

Navigating Dangerous Deliberative Waters: Shallow Argument Pools, Group Polarization and Public Debate Pedagogy in Southeast Europe¹

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Dodging questions in public debates has become stock-in-trade for American politicians. Perhaps this is not surprising given that influential public debate coaches such as Washington lawyer Robert Barnett have taught a generation of American presidential aspirants (including Bill Clinton, Michael Dukakis and Walter Mondale) that one sure-fire key to debate success is the "peas and carrots" strategy: "When all you have is peas and they want carrots, give them peas and tell them they are getting carrots" (qtd. in Mitchell 2002, 87). This evasive approach has proven rhetorically effective in public spheres where citizens are unwilling or unable to hold their political leaders' feet to the proverbial fire of robust dialectical exchange (see Farah, 2004).

However, as Artan Haxhi discovered in a recent public forum convened in Shkodra, Albania, sometimes, the peas and carrots strategy misfires. During this November 2004 forum, citizens of Shkodra were fed up with the fact that Haxhi, the chief municipal official of the city, had not delivered on his 2003 election campaign promises to address electricity shortages, problems with the water supply, unemployment, and other pressing social issues. He deflected questions on these topics with the refrain: "Ah, this is not Municipality's responsibility" (qtd. in IRSH, 2004). Audience members were not satisfied with the response; they peppered Haxhi with follow-up queries, such as: "Why have you undertaken impossible responsibilities?" (qtd. in IRSH, 2004). These probing citizen questions, building on a record generated

from a previous public debate involving Haxhi, are signs that a political awakening is underway—the Albanian citizenry is emerging from decades of apathetic slumber under stultifying communist rule. As one debate organizer observes, “In Albania, where the culture of debating has not existed for a long time, public debates are breaking the silence” (Mazniku, 2004). This phenomenon may pique the interest of argumentation scholars, since Albanian student debaters have been among those making the most sophisticated wake-up calls.

The Shkodra forum was convened by an Albanian social movement called Mjaft!, which has forged ties of solidarity with other prominent student movements such as Otpor (former Yugoslavia) and Kmara (Georgia) (Musavat, 2005). Translated into English, “Mjaft!” means “enough” – enough corruption, enough poverty, enough apathy. Mjaft!’s goal is to empower civil society and inspire positive change in Albania. Its mission is to increase active citizenship, strengthen the sense of community in Albania, promote responsible government, and improve the image of Albania in the world. Since its founding in 2003, Mjaft! has organized many peaceful protests, and Mjaft! activists have initiated debates on television about topics such as environmental pollution, casino gambling, and genetically modified foods.² The organization has contributed directly to the life skills of several thousand young people, most of them young women. Mjaft! now has a tangible presence in 17 cities in Albania and has links to 36 public high schools and all of Albania’s eight universities. In 2004, the United Nations recognized Mjaft!’s efforts by honoring the organization with its Civil Society Award. During the recent 2005 presidential election cycle, Mjaft! worked with Gallup International to produce Albania’s first series of public opinion polls (see Boustany, 2005; Wood, 2005). Notably, a significant part of Mjaft!’s leadership and rank-and-file membership is made up of academic debaters, particularly those associated with the Albanian National Debate Association (ANDA). Regarding the relationship between ANDA and Mjaft!, policy director Arbjan Mazniku explains:

[T]hey are very closely connected. You cannot do one without the other. That’s why this link of the two organizations has worked very well. ANDA is more academically focused, training people in debate ability, while Mjaft!

has tried to use this pool of people for actual, real change in the community. They have a symbiotic relationship. (Mazniku, 2004)

Mjaft! serves as a synecdoche for wider trends unfolding in Southeast Europe, where student-driven public deliberation is enlivening the political landscape not only in Albania, but also in Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Romania. What do these initiatives suggest about the political dynamics of linkages formed between academic debating groups and civil society organizations? Can public debate help soften the polarizing political conflict that has plagued the region? What general insight does this case study reveal about argumentation as applied critical practice? This paper explores these questions by drawing from collaborative research conducted by the authors under the auspices of the 2005 Southeast European Youth Leadership Institute.

