Fischer and Forester in the early 1990's (Fischer 1993). In the last section, we argued that a second wind could be brought to the "argumentative turn" by conceiving persuasion, in a good pragmatic fashion, as a social practice embedded in a specific context of interlocution.

This led us to point out, after V. Schmidt, that argumentation lies at the core of a central activity of policy making: the search for allies or "interest aggregation". Relying on Perelman's pragmatic theory of rhetoric, we showed that policy actors rely on two different kinds of "coordinative discourses" when they want to rally support, depending on the degree of ideological proximity. When there exists a common understanding of the problem, actors often let themselves be persuaded by the argument (we highlight the singular) which emerges from the situation of interlocution. This, however, is unlikely to happen if they do not share a common understanding of the problem. When this is the case, policy actors willing to coordinate their actions are more likely to rely on the ambiguity and flexibility of natural language in order to build an ambiguous consensus or compromise (Palier 2003).

In conclusion, we would like to highlight that studying policy-making through the lens of the actors' argumentation offers another advantage: it helps to go deeper into the crucial question of the link between language and power. Most works that followed the linguistic turn encountered difficulties in articulating both phenomena. Some, like Habermas, comprehensively studied the question of language but blindspotted the problem of power by hypothesizing an "ideal speech situation" where participants have an equal opportunity to participate and where social statutes are abolished. Symmetrically, most specialists of power did not try to take into account its relation to language. The few authors (Bourdieu, Foucault) who tried to articulate both notions failed to enlighten how power dynamics are mediated by social actors. They also failed to highlight that power is not a resource or an attribute but a dynamic generated by social interaction.

Conceptualizing argumentation in its specific context of interlocution allows us to account for the role of language in power dynamics. A power dynamic emerges when a speaker proves able to convince his audience of the plausibility of an argument. This

conception of argumentation is also coherent with a modern conception of power. The force of an argument is always contingent upon the social situation. It is even reversible: while talking, a speaker puts his arguments to test. He therefore engages in a costly process which can lead him to change his views.

To sum up, conceptualizing argumentation as a social practice allows us to introduce the question of power at the heart of the linguistic turn. This way had been paved by Fischer, Forester and the partisans of the first « argumentative turn ». One can go further by considering argumentation as an instrument for policy actors more than an instrument for the analyst. We should follow the example of Garfinkel when he hypothesized that laymen are potential sociologists. Social actors are as able as policy analysts: they can influence each other through the process of argumentation.

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