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‘Cognitive systemic dichotomization’ in public argumentation and controversies

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ABSTRACT: We describe and analyze an important cognitive obstacle in inter- and intra-community argumentation processes, which we propose to call 'Cognitive Systemic Dichotomization' (CSD). This social phenomenon consists in the collective use of shared cognitive patterns based upon dichotomous schematization of knowledge, values, and affection. We discuss the formative role of CSD on a community’s collective cognition, identity, and public discourse, as well as the challenges it raises to reasoned argumentation, and how different approaches to argumentation undertake to face this obstacle to the reasonable debate of issues of public concern.

KEYWORDS: Argumentation, Cognition, Controversies theory, Deliberative democracy, Dichotomization, Group identity, Pragma-dialectics, Public discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Controversies, disagreements and conflicts pervade our social life, especially in the public sphere. Various theories propose ‘direct reasonable argumentation’[1] as the proper approach to overcome such disagreements and thereby to mitigate their eventually pernicious social effects. These theories[2] may differ in their specific goals and methods, which may include improved cooperation, regulated relational and affective attitudes, better understanding and creation of learning opportunities, application of justification and falsification methods, and reaching reasonable agreement between different groups on deep

[1] We employ the expression ‘direct reasonable argumentation’ in this paper in the broad sense of “a dialogical discourse process that refers to the substantial components of a disagreement, heavily relies on arguments, through discursive cooperation of the parties and attentive consideration of the statements of each other”. The term ‘direct’ emphasizes the explicit or implicit mutual addressing and responding, be it in writing or in face-to-face encounters.

[2] E.g., deliberative democracy theories, pragma-dialectics, controversies theory, and intergroup dialogue.

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and substantial disagreements in the public sphere. Such goals might be achieved in the shared public sphere through voluntary public debates, critical discussions and controversies using direct reasonable argumentation for handling the complex issues involved. However, direct reasonable argumentation between contenders, encompassing the crucial aspects of a public issue, is quite rare and the achievement of these goals through reasoned argumentation has many conceptual, cognitive, and affective obstacles. Moreover, current public discourse is usually geared toward intra-group persuasion aiming to increase a group's political influence through ingroup cohesion and commitment, as well as toward weakening outgroups' political power. Even when discourse seems to address directly other groups, it usually turns out to be addressed to audiences belonging to one's own group or favorable to it. In both cases little if any reasonable argumentation can be expected and no real discussion takes place.

The present article seeks to examine structurally some of the causes for the current situation as regards the use of the proposed reasonable argumentation methods in debates about public issues. Accordingly, it considers, on the one hand, the adequacy of various proposed methods and, on the other, the limits of their applicability in the light of their normative basis. These limits indicate, in our opinion, the direction to follow if one wishes to achieve a praxis oriented normative theory. The article undertakes to perform this task by deepening the investigation of disagreements characteristic of the public space. In so doing, a major obstacle in inter- and intra- community's argumentation processes is singled out, namely 'Cognitive Systemic Dichotomization' (CSD). This expression refers to a social phenomenon in the intersection of cognition and community that underlies the creation and maintenance of collective cognitive worldviews, value systems, and standpoints in a community, whatever its kind (e.g. civil society, political, subaltern, scientific). CSD consists in the organization of and reliance upon schematized knowledge based on dichotomization in complex social and political settings combined with the impact of cognitive and affective biases. It has also a formative effect on communities' collective identities, through public discourse and disputes that are part of building and enhancing the social representation of the ingroup and the dichotomized negation of the outgroups.

The full significance of cognitive dichotomies and the potential shift from CSD to reasonable argumentation, as well as its consequences for the assessment of argumentation theories and their adequacy has been overlooked, as far as we know. The principal aim of this paper is to disclose the consequences of the CSD phenomenon and its connection with the possibility to achieve the positive normative goals that can be reached by means of direct reasonable argumentation, as pointed out at the beginning of this Introduction. These consequences shed further light on the assumptions that characterize different reasonable argumentation theories such as deliberative democracy theories, pragma-dialectics (PD), and controversies theory (CT).