“Balkanization” and Group Polarization

Nietzsche compared 'dead' metaphors to coins that lose value when their markings wear off from overuse. If the metaphor of “balkanization” is not yet dead, it is at least very tired — through widespread usage, the meaning of the term has evolved to denote the generic phenomenon of separatism, in whatever guise. Largely forgotten is the original context in which the term emerged. In the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Balkan nations had just managed to reestablish their statehood after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. They started a number of localized mini-wars between themselves, throwing the region into a period of instability. The local conflicts exacerbated and ultimately contributed to the outburst of World War I. Therefore, in 20th century European history the Balkans are frequently characterized as the powder keg of Europe.

The meaning of the term “balkanization” has evolved so that today, the term has been used to describe phenomena as varied as automobile parking (Casey, 2001), port security (Edmonson, 2005) and gasoline prices (Scherer, 2001). In a similar vein, legal scholar Cass Sunstein (2003) deploys the balkanization metaphor to elucidate what he calls the “law of group polarization.” According to Sunstein (2001), “If certain people are

deliberating with many like-minded others, views will not be reinforced, but instead will be shifted to more extreme points.” When groups engage in ‘enclave deliberation’ – communicating exclusively with like-minded interlocutors – the polarization effect is heightened. Enclave deliberation creates a paradox; as members of society communicate more, they grow further apart and become less capable of coming to terms with unfamiliar viewpoints:

The phenomenon of group polarization has conspicuous importance to the communications market, where groups with distinctive identities increasingly engage in within-group discussion. Effects of the kind just described should be expected with the Unorganized Militia and racial hate groups as well as with less extreme organizations of all sorts. If the public is *balkanized* and if different groups are designing their own preferred communications packages, the consequence will be not merely the same but still more *balkanization*, as group members move one another toward more extreme points in line with their initial tendencies. At the same time, different deliberating groups, each consisting of like-minded people, will be driven increasingly far apart simply because most of their discussions are with one another. (Sunstein, 2001, 66, emphasis added)

This finding has serious implications for public argument scholarship, since it challenges the shopworn idea among some First Amendment scholars that when it comes to dealing with noxious ideas, “more speech is always better” (Chemerinsky, 1998). Group polarization theory turns this axiom on its head: “With respect to the Internet and new communications technologies, the implication is that groups of like-minded people, engaged in discussion with one another, will end up thinking the same thing that they did before – but in more extreme form” (Sunstein, 2001, 65).

Argumentation plays a key role here, since according to Sunstein (2001, 68), “the central factor behind group polarization is the existence of a *limited argument pool*.”

Sunstein’s balkanization metaphor is evocative, as group polarization theory suggests novel explanations for the causes of ethnic strife in the former Yugoslavia. The received view holds that such strife is the result of long suppressed ethnic hatreds that

were released when the lid of the Cold War pressure cooker flew off. However, the limits of this explanation are apparent when one considers anomalies, such as the fact that instead of keeping a 'tight lid' on Yugoslav society during his rule from 1943-1980, Marshal Tito supported the interaction of diverse ethnic groups and provided a wide berth for the airing of different opinions among six different republics. He resisted efforts by external actors (e.g. the US and USSR) and internal actors (e.g. Tudjman) to polarize public life, and the result was a relatively peaceful era in the region. Building on this empirical fact, and challenging the 'Cold War pressure cooker' hypothesis, Timur Kuran (1998) argues that ethnic conflict in the Balkans is better understood as the inadvertent product of recent efforts by 'polarization entrepreneurs' to consolidate political power through propaganda campaigns designed to promote enclave deliberation and group polarization in Balkan society (see also Somer, 2001).

