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Place as Argument

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Abstract
Inspired by studies about the history and anthropology of knowledge, this text addresses the question of how places are constitutive of the process of argumentation. The argument from place (*argumentum a loco*) that is presented in classical rhetoric handbooks, particularly in Quintilian, is used as a model of analysis in order to emphasise the situated character of argumentative processes. Both the attention to the place from which an argument is uttered and to the place to which the argument refers are useful guides that help us understand the phenomenon of relevance and keep expanding the contextual and situated approach to argumentation theory and rhetoric.

Keywords *Argumentum a loco* · Common places · Place · Quintilian

1 Contextual Approaches to the Study of Knowledge

The processes of production, circulation, reception and adaptation of knowledge entail argumentative exchanges. These exchanges can be done by means of debates, treatises, visualisations of information, long- and short-range correspondences, conversations and presentations before communities. These bodily, visual, oral or written practices involve an argumentative exercise via the utterance, evaluation, acceptance or rejection of statements and suppositions. To that extent, both the history and philosophy of sciences, and argumentation studies and rhetoric, are related disciplinary fields that help us understand and describe contexts and interaction modes with reasonings.[1]

Along the lines of the geographical and anthropological studies about the places and contexts of scientific knowledge, in this text I offer an experimental reflection

[1] For a comprehensive account of rhetoric and argumentation in scientific practices, see Richard W. Serjeantson, "Proof and Persuasion," in *The Cambridge History of Science*, edited by Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), pp. 132–176.

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on the relevance of the scales and locations in which argumentation unfolds. When I talk about the place or the site I refer both to the *referred place* in the argumentation and to the *site* where the argumentation *takes place*.[2] Two questions will lead me: how can a place be the source of an argument? and, more radically, how can a place come to be a constitutive part of an argument?

2 Places and Contexts in the History of Science

During the twentieth century, the history and philosophy of science became more and more interested in the agency of social contexts in the production of knowledge.[3] In that sense, the processes and the contents of knowledge could be understood as embedded in long-lasting traditions that change, adapt and flow in institutions and social media where deference and authority, relationships of belonging and exclusion, are as relevant as their coherence and consistency against processes of observation, experimentation and logical correction. Recently, the social and historical comprehension of knowledge was enriched by studies that, from a pragmatic approach, have revealed the importance of working materials and tools as well as processes of visualisation and visual organisation of the information in the production of knowledge.[4] In that sense, a new line of investigation has been opened, in which bodies of scientific knowledge are studied as processes by means of which one intends to *know something* and as processes within which one needs to *do*

[2] I do not intend to create a dichotomy between the referred place and the place from which one speaks, but neither do I intend to provide an explanation about the continuity or friction between them. The relation is complex, and the discourses and arguments about a place are usually determined by the places of utterance themselves, and vice versa, the places of utterance have the power to orientate the experience and knowledge of places. On the dynamic relation in specific cases, see, for example: Michael Reidy, "From Oceans to Mountains: Constructing Space in the Imperial Mind," in *Knowing Global Environments: New Historical Perspectives on the Field Sciences,* edited by Jeremy Vetter (Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 17–38; Lachlan Fleetwood, "'No former travellers having attained such a height on the earth's surface': Instruments, inscriptions, and bodies in the Himalaya, 1800–1830," *History of Science* 56, no. 1 (2018): 3–34. Likewise, on the role of the Phlegraean Fields and Pozzuoli in the medicine of Early Modernity, see Andrés Vélez-Posada, "The *Forum Vulcani* in the Work of Juan Huarte: Geographical Argument and Renaissance Medicine," in *Greek Science in the Long Run: Essays on the Greek Scientific Tradition*, edited by Paula Olmos (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 301–321.

[3] The *Royal Society* as a space of sociability in the city of London is an exemplary case in order to see how the expansion of the legitimacy of mechanical theories and modern naturalistic studies developed from a social context: Simon Schaffer and Shapin, Steven, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). For an ethnographical account of knowledge-production see Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). The origin of this approach can be traced back to Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1962] 2012).

[4] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Christian Jacob, *Lieux de Savoir 2, Les mains de l'intellect* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011). For a recent account of this fruitful approach, see the special Issue on Making Visible: The Visual and Graphic Practices of the Early Royal Society, edited by Sachiko Kusukawa, *Perspectives on Science* 27:3 (2019).

something.[5] Rather than favouring a sort of scepticism about the pursuit of knowledge, these perspectives invite us to understand how the scientific developments and their most highly elaborated practices of formal abstraction and synthesis occur as situated operations. In my view, this kind of analysis is related and comparable to that of the study of argumentation, provided that we admit that every utterance is embedded and originates in specific contexts, from previous expectations and values, through acquired behaviours or implicit rules, and with particular instruments and materials.