The paper performs a comparative analysis of the capabilities of two rather different argumentation approaches to overcome or at least mitigate the CSD obstacle in confrontations, conflicts and other substantial types of disagreements that are often observed in the public sphere and in complex disagreements in other spheres as well. The compared approaches, PD and CT, were chosen due to their different orientations. Unfortunately, in this paper we will not be able to take into account other relevant approaches, nor to cover all the aspects of PD and CT worth comparing. We limit ourselves to the

discussion of central ideas of each, which we consider sufficient ground for making our point and for the ensuing debate.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF THE PUBLIC SPACE FOR REASONABLE ARGUMENTATION

Before engaging in a detailed comparative analysis of what can be done in order to improve the possibility of successfully applying reasonable argumentation in the public sphere in order to overcome the difficulties to do so, we must first diagnose these difficulties. This will be done in two sections. In the present section (2), the structural features of disagreements in the public sphere are described and the peculiar problems this sphere raises for resolving these disagreements are pointed out. We also present the different approaches that theories of deliberative democracy propose to resolve these disagreements. The next section (3) is entirely devoted to CSD, which we consider a major obstacle to such resolution by means of reasonable argumentation.

2.1 Sources of disagreement in the public sphere

First of all, one has to be aware of the obvious multi-faceted nature of disagreements that arise in the public sphere, as a result of the variety of inter-related factors that are constitutive of their generation, dynamics, and eventual (if any) resolution. Disagreements of this sort, in which different and multiple factors are always involved, must be handled by a multi-perspective approach, to which any single method—e.g., reasonable argumentation—can offer at most a partial contribution. Let us consider some of the factors in question.

2.1.1 Complexity

Disagreements in the public sphere are challenging first and foremost at the cognitive-epistemic level by virtue of the complexity of their contents. Public issues arise virtually in all domains and aspects of social as well as individual life, whose interconnections can hardly be decoupled. Even what seems to be a well-defined single issue, e.g. government supported housing, involves questions such as social justice and the ideology determining the order of priority of the items in the government budget, which have to do with most of the issues in the public agenda. The knowledge required for the proper treatment of these issues thus requires an interdisciplinary effort, which is itself extremely difficult to achieve, for the links between the relevant disciplines (e.g. economy, engineering, law, education, sociology, security, policy making, etc.) are complex and unclear even for the expert practitioners of each of them. Furthermore, knowledge is not equitably and freely available for everyone, and is subject to each user's interpretation according to his/her viewpoint, so that the decisions taken, the actions performed, and their consequences are multi-valued both for those directly involved and for the public in general, a fact that causes further and ever more complex disagreements. Furthermore, the evaluation of the impact of short and long range results based on past and current assessments requires reliable forecasting, which is not only extremely uncertain but involves the prediction of contingent effects of events that might significantly modify the original assessments. Needless to say that dealing with all the complexity here briefly described is, to say the

least, a cognitive task beyond the capacity of any individual and certainly demands a division of intellectual labor that depends on trustful cooperation.

2.1.2 Differences in worldviews and values

To be sure, complexity as such can be reasonably handled. This is apparent in very large corporations and scientific or technological enterprises, for example. However, the conditions for success include a viable and relatively narrow common goal, a structured division of labor, and competent management and integration processes—which together lead the joint endeavor to navigate successfully through complexity. Yet, such conditions are not usually fulfilled either in the political or the public spheres. The often opposed orientations of the worldviews and values involved in public disagreements lead not only to different epistemic and cognitive stances, but also stimulate conflicting emotive and interpersonal—as well as intergroup—attitudes and biases in public disagreements. One must further take into account the fact that groups or individuals may employ different modes of information processing and decision making and assign different cultural roles to individual and collective participants in disagreement prone social processes.

