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Rhetorical Materialism: The Cognitive Division of Labor and the Social Dimensions of Argument

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for the issues that confirmation bias and motivated reasoning highlight underscore one of the reasons for argumentation theory: i.e., the recognition that there are many cases in which reasoning obfuscates and confuses issues instead of clarifying them. In real arguments, arguers continually omit countervailing evidence and employ hidden premises, illegitimate emotional appeals, post hoc reasoning, and a myriad of other fallacies that hinder rather than promote sound judgment (in traditional rhetoric, one of the purposes of the enthymeme was to hide questionable assumptions in implicit premises that are never stated and hence less open to scrutiny).

In such a situation, it is difficult to see how reasoning can do what Mercier and Sperber say it does—i.e., increase “in epistemic quality the information humans are able to share”—unless it is influenced by a widespread understanding of the norms of good reasoning. Without this goal, which is in many ways the heart of argumentation theory, it is difficult to see how reasoning can achieve the evolutionary advantages that Mercier and Sperber have claimed for it.

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RHETORICAL MATERIALISM: THE COGNITIVE DIVISION OF LABOR AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF ARGUMENT

Ronald Walter Greene and Heather Ashley Hayes

Mercier and Sperber assign the human intent to persuade to the argumentative function of reasoning (“Why” 57). However, when pressed by reviewers to consider the “rhetorical” character of argument, Mercier and Sperber respond by emphasizing the “rhetorical and epistemic goals” of argument (“Authors’ Response” 95). In doing so, they specifically assign the intent to persuade (rhetorical) to the speaker (argument production) and the goal of being informed (epistemic) to the audience (argument evaluation). Mercier and Sperber defend this “division of cognitive labor” (“Why” 65, 73) between argument production (a rhetorical goal) and argument evaluation (an epistemic goal) for its efficiency. We wish to isolate and evaluate this “division of cognitive labor” to offer a more socially dynamic approach to argumentation.

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First, rhetorical production is inclusive of all the social elements of argumentation. For Mercier and Sperber, the rhetorical consists of the production of arguments by a communicator to convince an audience, anticipate audience objections, and justify decisions. Mercier and Sperber render the production process of argument as a mental/verbal act of the speaker. The production of arguments is socially circumscribed by a "dialogic context," but the speaker produces arguments when s/he starts "from the conclusion and tries to find premises that will convince one's interlocutor" ("Why" 73). Yet, their assignment of the rhetorical to the speaker's side of the cognitive division of labor attenuates the social dimensions of rhetorical production. A more rhetorically materialist perspective should render all the molecular elements (speaker, speech, audience, occasion, change) of a rhetorical context (McGee 36) socially relevant. Moreover, argument participates in a material constitutive process of world making by assembling these molecular elements as an argumentative context.

Mercier and Sperber seem to presuppose the social context that is produced and reproduced by the rhetorical dimension of argument. Yet, as a material-constitutive process, rhetoric inhabits every element of the social context (speaker, speech, audience, occasion, change) transforming it into a field of argumentation (Greene, "Aesthetic Turn"). Thus the intentions associated with argument (persuasive or otherwise) are socially produced by a rhetorical context (Burke). One consequence of our rhetorically materialist perspective is to approach argument less as a meta-representational inferential act of reasoning and more as a socially productive, and therefore, contingent, human technology (Greene, "Another Materialist").

Second, the general intellect in capitalist accumulation activates an antagonism in the cognitive division of labor. For Mercier and Sperber, the "optimal stance for pursuing the truth" requires the cognitive division of labor between argument evaluation (judging) and argument production (advocacy) ("Why" 72). From the speaker's standpoint, "rather than looking for flaws in our own arguments, it is easier to let the other person find them and only then adjust our arguments, if necessary" ("Why" 73). The receiver (audience) evaluates arguments with an informative intent to distinguish information from misinformation. Mercier and Sperber privilege face-to-face group discussion as the paradigmatic social situation to take advantage of psychological research suggesting that groups have an interest in making sure "*truth wins*" ("Why" 72). For Mercier and Sperber, groups have the ability to socialize argument production toward "a shared interest in truth" by providing the opportunity for argument evaluation to "filter" bad reasoning ("Why" 72).