The descriptive orientation of contextual analyses of knowledge-production has also allowed scholars to recognise the ordering capacity of the *sites of knowledge*.[6] In the case of spatial emphasis, the aim is to understand how the space in the case that is being studied and the place from which the study is stated are constitutive parts of knowledge. In other words, the spatial emphasis intends to describe the way the bodies of knowledge are distributed in different spatial scales, and how they move and travel at different speeds and times through the interchange among people, objects and work styles. The interest in geographical and spatial contexts has paved the way for studies showing how production nodes, cities or institutions in competition, circulation routes, regions of study and areas of reception, are spaces in which scientific argumentation stands and is woven.[7]

The place matters. An already classic history of sciences has shown how scientific veracity and acceptability are based on processes of universalisation and standardisation, where the references to specific locations are purged and the contexts are presented as anecdotal and, at most, exemplary. On the other hand, in relation to the communication of knowledge, even accepted theories and standardised processes have places where their reception is diverse, where changes of justification are made and emphasis is put on problems and motivations that are not so much taken into account in other scientific communities.[8] These places of knowledge are liable to be tracked down through various scales of magnitude: from cafés, classrooms and laboratories, botanic gardens, industrial plants and hospitals, environments like jungles, wastelands or seas, to cultural areas, countries and continents.[9]

[5] The "artisan epistemology" has been studied in the case of Early Modernity by Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). See also Matteo Valleriani (ed.), *The Structures of Practical Knowledge* (Cham: Springer, 2017).

[6] For a general account of this, see the section "Personae and Sites of Natural Knowledge", in *The Cambridge History of Science*, pp. 177–362.

[7] For a historical and anthropological understanding of places and space in the production of knowledge, see: David N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Christian Jacob, *Qu'est-ce qu'un lieu de savoir?* (Marseille: OpenEdition Press, 2014) [https://doi.org/10.4000/books.oep.423]; Peter Meusburger, David N. Livingstone, Heike Jöns (eds.), *Geographies of Science* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

[8] For a synthesis of this argument, see Steven Shapin, "Placing the View from Nowhere: Historical and Sociological Problems in the Location of Science." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 23, 1, (1998), pp. 5–12.

[9] See for instance, Christian Jacob, "Cadres et environnement des activités savantes", in *Qu'est-ce qu'un lieu de savoir?*. The relationship between cities and the knowledge that inhabits them allows urban settings to favour styles, intellectual practices and technical developments, see the special issue on "Sci-

This historiographical synthesis of contextual approaches to knowledge is what motivates me to propose, in what follows, some reflections and cases that provide elements to see how, or in what sense, the place is constitutive of arguments.

3 The Environment of Argumentation

Setting aside the tangled discussion about what an argument is, I will focus on the issue of where the argument is.[10] In the field of argumentation studies there are examples in which the place of argument has been considered as highly relevant. In 'The World of Where and When', for instance, Stephen Toulmin proposes a description of argumentation from the point of view of lived time and space. The world of where and when is the world "in which everything we say refers to a particular time and place, without claiming any abstract, universal validity".[11] According to Toulmin, the arguments that we organise and defend rationally are loaded with tacit contents stemming from specific ecologies, situations and experiences, which are personal and socially distributed. In a time of fascination with theory and modelisation, Toulmin's sceptical motivations to go back to the "unarticulated" practical experience are just as refreshing today as they were 30 years ago. Toulmin draws attention to the context through an alternative tradition that is less heroic than logical "foundationalism": the rhetorical tradition that avoids hasty generalisations and favours practical cases, focusing on the particular occasion and what is opportune.[12] Thus, Toulmin invited argumentation and knowledge scholars to turn to a complementary analysis of ethics, of historical reasoning, of jurisprudential evaluation and of therapeutic treatment, which deal with particular cases.

Christopher Tindale's recent proposals, in which he presents the *cognitive environment* as a practical context for the analysis of argumentation, echo that rhetorical

Footnote 9 (continued)
ences et villes-mondes, XVI^{e}–XVIII^{e} siècles", edited by Antonella Romano and Stéphane Van Damme, *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 55–2, (2008).