2.1.3 Epistemic vs. action-related concerns

A central aspect of disagreements in the public sphere is that they do not concern only the epistemic dimension. For the simple reason that such disagreements also bear a direct relation to actions that may cause significant changes in public life. This grants them special importance by virtue of their impact on the contenders' lives. Furthermore, this explains also the value of any potential improvement of the current political practices employed in the 'resolution' of public disagreements. To be sure, there is a connection between knowledge and action, since decisions of action are to some extent based on available knowledge, although the nature of this connection is disputed. Regardless of this dispute, it is essential to acknowledge that the reasons invoked in public disagreements for the justification or rejection of standpoints cannot be based on a purely epistemic motivation. Among other things, such an acknowledgment implies the need of some skepticism vis-à-vis the reliance on experts and advisors as the incontestable representatives of knowledge in decision making in public affairs.

2.1.4 An arena for the clash of interests

The very need of having the power to decide in certain circumstances which actions to undertake or support in the public arena (or to have the power to influence such a decision) is directly related to the interests of the decision maker as well as of individuals or groups that may benefit from or be damaged by the performed actions. The underlying presumption of this statement, whose general acceptance is the growing legitimacy of all sorts of lobbies, especially in the political domain, is that the main goal of individuals and groups is to influence as much as possible the public decisions so as to benefit from them, rather than to have as their major concern the common good of society. Notice that the notion of interest here employed is broad enough to comprise the mirroring of collective and/or individual worldviews and values as well as material or symbolic benefits. Still,

the question of whose interest is defended in a public disagreement remains open: although some groups or individuals claim—and may be justified in so doing—that their position represents the common good, others identify the common good with the fulfillment of their own interests. This only renders the public discussion on the common good as a basic public interest rather rare and raises the question whether an agreement about the common good is at all achievable (see 2.2.2).

2.1.5 Collective beliefs and opinion makers

A single individual can hardly understand all the subject matters and issues that arise in the public space and create alone well-grounded independent standpoints on each of them. Consequently, shared networks of beliefs, based on a division of labor sometimes hierarchically structure, are mandatory for social agents concerned with more than their personal interests. No wonder that certain societal institutions and practices, such as education, professional associations, traditions, rituals, etc., contribute to the formation of these networks of collective beliefs and actions. Many beliefs are thus collectively shared thanks to our reliance on the 'epistemic authority' of their sources or vehicles; for example, normally we don't doubt that the bridge we are about to cross, which has been built by reliable engineers, will support the weight of the car we are driving, just as we don't question the mathematics we learn at a good high school or the validity of a religious cult conducted by a certified clergyman.[3]

Shared beliefs concerning public issues are based on a similar mechanism, though two main differences should be highlighted. First, we are usually aware that in each public issue there is room for opposed beliefs and therefore disagreement; nevertheless we tend to accept, in most cases, the position we perceive as convincing without further examination. Second, we are also aware that the beliefs on public issues conveyed to us are usually influenced by subjective considerations of the conveyor; in spite of this –in some cases precisely because of it—we adopt them without questioning. In this respect opinion makers have a decisive role, by virtue of the public exposure which grants them a sort of epistemic authority. They act as the vehicle par excellence of the dissemination of beliefs, as the interpreters and commentators who create them, and as the originators and delineators of the boundaries of the collectives that crystallize these beliefs into a definite public position.

