Commentary on Leal, Suro and Hample's "Arguing in Mexico"

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to the short abstract of "Arguing in Mexico," "Scholars have for some time been warning that Mexicans labor under argumentative deficits in basic education, in college, and in the professions." They found no objections to this in terms of "argumentation as a product (including logic)," but note that the problem relates as well to argumentation as a "process," which they astutely note is "culturally bound." They offer a cogent and detailed analysis of empirical data related to this question, and not only offer evidence of the reality of differences in Mexican interpretations of argument as a process, but also of an inherent bias in field of argumentation in interpreting the argumentative practices of understudied cultures. Many now recognize that we need to question whether theories of argumentation apply globally. This essay offers a case confirming the need to interrogate assumptions about argument in territories like Mexico, shaped by pre-Colonial, Colonial, and Post-Colonial experiences.

As the editor of a forthcoming anthology on "comparative" rhetoric, I find this essay to be exceptionally relevant and timely. The study of comparative rhetoric began with the pioneering work of Robert Oliver and George Kennedy, the latter coining the term. In the twenty-first century, work in this area expanded exponentially. LuMing Mao one of the main theorists of the movement, in his essay ''Reflective Encounters,'' emphasizes that comparative rhetoric involves applying perspectives sensitive to cultural differences, interpreting materials within a broad cultural context, and understanding people and their communication practices within their own languages, terminologies, and traditions. This essay forwards the first two of these three concerns.

Though schooled in formal logic as an undergraduate, and though my dissertation concerned interpreting Stephen Toulmin through a feminist lens, my response stems largely from my experience with comparative rhetorical studies, which began in 2007 with my publication "Re-thinking Rhetoric from an Indian Perspective."

For most comparative rhetors, rhetoric relates to a human impulse to communicate, to be understood, to explain, and to argue. *What* we say is our message, *how* we say it is our rhetoric. Though traditional scholars trace its origins to Ancient Greece and Rome, comparative rhetors have shown that the impulse to rhetoric assumed a wide variety of shapes all over the world, in both ancient and modern times. This essay joins a chorus of voices asking whether mainstream Western notions of argumentation are universal.

Indeed, people all over the world argue, but recently we are learning that our relation to argumentation depends on how we conceptualize it, on what traditional views of argument and human relations structure our society, on the levels of hierarchy and formality, on the emotions people associate with it. The authors' clearly paint a tentative portrait of the shape of Mexican people's relation to argumentation in relation to those very significant issues.

2. REACTIONS TO THE ESSAY

As the essay notes, "This study seems to be the first systematic investigation of motivations, cognitions, and emotions regarding interpersonal arguing in Mexico." It provides a clear portrait of interpersonal argument as interpreted by over 400 participants.

The authors studied responses from 459 Mexicans, 45% male and 55% female, with a mean age of 22.5 years. 409 were undergraduates and 50 graduate students, all from the University of Guadalajara Center for the Social Sciences and the Humanities. One of the limitations of the study, as the authors admit, was the fact that the persons studied comprised a rather limited and progressive group of Mexicans.

Nevertheless, the findings are compelling, and at least provide a basis for further study.

In sum, the authors provide the following insights:

The Mexicans they studied

- prefer arguments to be courteous.
- prefer arguments about merits over personal attacks or incivility.
- were very tolerant of "status disparities," – power distance – and thus interpret interpersonal arguing as unhealthy."
- enjoy arguments framed in a gaming environment.
- favour argumentation similar to Michael Gilbert's theory of coalescent argument, more emotional, physical, and "mystical."

Rather than being a portrait of a people who lack argumentative skills, these findings reveal that the Mexicans represented actually view argument within the very idealized framework that many scholars of argument seek to promote. That is the most surprising, interesting, and ironic aspect of this

research. As a professor who even today was asking his summer online writing students not to create "straw man" and "ad hominem" arguments, this is a welcome insight. This impulse to attack, to associate argument with verbal combat, as my research in Indian rhetoric, as well as Chinese and other rhetorics, and this study shows. is not universal. There are other ways to argue that prove just as useful, complex and fruitful, that sadly have been misinterpreted and/or overlooked, as "Arguing in Mexico" attests.

One risk of studies like this is that they could perpetuate stereotypes. Descriptions of Mexicans and argumentation at the front, though later somewhat debunked, stem from very broad-brush depictions of Mexican culture to which the writers admit validity. I question whether this admission reflects what Mao calls a "deficiency" interpretation ("Reflective" 401), where one particular culture is determined to be lacking" based in European biases such as those rooted deeply within this empirical approach. Though this study unbalances the critique that Mexicans are not good at argument, it needs to interrogate more, based on its own findings, a more nuanced and global view of argumentation.

3. IMPLICATIONS: EXPANDING THE GLOBAL TURN IN ARGUMENTATION

In 1967, Richard Rorty edited a book called *The Linguistic Turn*, committing the field of philosophy to the study of language. Since that time, other fields have experienced other sorts of turns, the latest being what is called the "Global" turn, in which E. Darian-Smith points out that to inhabit a "truly global" perspective we must "break free from modernist and Eurocentric concepts and assumptions" (10) and avoid replicating "questions embedded within specific disciplines" (11). She asserts that we must move beyond interdisciplinarity because that keeps us "bound to the conventional disciplines from which they draw their conceptual differentiation" (10).

In addition, the global turn entails more than moving beyond interdisciplinarity; it implies fundamental changes in the ways those of us *within* a discipline understand that discipline. For instance, Lu Ming Mao, in "Thinking beyond Aristotle: The Turn to How in Comparative Rhetoric," asks

> "how can we open ourselves to how other traditions and cultures use and experience language and other symbolic means without romanticizing them beyond their own otherness and pitting them against Euro- American logic and intelligibility?" (449)

"Arguing in Mexico offers a way to do just what Mao asks of us. I thank the the organizers of this conference for opening the discipline of argumentation to these new perspectives in including this, as well as my own, essay on argumentation in India.

My experience working with over forty scholars in comparative rhetoric reveals that this inclusion of new perspectives requires a whole new disciplinary infrastructure. My colleagues from around the world, particularly in former colonized nations, speak to me of the lack of support they get in their own graduate programs to study their own indigenous cultures. They feel pressured to teach and write on traditional topics within the discipline. They are told that once they get tenure, perhaps they can then study their own culture. The ECA is forward looking in inviting these perspectives for discussion and publication.

There is also the issue of what to teach. I am working with a colleague in China on rhetoric textbook for Chinese graduate students. One of my tasks it to relate the history of rhetoric in 7000 words. Of course, I have to talk about Plato, Aristotle, Cicero – and a number of key figures through the age of the New Rhetoric, a list almost entirely made up of European and American males. Having studied comparative rhetoric, my interests lie with the Sophists and how they were misinterpreted and almost lost to history. How do I get to Chinese, African, Indigenous, Indian, Persian, Muslim, Jewish, Egyptian, Southeast Asian, Japanese, Irish, and other rhetorics? And how to I teach those rhetorics or know enough to even explain them? And how do you fit in studies like "Arguing in Mexico?

The simple answer is not so simple. We need infrastructure change in terms of the courses we teach, the Theses and Dissertations we encourage, the job descriptions we create, the articles we recommend for publication. I for one am thankful for studies like this that pave the way. We quite simply cannot keep focusing on our traditions in a narrow sense. The global turn does not negate what has been done, it expands it, challenges it, makes it better.

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