[10] In this paper I understand the argument in its loosest sense, which includes both its technical definition as reasoned inferences between some premises and a conclusion, and its definition as argumentation, in the sense of a series of expressed assumptions by means of which one intends to dissent or to resolve a disagreement in the context of a discussion. On this debate, including the logical difficulties for a definition of argument, see Jeffrey Goodman, "On Defining 'Argument'," *Argumentation*, 32–4 (2018): 589–602. A seminal paper about the difficulty of the definition of argument in the context of the emergence of informal logic is Douglas N. Walton, "What is Reasoning? What is an Argument?", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 87–8 (1990): 399–419. See also, David Hitchcock, *On Reasoning and Argument: Essays in informal logic and on critical thinking,* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017). From a more classical account on the broad sense of argument since the tradition of rhetoric, Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria or The Orator's Education, Books 3–5,* edited and translated by Donald A. Russell (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2001) [5, 10] pp. 365–375.

[11] Stephen Toulmin, "The World of Where and When", in *Return to Reason*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) p. 192 and ff.

[12] One cannot but recall the definition of rhetoric as the faculty or ability of finding the available means of persuasion in any given case. See Aristotle, *On Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse*, translated by George A. Kennedy, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), [1355b–1356a] pp. 36–37.

and pragmatic approach regarding the where and the when of argumentation.[13] In his view, when statements are isolated in order to assess whether the argument in and of itself is "good" or "bad", a great deal of the analysis just sets aside the situations and the people that produce it. That is an analytical reduction that can turn out to be problematic when the aim is to describe the sense of the particular situations of argumentation. The relational model of the *cognitive environment* proposed by Tindale is, then, based on the principle according to which discourses are always delivered *to someone* and *in a particular situation*. This sort of contextual sensitivity in the study of argumentation requires studying arguments from the case in which they arise and to which they refer, trying not to limit the evaluation to the analysis of their logical form. This orientation paves a way to the understanding of the place of argumentation as an environment with agency, commitments and interchanges.

In order to put argumentation in its place, one should ask where the argument occurs. A first way of answering is physical coordinates: in latitudes and hemispheres, in continents, regions or environments. If we reduce the scale, arguments can be said to appear in a café, a bar, a walk through the city or the mountains. Also in museums, archives and libraries, since great amounts of documents are stored and registered there so that they can be searched, learned and assessed. Nonetheless, using the same spatial language, we also locate arguments in the language, in the mind, in the tone of voice or even in the manner of acting, by which we imply that places are not just physical spots, but relational, ecological and cognitive spaces. Every scale or measure of magnitude assumes a certain degree of generality, an organisation scheme and a relationship strategy.

The place is not a container nor a backdrop. These spatial scales in which we organise and distribute the places are covered by attributes, values and uses. The place has a social function that arranges relationships. This phenomenon is manifest in institutional places with previous rules, such as a criminal court. The relational comprehension turns every place into an environment that favours a particular behaviour and, more specifically, a kind of disposition for argumentation or the absence thereof.

So far, I have provided reasons for which the place of argumentation is constitutive of the sense and the motivations of statements. In the next section I will address the way Quintilian, exponent of the system of classical rhetoric, understood the place within the practices of persuasion and search of opportune arguments.

4 The Argument and the Place

In the particular context of rhetorical theory, arguments are described and classified as coming from or belonging to a place. Classical theory employs two senses of place: a first sense that is cognitive and metaphorical, in what is known as *common places*, which are a sort of taxonomic order where arguments are classified

[13] Christopher Tindale, *The Philosophy of Argument and Audience Reception*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

according to their subject matter or their logical relations. The second rhetorical sense of place, more concrete, refers to the place as a source of the argument, that is, to the place to which the argument refers or the place in which argumentation takes place.

The definition, the distinction between part and whole, the comparison by similarities, the relationship of cause and effect are all cases of common places in which arguments live. Quintilian, the great theorist of the ancient rhetorical education, understands these common places, *topoi* or *loci* of arguments as the places where arguments lurk, and from which they must be drawn forth.[14] Quintilian employs here a mode of speaking that is characteristic of hunting, since whoever argues must catch relationships and paths of thinking according to the general topic that the occasion brings up. In other words, the common place to which the arguer is headed is guided by the particular case and what is opportune. In spite of the abstract way of describing it, the common place is intimately related to concrete circumstances. Quintilian explains this "kairological" sense of common place as follows: "If we know where everything is "born", when we come to the Place we shall easily see the Argument in it."[15] That way, argumentation creates a place of its own in which the participants are committed, move forward and explore, following tracks and looking for the convenient arguments in their cognitive space.