The recent swing in Bulgarian political life offers an example that illustrates this point. The results of the 2005 Bulgarian elections caught both the government and the greater society off guard, when a nationalist party of the extreme right called Ataca or "Attack" appeared for the first time on the political scene and won seats in parliament (BTA, 2005). This unprecedented political phenomenon can be analyzed from the perspective of Sunstein's (2003) 'law of group polarization.' First, Attack's sudden appearance just a month before the parliamentary election can be regarded as a premeditated move toward 'enclave deliberation' which deprived potential opponents of the opportunity to challenge the party's nationalist and minority views. Second, this one-sided propaganda campaign led to group polarization, which even further limited the 'argument pool' and radicalized Attack's extreme ideas.

Public Debate and Group Depolarization

While 'enclave deliberation' has a tendency to shrink the 'argument pool' and foster 'group polarization', Sunstein (2001, 26) notes that this process can be reversed: "As a corrective, we might build on the understandings that lie behind the notion that a free society creates a set of public forums, providing speakers' access to a diverse people, and ensuring in the process that each of us hears a wide range of speakers,

spanning many topics and opinions” (see also Mitchell & Suzuki, 2004). Exposure to assorted ideas and interlocutors, on this logic, moderates the tendency of deliberative enclaves to be echo chambers that incubate extremism: “[G]roup polarization is diminished, and depolarization may result, if members have a degree of flexibility in their views and groups consist of an equal number of people with opposing views” (Sunstein, 2000, 118).³

An ideal context to explore Sunstein’s theory is Southeast Europe, where a nascent public debating culture is currently emerging. A host of debate-oriented organizations, such as Mjaft!, have spun off from the Southeast Europe Youth Leadership Initiative (SEELYI), a U.S.-based civic exchange program designed to promote student-driven public deliberation in the region (see IDEA, 2005; Mitchell, 2002). Since its inception in 2001, SEELYI has brought over 500 high school students and community leaders to Baltimore, MD and Winston-Salem, NC, for intensive study of argumentation theory, research on specific content areas, practice in debating techniques, and exploration of how public debates can help develop enlightened citizenries by spurring democratic deliberation on pressing issues (the teaching method is laid out in Broda-Bahm, Kempf & Driscoll, 2004).

While Mjaft! leaders Erion Veliaj and Arbjan Mazniku were involved in the early stages of SEELYI, more recent alums of the program have used SEELYI as a rallying point to implement public debate projects. For example, Romanian students participating in the 2005 SEELYI program have developed a follow-on project that is designed to raise awareness of major public ideas and promote deliberation through student training in critical thinking, advocacy skills and research. Students will begin in their own towns, then move on to other locales in need of training. The design concept evinces the idea of an octopus, with efforts beginning in a core area and then branching out. The project is daring, especially taking into consideration that 17-18 year-old students will likely meet obstacles while trying to spur public debates. Members of the older generation in Southeast Europe may very well dismiss such initiatives as child’s’ play or challenge them as unjustified ways of expressing modern points of view.

Similar projects underway in Southeast Europe are likely to face comparable obstacles. Serbia and Macedonia have always been old-fashioned countries, a quality perhaps connected to the Turkish occupation that lasted 500 years. That experience instilled a strong sense of deference based on age and status, with younger people expected to listen to older people, children to defer to parents, students to obey teachers, workers to follow bosses, and so on. In this culture, there is a strong presumption in favor of the way things are. Thus it is very hard for young people to press for change because the older generation controls the *status quo*. However, there is room for hope. The student group Otpor succeeded in challenging Slobodan Milosevic's fraudulent election victory in 2000, even in the face of humiliating tactics deployed by Serbian police forces (Agovino, 2000). "We created a possible parallel universe," explains Veran Matic, founder of the independent B-92 radio network (qtd. in Ford, 2003). The fact that new communication technology facilitated such an achievement redoubles optimism that similar dramatic projects may be possible in other contexts (Tunnard, 2003). In our final section, a comparison between Otpor and Mjajt! sets up concluding commentary regarding the prospects for public debate pedagogy to shape Southeast Europe political terrain in positive ways.