Their emphasis on group interest requires closer investigation because the world assembled by rhetorical argumentation should be set within a broader material ontology that contextualizes the argumentative function of reasoning. Here we want to maintain that Mercier and Sperber's "shared interest in truth" describes what Marx calls the "general intellect" or the "general social knowledge" harnessed as "a direct force of production" (706). Instead of an evolutionary framework (Mercier and Sperber, "Why" 58) we are suggesting that the general intellect materially aligns the social production of truth with capitalist accumulation. To highlight their epistemic value, Mercier and Sperber note the relational value of real world groups ("Why" 73). We might say, then, that group performance activates the "social brain" (Marx 694) while the argumentative capacities of advocacy and judging isolate two different rhetorical modes of "communicative labor" (Greene, "Rhetoric and Capitalism" 188). The cognitive division of labor that, for Mercier and Sperber, tacks between a rhetorical and epistemic pole, is a material signature of how the communicative

labor of the general intellect is incorporated into the laws of capitalist accumulation (Greene, "Rhetorical Materialism"). Thus an antagonism between capital and labor is likely a constitutive element of any conceptualization of Mercier and Sperber's cognitive division of labor (Dyer-Witthford; Vercellone). When Mercier and Sperber prioritize argument evaluation over production they do so for evolutionary reasons ("Authors' Response" 95–96), but in so doing, they naturalize a cognitive division of labor that privileges one form of communicative labor (judgment) over another (making arguments). The priority of judgment in cognitive-communicative labor tends to enshrine the managerial prerogatives of the professional knowledge class (Frow) and the racial and gendered division of labor (Federici and Caffentzis; Morini).

Third, the mediated networks of communicative capitalism (Dean) capture epistemic vigilance as the trigger for argument evaluation. According to Mercier and Sperber, because a speaker is more motivated by the persuasive effect than the truth-value of the information, it is important for receivers (audiences) to exhibit "*epistemic vigilance*" so as not be misled ("Why" 60). This epistemic vigilance activates the evaluation of arguments by checking the coherence of the arguments produced by the communicator ("Why" 60). Although Mercier and Sperber grant that any one person might be both advocate and judge, the cognitive division of labor in their model requires keeping each capacity separate ("Why" 96). When discussing argument production, Mercier and Sperber highlight an unconscious force they call a "triggering of reasoning" that arguers have limited control over ("Why" 73). Might a similar trigger be influencing epistemic vigilance?

The unconscious trigger of epistemic vigilance may be explained by what Jacques Lacan calls an "epistemological drive" (106). Jodi Dean explains that a drive generates enjoyment by the repetitive failure of not reaching what one desires "because failure produces enjoyment . . . drive captures the subject" (21). Lacan's epistemological drive describes how the receiver might react to the anxiety generated by an evolutionary command to distinguish good information from bad. Epistemic vigilance may be generated by an anxiety about being unduly persuaded by another. In so doing, the epistemological drive may be the very unconscious trigger that activates argument evaluation. Although Mercier and Sperber imagine argument in a dialogic context, Dean notes how "networked information and communications media" capture this epistemological drive (40–41). One reason why production and evaluation can reside in the same person is that both the rhetorical and epistemic roles are activated by circulating arguments in and through mediated communication networks. Dean describes the process this way: "people discuss the realities that concern them everywhere and all the time . . . [W]hat appears as an exchange of reasons is a vehicle for the circulation of affects" (34–35). Communicative capitalism, for Dean, activates networks of affect motivating argumentation. However, communicative capitalism may be generating new irrationalities as it incorporates our biological functions into the circuits of social argumentation.

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