The second sense is the particular case of the argument derived from a place or *argumentum a loco*. The spatial source of the argument is relevant to this essay because it provides descriptive elements that help us elucidate the phenomena of understanding and acceptability of arguments that are determined by the site and the location.

In the classical theory of rhetoric, the sources of the argument tend to be thought of as a creation under the control of an orator, a writer or an arguer. However, the autonomy of invention or discovery of the argument is closely linked to the occasion. The famous Aristotelian definition of rhetoric is emphatic: rhetoric is the ability to consider in each case what can be persuasive.[16] A part of that case or that occasion is, for example, the audience. The orator is orientated towards her audience, and this implies that the audience is already present in her speech and that, therefore, the orator states her argument in the other's terms.[17] In the same manner, the contextual space is an active part of the occasion and therefore an active source of the argument.

A recent example of the presence of the place in the argument is Barack Obama's speech at the launch of his presidential campaign.[18] On Saturday 10th of February of 2007, in Springfield, Illinois, from the stairs of the *Old State Capitol*, the young senator Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president of the United States with the Democratic Party. This was the first time that many people saw Obama, and

[14] Quintilian, [5, 10, 20–21] pp. 374–377.

[15] For this conception of the argument as a living entity, see Quintilian, [5, 10, 21–22] pp. 376–377.

[16] Aristotle, [1355b–1356a] pp. 36–37.

[17] Tindale, pp. 1–19.

[18] The speech can be read at [http://obamaspeeches.com/]. I am drawing on Tindale, pp. 7–10.

he had to take advantage of that moment in order to attract them and build an image. The sense of the place that Obama picked for that speech is remarkable. Springfield, "where North, South, East and West come together," is remembered as the place where Lincoln addressed the Union. Standing in that place, Obama revives that "tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer". Thus, the place from which he argues and to which he refers, the *Old State Capitol* in Springfield, organises the sense of his speech around particular spatial metaphors: the path, the destination, the meeting point. Obama takes advantage of that place in order to appeal to his predecessor's voice and character, emulating him before the audience. It is the place itself, with its burden of memory, where the temporality of a heroic past which projects its power into the present unfolds. The trip that he and the people make to that spot turns into a common destination, a goal where they are all headed. The evocation of that place is so powerful that it creates presence and equivalence.

The strategy of using a place in order to produce a speech and gain adherence is well known to classical rhetoric scholars. In her study on oratory in the Roman world, Ann Vasaly asks herself about the role of environments and their representation in the argumentation process. Vasaly shows that every place is presented as an argumentative element loaded with social and emotional sense. The places in argumentation disclose the human valuations and the physical determinations that organise them. The place unfolds latent representations, as Quintilian would say, from which the orator, the audience and the judge benefit.[19]

The argument derived from a place is one of the topical sources of argumentation.[20] According to Quintilian, there are usually two kinds of sources of arguments for each occasion: arguments from or to the person (*a persona*) and arguments from action, things or subject matter (*a re*). Among arguments from action or subject matter, various kinds of sources for narration or exposition can be distinguished: the motive or intention, the place, the time, the cause, the mode or the instruments used in an action.[21] For the case that interests me here, the aim of the argument from place is to provide the narration and the exposition of proofs with credibility as well as coherence and vividness.[22] The usefulness of the argument from place is manifest in judicial speeches or declamations, because the place allows the orator and the audience to suppose and, therefore, argue about the likely purpose of a person when she acted. In this kind of speech, the place can also contribute to the typification or condemnation of the particular action, or simply to its evaluation.

Let us see that in more detail. The contextual force of the place establishes it as an evaluative source of facts and acts insofar as the arguer emphasises and deploys precisely the qualities attributed to those spaces. Thus, for example, and following

[19] Ann Vasaly, *Representations: Images of the World in Ciceronian Oratory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) p. 15 and ff.

[20] Quintilian, [5, 10, 23] pp. 376–377.

[21] Quintilian, [5, 10, 32] pp. 382–383.

[22] "Arguments are also derived from place. It is a consideration relevant to the credibility of a Proof whether the scene of the crime was in the mountains or in the plain, by the sea or inland, cultivated or uncultivated, frequented or isolated, near or far, good for the purpose or bad." Quintilian, [5, 10, 37] pp. 382–383; see also Ann Vasaly, pp. 20–26.