Closed Fist or Open Palm?

Originally, the main political goal of Otpor was to overthrow Milosevic by polarizing actors in Serbia into pro- and anti- Milosevic camps. The group's 2000 election motto was: "There are more of us," amplifying that "us" meant Milosevic opponents. Initially, Otpor didn't stand behind any leaders of the democratic bloc, because they knew the only way to overthrow the established regime was to amalgamate the political opposition into a large fist that could break the system. Unfortunately, when the job was done, many Otpor activists fell prey to what Robert Michels' (1915/1959, 388-92) calls the "Iron Law of Oligarchy" — the tendency of social movement activists to moderate their oppositional stances after assuming positions of power in the establishment. After defeating Milosevic, Otpor retired its trademark red fist symbol (Grubanovic, 2003) and many activists took up posts in the state apparatus.⁴

From these positions, they were less effective in energizing civil society, some argue to the detriment of ex-Yugoslavian society (see e.g. Ramet & Lyon, 2002).

The contrast between Otpor and Mjajt!'s signature symbols illustrates some key differences between the two movements. Otpor's closed fist (Figure 1) signals the group's defiant commitment to oust a strongman from power. Mjajt!'s open palm (Figure 2) symbolizes a more nuanced program of political struggle, with activists focusing on the arena of civil society, steering clear of the power matrix of party politics. For example, in 2004 Mjajt! eschewed overtures from Sali Berisha's Democratic Party to form a political alliance. "They [the Democrats] are surfing on the wave that the civic protest created," said Mazniku. "They want to get power, which is okay for a party, but a civic movement demands better governance, and that is where we differ" (qtd. in Raxhimi, 2004). In this respect, Mjajt!'s strategy bears a similarity to the "new social movements" that make "revitalizing and enlarging civil society" a permanent project, one that seeks "to generate subcultural counterpublics and institutions" (Habermas, 1992/1996, 370).

Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato (1992, 199-204) suggest that the civil society-focused new social movements have novel ability to surmount the "Michelsian dilemma" posed by Michels' "Iron Law of Oligarchy." Perhaps one fertile area of follow-on research would track the progress of Mjajt! and Otpor through time, observing how the two movements navigate the Michelsian dilemma, with particular attention given to whether Mjajt!'s public debate *telos* provides unique purchase for this task. Such study might elucidate the political benefits and drawbacks of both approaches, producing knowledge that could inform future activist projects and deepen understanding of social movement protest.

A second area of research suggested by the foregoing analysis relates to the generational dimension of public debate as a tool of political transformation in Southeast Europe. As we noted previously, the older citizens of Albania, Serbia, Macedonia and Romania developed political consciousness in a time when public opinion and citizen activism were largely alien concepts. Public debate projects spinning out of SEEYLI could be examined as instances of what G. Thomas Goodnight (1987) calls

“generational argument” – discourse formations with unique patterns that can be analyzed comparatively, perhaps even across cultures. Such scholarship might also contribute usefully to the literature on “oppositional arguments” – forms of deliberation that perform the double function of contesting issues and shaping precedents that govern subsequent discourse (see e.g. Olson & Goodnight, 1994).