2.2 The handling of disagreements in the public-political sphere

2.2.1 The current situation: Between the public and political spheres

Argumentation plays an important role in the public sphere; but what kind of argumentation and for what purposes? The decision making power about actions of public interest is in the hands of the political system rather than in the public's hands. In so far as argumentation on public issues purports to have some weight in the relevant decisions, it must be designed so as to exert some direct or indirect influence on the political decision mak-

[3] Whether intentionally designed or not, the result of such institutionalized practices, habits, and beliefs, amounts to the 'colonization of minds' of the members of a community, thereby creating CSDs that are hard to get rid of through a process of 'decolonization' of the colonized minds (Dascal 2009).

ers' considerations. Perhaps the most important consideration for politicians is to keep their positions of power, and a widespread belief is that pleasing their constituencies with decisions, initiatives, and actions that fit a constituency's needs and expectations is the best way to achieve their goal. The public sphere comprises the means—e.g., the media, manifestations, strikes, NGO's, lobbying, public opinion polls, satire shows, etc.—both to interpret and to convey the public's needs and desires to the political system, and to interpret and report the politicians' performance to the public. It is through this two-way interpretive highway that the flow of 'argumentation' between the public and the political spheres seeks to achieve its influence of the public on governmental decisions. The power of this highway is unquestionable: it is often effective in yielding a course of action favored by the public sphere, it can maintain in power rulers attentive to the real needs of the community, and it can remove those who attend only to the figments of their imagination. Yet, rather than argumentation in its standard meaning and the rational persuasion it is supposed to pursue, the traffic in the described highway is better characterized as involving tools like pressure, manipulation, bargaining, rhetorical efficiency, and interpretive arbitrariness. Such tools, as pointed out, may achieve the aims of their users, but it is questionable whether they foster either direct or other forms of reasonable argumentation in the public sphere. Nevertheless, even though argumentation is not its core, the prevailing market orientation of the relationship between the public and political spheres yields a sort of equilibrium between the forces acting in both spheres, as the result of a conflict management process rather than of reasoned conflict resolution.

2.2.2 The deliberative democracy proposals

There are different reactions to the situation described in 2.2.1. Some of these reactions are based on the use of the operating 'market mechanism' we have pointed out in order to modify the end result, so that it fits their conception of a better state of affairs or at least their explanation why the state of affairs cannot be changed. Partisans of this approach include, for instance, advocates of a realpolitik attitude (e.g., Posner 2003), proponents of a so-called 'radical democracy' (e.g., Mouffe 1999, 2000), and skeptics of structural changes of the current 'social choice' political system by deliberative democracy processes (e.g., Knight and Johnson 1994). Other thinkers, who defend a deliberative democracy position, are rather opposed to the market mechanism itself and to its results. According to them, the extant equilibrium can and must be improved. One of their arguments is that the ongoing equilibrium is not endowed with the legitimacy it needs in order to be accepted, both morally and pragmatically, for it favors the powerful and it is not grounded on reason. In this respect, they share as a core reference, albeit not unanimously,[4] certain ideas of Habermas and Rawls, which we briefly address in the following paragraphs. Whatever their position, it has been justly argued that "[D]eliberative theorists are in general agreement on at least this: the political process involves more than self-interested competition governed by bargaining and aggregative mechanisms" (Bohman and Rehg 1997: xiii). However, the mere rejection of the rational-choice 'market' oriented model is

[4] Briefly put, the main issues that divide the group's members are: the connection or disconnection between the public and the political spheres, the Rawlsian limitation of public debates to the liberal framework, and the universalistic Habermasian conditions for public dialogue, namely full equality, total reasonableness, full information, and exclusive commitment to the common good.

rightly criticized for not providing answers to crucial questions such as "what, positively speaking, differentiates political behavior from market behavior?" (ibid.: xiii).

Let us now turn briefly to those ideas of Habermas and Rawls which are relevant to this section. Very broadly put, they are concerned mainly with the justification and legitimization of the political system that is based on a sense of political justice and on public reason as expressed by reasoned deliberation performed by capable rational people.