Quintilian's exposition, the attributes of places can characterise them at least as natural places (if the facts that are mentioned or in which one speaks refer to the sea, the mountain or the countryside) or as built places (public places such as the theatre; private places such as a house; sacred places such as a temple; religious places such as a mausoleum or a tomb; infamous places such as a brothel). Likewise, the characteristics of the place are relevant as well to assess the argument and the action itself: the vicinity of other spaces, the size, whether it is frequented or solitary, and so on. The features of places work within argumentation as guidance that helps assume, for instance, intentions and motives in a judicial case. Indeed, an act can be censurable or not depending on the place in which it occurs. For example, there are places where certain topics are taboo while other topics are expected to be discussed only there. On the basis of the law of his time, Quintilian says: "You have stolen private money, but as it was from a temple, this is sacrilege, not theft", or, also: "You have killed an adulterous couple, which is allowed by law; but as it was in a brothel, it is murder."[23] In general, the resort to the place within argumentation has a decisive role, since it organises reasonings and provides the speech with an emotional and social burden. Instead of neutral containers of action, places in argumentation are loaded with connotations.

The case of vivid description (*enargeia*) of places is crucial in rhetoric. When the place in which an action took place is put before the eyes, the coherence, the link and the verisimilitude of the argument are strengthened. Describing and speaking about places was one of the main skills that Menander of Laodicea's handbook of epideictic rhetoric attempted to instil in the orator. The *argumentum a loco* is key in the judicial or forensic genre, where the orator bases his evidence to accuse or defend on the nature or characteristics of the place where the judged action took place, but its use goes beyond the judicial sphere. After Quintilian, the argumentative device in which the place has a leading role experimented a special peak. During the splendour of the so-called second rhetoric, Menander's treatise considered, among the things that are worthy of praise, the places where actions happen. For him, places can be praised or censured for their position, nature, beauty or their salubriousness.[24] In his masterful study on European literature, Ernst Robert Curtius was interested precisely in the *argumentum a loco* within the system of the rhetoric of praise, since it is to this practice of valuation of the place that western literary tradition owe the construction of one of the topics with greatest historical continuity: the pleasant place—*locus amoenus*—and, by extension, the activation and the role of landscape in art.[25]

[23] Quintilian, [5, 10, 39–42] pp. 384–387.

[24] Menander Rhetor, *Treatises*, edited with translation and commentary by Donald A. Russell and Nigel G. Wilson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), [Book II] pp. 29 and ff. For studies about Menander's rhetoric of place and its epistemological role, see Laurent Pernot. *La rhétorique de l'éloge dans le monde gréco-romain*. (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 1993) and Christian Jacob and Frank Lestringant, *Arts et légendes d'espaces: Figures du voyage et rhétoriques du Monde* (Paris: Presses de L'École Normale Supérieure, 1981).

[25] See Ernst Robert Curtius, "The Ideal Landscape", in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) pp. 183–202.

5 Final Considerations

Setting aside the reservations we might have regarding classical rhetorical models and their implications for the understanding of argumentation (like, for example, the autonomy which the orator seems to be granted in her cognitive process of "invention" or argument production), the *argumentum a loco* points to a matter worth-considering: it is necessary to consider the place within the argumentative process as something that is constitutive of the utterance and not merely as a geometrical point or a paralinguistic space. Considering the place as something with a social and cognitive connotation means providing the phenomenon of argumentation with a practical context, a situation, a ground that goes beyond the abstract forms of universal audiences and of logical forms in themselves.

An anthropological consideration might be in order as a conclusion of this essay. Just as the analysis of scientific knowledge can be understood from the point of view of the processes, contexts and places in which it is produced, so too the analysis of arguments invites us to take into account the places that unfold and those in which argumentation takes place. Arguments do not exist by themselves: they are always embodied in individuals, communities, institutions and places. Perhaps the *argumentum a loco* is not simply yet another source of argumentation but, in a fundamental way, it might be said that every argumentation comes from and refers to a particular spatial dimension. The argument is not an immaterial and purely ideal thing: it does not exist without the practices and the places that constitute it and that make possible its circulation and transmission. The pretension of the universality of arguments should not conceal or deny the locality on which they are based and to which they refer.

In the case of everyday argumentation, it is worthwhile considering the places or environments where argumentation is carried out: halls or auditoriums in schools, universities and libraries, in laboratories, cafés and workshops, in mountains, jungles and shopping centres, but also in the media, books and pictures. In each one of those places there is an architectural arrangement, a social dimension and a set of ecological and cognitive qualities that matter and that cover the discussion of arguments with values, motivations and orientations. Each space provides a certain arrangement and orientates us towards action and reasoning. One of the aims of an anthropological understanding of argumentation will be to stress again the necessary local situation of the interlocutors.

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