Finally, this brief case study raises fresh questions about debate activism that pick up on Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede’s (1969, 306-307) discussion about the value of ‘total’ debate programs that mix together synergistically academic tournament debating and public debating activities. Albanian debate activists have already outdone their American counterparts in developing a model of this sort that bridges the safe pedagogical space of contest round advocacy to the more turbulent waters of public deliberation. Their efforts create a raft of issues that deserve scholarly reflection. For example, while Ehninger and Brockriede believe that each and every student should pursue *both* academic debating and public debating, the Albanian model positions the academic debate organization more as an entry point that eventually feeds a select few (advanced) debaters into the more political world of Mjaft! politics: “We start with academic debating, and after students get excited about it, we say, ‘see, this can also be done publicly.’ I believe only a small group of the academic debaters will move to be public debaters, because it takes extra skills and extra interest in public issues” (Mazniku, 2004). For Albanian debaters, this transition often entails a shift in roles: “Most of our core of people are academic debaters. In the academy, they are used to debating amongst themselves. But in public debate, they are usually faced with either public officials or they just moderate or promote the debate” (Mazniku, 2004). The switching-station that connects competitive and public debate contexts is a fertile site for argumentation research. One might study, for example, the ingenious Albanian concept of the “citizen contract” (see note 2), to explore ways in which the academic debate skill-set has utility in public debate settings. Similarly, it is possible to envision experiments in argumentation *praxis* that would test proposals to link contest round practices to wider public spheres of deliberation, such as Damien Pfister and Jane Munksgaard’s (2005) blueprint for “switch-side public debating.”

Unfortunately, it will be impossible to pursue such research questions under the auspices of SEEYLI, the program in civic leadership funded jointly by the US Department of State and the Open Society Institute – the State Department opted recently not to renew funding for a sixth year of the SEEYLI program. Some suggest that this decision was a politically motivated jab by the US government at Open Society Institute founder George Soros, who campaigned vigorously against President George W. Bush's re-election in 2004. If this is the case, the Bush administration may be cutting off its nose to spite its face, since the SEEYLI program's five-year track record establishes it as one of the nation's most effective public diplomacy and democracy promotion initiatives.

Figures



Figure 1: Otpor movement symbol



Figure 2: Mjajt! movement symbol.

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Notes

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² The Shkodra forum discussed above was a follow-up event that built on a previous Mjaft barnstorming “caravan” that featured debates, music concerts and political performances at many towns in Albania where 2003 municipal elections were being held (on the role of performance as a means of political protest in Southeast Europe, see Clemons 2005). During the 2003 caravan debates, Mjaft activists recorded candidates’ promises carefully on a laptop computer, then printed out the list of such promises as a “citizen contract.” Before the audience dispersed, Mjaft representatives presented such contracts to the candidates and asked them to sign their names, alongside a “co-signing” citizen representative. The signed contracts were then subsequently used as evidence to structure audience questions in post-election public debates such as the November 2004 forum featuring Artan Haxhi in Shkodra. As Mazniku (2004) explains, “we were looking for something that can be a link to hold politicians accountable. That’s how the citizen contract came up.”

³ A significant caveat to Sunstein’s thesis is his stipulation that in certain circumstances, enclave deliberation performs an important social function: “A special advantage of ‘enclave deliberation’ is that it promotes the development of positions that would otherwise be invisible, silenced, or squelched in general debate. In numerous contexts, this is a great advantage; many social movements have been made possible through this route (as possible examples, consider feminism, the civil-rights movement, religious conservatism, environmentalism, and the movement for gay and lesbian rights)” (Sunstein, 2000, 111; see also Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Griffin, 1996; and Mitchell, 2004). Here, enclave deliberation provides those speakers who may feel excluded or intimidated in mass public spheres with opportunities to develop their public voices and to share their views with like-minded interlocutors. Yet, there is an important catch – while such activity has potential to enrich a society’s overall argument pool, “enclave deliberation is unlikely to produce change unless the members of a different enclaves are eventually brought into contact with others. In democratic societies, the best response is to ensure that any such enclaves are not walled off from competing views, and that at certain points, there is an exchange of views between enclave members and those who disagree with them” (Sunstein, 2000, 113).

⁴ It should also be noted that some Otpor activists went on to play a significant role in Ukraine’s “Orange revolution,” training Ukrainian activists in methods of non-violent resistance starting in 2003 (see Ackerman & Duvall, 2005).