Although this reasoned deliberation is geared by Habermas and Rawls, respectively, toward different kinds of issues and types of deliberation, the main idea is that the political systems will be replaced by a more reasoned, informed mechanism for achieving agreements (instead of power-based actions). Elster (1997: 11-12) summarizes this as follows:

> The core of the theory, then, is that rather than aggregating or altering preferences, the political system should be set up with a view to changing them by public debate and confrontation. The input to the social choice mechanism would then not be the raw, quite possibly selfish or irrational, preferences that operate in the market, but informed and other-regarding preferences. Or rather, there would not be any need for an aggregating mechanism, since a rational discussion would tend to produce unanimous preferences. When the private and idiosyncratic wants have been shaped and purged in public discussion about the public good, uniquely determined rational desires would emerge. Not optimal compromise, but unanimous agreement is the goal of politics on this view.

Both Rawls and Habermas believe that *reasonable argumentation* ensures the possibility of verifying the contenders' arguments in a discussion through justification and criticism. The difference between them is that, whereas Habermas believes in the possibility of discussing the common good and contends that it is up to the public space (e.g., the media, the NGOs) to lead this discussion and to exert its influence on the public administration, Rawls, although he also admits the possibility of discussion, denies the possibility of reaching agreement about the public good, and therefore focuses his attention on the political space, especially on legislative procedures and on collective political existence issues, for which he believes overlapping consensus (i.e, consensus about the political institutions and procedures) is attainable. It will not be possible here to engage in a discussion of the full divergences between them, nor on the critique of their idealistic assumptions, especially the impossibility of separating between interests and the public good (e.g., Elster 1997) and the overlooked needs of the weaker parts of society to conduct their own internal discourse (e.g., Fraser 1991, 1997; Sunstein 2002).

It should be stressed, however, that by and large the criticism does not deny the existence and need of deliberation in the public space. It rather focuses on more modest goals than reaching full agreement obtained by reasonable argumentation trying to overcome public dissent at large. Some deliberative democracy theorists illustrate well this tendency. Referring to this brand of authors, which includes among others Young (2000), Dryzek (2000), and Fraser (1991), with whom he agrees, Neisser (2006) emphasizes the importance of a dialogue that should be at the same time direct and face to face and open to public access,[5] which he considers to be essential for democratic deliberation:

[5] See Yankelovich (1999: 15). For an attempt to unite personal and public dialogue in the Buberian notions of I-Thou and Inter-human, while at the same time analyzing the practical and conceptual limitations of such a union, see Dascal (2008c).

> I believe that the deliberation essential to democracy requires the stimulus of actual face-to-face, public dialogue among citizens, not just personal reflection on the part of each citizen, one mind at a time. We also agree that these dialogues need to be regularly held in a multitude of different kinds of spaces, both within and without the state, allowing for the formation of multiple "publics," some more narrow than others, so that the public sphere writ large is constituted by contesting discourses. And, finally, we concur that the deliberations need to be minimalist when it comes to ground rules, to allow entry for many styles of presentation, and to avoid ruling out any topics in advance as insufficiently "public" and thus inadmissible. (Neisser 2006: 1)

He further stresses that such a dialogue or conversation must involve participants from different social groups and layers, significantly different from each other, and yet capable of both arguing for different views and acknowledging the other as akin to themselves:

> My summary way of expressing this ideal declares that democracy requires widespread participation in periodic "cross-border, public conversation." Talk is "cross-border" when the participants come from several groups, each of which sees itself as somehow different from the others in some significant way. Democracy happens and just policy outcomes are made more likely through such border-crossing, not by creating unanimity so much as by bringing participants to see themselves and issues in new ways, understand their interests more inclusively of those of others, and viscerally experience the humanity they share with those others. This grasp of the other as akin to oneself is ultimately what makes humans capable of being ethical (ibid.).

Neisser continues the presentation of his somewhat idyllic vision of deliberation democracy spelling out some of the pragmatic conditions and expected consequences of the 'cross-border conversation' he advocates:

> When I call for the cross-border conversation of democracy to be "public" I mean it should be widely publicized and potentially accessible to all, or at least to many. And I use the word "conversation" to indicate that (1) no policy decision is going to be made as a direct result (though this can, and ideally will, come later, and as an indirect result), (2) the participants speak for themselves rather than as representatives or experts, and (3) the main goal is not to resolve an issue so much as to change inter-group dynamics, form opinions anew, and/or increase understanding. This last requirement is crucial; to fulfill it a degree of expert—gentle, generous, non-manipulative, pro-disagreement—facilitation of the conversation will often be necessary (ibid).

It is quite interesting that in the above quotations—and not only in them—no use is made of the phrase 'reasonable argumentation' in terms of reaching an agreement. Certainly this is not due to the fact that deliberative democracy theorists presume that there is no role for this kind of argumentation in the dialogue they envisage. Perhaps the reason is that they don't believe in the way deliberation is traditionally conceived as a personal and/or social decision-making process which, among other things, eliminates or at least reduces cognitive dissonance. Unlike the various 'reasonable argumentation' approaches, which try to use argumentation as a tool to overcome difference of opinions, the above mentioned deliberative approaches do not seem to view difference of opinion as something that has to be suppressed by an argumentative procedure, however sophisticated and reliable it may be. Rather, they acknowledge—at least implicitly—the fact that decision does not end deliberation nor does it suppress dissonance once and forever, as has been discovered by Festinger, the father of cognitive dissonance theory (see Dascal 2005: 41-43). Deliberation strives in difference, of ideas, of opinions, of positions, be it before or after decisions. As we shall see

in the next sections, the systemic 'solidification' of argumentative and cognitive patterns in the public sphere, instead of resolving or helping to resolve disagreements on public issues, contribute to suppress deliberative practices on such issues with their relentless hope to achieve unquestionably reasonable agreement. Nevertheless, whatever one's appraisal of the role of deliberation and reasonable argumentation in public disagreements, as well as of the existence or avoidance of actual argumentation taking place in the public sphere, we have to admit that there might be a large gap between the actual disagreements and the perceived ones—a gap that is often provoked by CSDs.

3 COGNITIVE SYSTEMIC DICHOTOMIZATION

The challenges discussed in section 2 suggest some of the structural difficulties involved in using direct reasonable argumentation for managing satisfactorily disagreements in the public sphere. However, these challenges do not comprise all the problems that must be taken into account, especially those derived from the perception of the disagreements by the contenders. A better understanding of this type of difficulties will shed light on the problems and prospects of direct reasonable argumentation in the public sphere.

3.1 Cognitive systemic dichotomization in the public sphere: Overview

The phenomenon of cognitive dichotomization, which bears in the public sphere a systemic nature, is based, on the one hand, on the complexity of the collective organization of knowledge, and on the other on the difficulty of social choice in cases of disagreement as to the desired collective action. To handle public issues properly, knowledge about various aspects of the issue, gathered from various sources, must be made available and systematically accessible for the formation of reasoned positions, for justified opinion making, and for decision makers. The complexity of the required knowledge and its easy access mandate simplifying epistemic measures, which are provided by systemic dichotomies, which also provide means for group identification as well as for a simpler tool for conducting debates and, in general, discursive exchanges. These applications, in turn, help to reinforce the systemic utility and entrenchment of such dichotomies. It seems that, at a certain level, this process is cognitively necessary, and therefore not without its reasons. Nevertheless, it has also unsuitable effects, such as inter-group polarization, which leads to highlighting and taking for granted the negative properties of the opposed *outgroup* vis-à-vis the positive properties of one's *ingroup*. In what follows we describe and analyze components and consequences of cognitive systemic dichotomization in the public sphere.

3.2 Disagreements in a complex system

As we have seen (2.1), public discourse involves a broad set of contents that functions as the basis of systemic as well as local disagreements. Since both are interrelated, the latter can hardly be analyzed without taking into account the former. Yet, systemic disagreements are rarely the object of discussion either due to the complex, non-hierarchic network structure underlying them, or to the fact that the contenders and analysts, who are familiar with the particular issues discussed, usually lack familiarity with most of the components of the controversial environment. This is probably due not only to the the-

matic variety and quantity involved, but rather to the associative nature of the numerous kinds of interconnections between the themes, which yields a network of worldviews, values, methodological rules, types of beliefs, polar relations, modalities of evidence and justification, degrees of knowledge, ways of sorting data, causal relations, interpretations, actions, etc. Some of these modes of associating a disagreement with the wealth of information characteristic of the public context in which it takes place is usually perceived as bearing the task of being a decisive factor in defining the 'positions' of the contenders. In complex environments such as the public sphere polarization and systemic dichotomies are frequently employed for this purpose.

3.3 Semantics, pragmatics, and systemic dichotomies

3.3.1 The semantic power of CSDs

Systemic dichotomies have a special status in disagreements in the public sphere for a number of reasons. First, their use of the simple and rigorous dichotomous structure provides what seems to be an easily applicable recipe for conducting and resolving disagreements. This structure consists in two radically opposed concepts, propositions, or beliefs and the relation of negation ('~'), through which the operation of mutual exclusion is performed. Disagreements on public issues are usually taken to be grounded on dichotomies[6]; each contender is supposed to hold either the position P or the position ~P and to have good reasons for the position held by himself or herself and/or against the adversary's position; furthermore, these are the only alternatives in the issue under dispute and, according to the principle of bivalence, only one of them can be true; it follows that the disagreement can be solved only by determining which position is the true one and what contender holds it. Second, the grounding dichotomy is itself well grounded; it is not picked up in an ad hoc fashion; rather, it is selected because it is taken to have a justified foundational status, whence it follows its applicability to other topics, issues, and disagreements. This is an asset in the public sphere, for as a grounding dichotomy it provides a sort of template for dealing with a broad range of issues whose isolated, independent treatment would be excessively demanding from a cognitive point of view. Third, dichotomies of this kind are shared by relatively large groups of people; this endows them with collective authority and rules out the allegation that they are fruits of bias or other forms of subjectivity.

Dichotomies that display these features are those that normally tend to become a dominant part of the cognitive systemic infrastructure of public discourse. This infrastructure can be joined and reinforced by other elements of the public sphere network, such as emotions, values, and group identity, which may also be dichotomously structured and thereby reinforced by the cognitive infrastructure. The result is a uniform, coherent system whose components match each other and can scarcely be decoupled.

The discursive dimension of such systems not only serves as the central vehicle through which disagreements in the public sphere manifest themselves; it also reflects the systems' dichotomous infrastructure. The logic form of dichotomies, described above as

[6] We refer to dichotomies in the broader pragmatic sense that includes also contrary positions that are not contradictory in the logical sense (cf. Dascal 2008a).

one of the reasons for their cognitive attraction in the public sphere, corresponds to a basically semantic perception of the discourse employed, e.g., in public disagreements.

3.3.2 The pragmatic dimension of CSDs

One should not overlook the fact that controversies, argumentation, and similar uses of language are forms of communication whose investigation is concerned not only with semantics but also and mainly with pragmatics. It is convenient, therefore, to look at CSDs also from a pragmatic point of view. Instead of considering dichotomies as the logical-semantic trigger of debates and the basis upon which they unfold, one can look at them not as the initiators and supporting infrastructure of a debate, but rather as the result of a pragmatic process of 'dichotomization' that takes place as the disagreement evolves. From this perspective, they are located at the endpoint of a process that polarizes the opposition between the contenders into an exclusive disjunction that acts as an irresistible ready-made argumentative 'attractor' for both sides. The attractiveness of this process accounts for the fact that it is a frequently used argumentative strategy in several types and domains of debate. Other types of debate, however, may follow a strategy of 'de-dichotomization', whose attractor is the reverse, namely an endpoint of conciliation or compromise rather than the radical polarization of the initial antagonism.[7] Nevertheless, the dominance of dichotomization rather than of de-dichotomization enhances the attractiveness of dichotomies as a form of simplification and radicalization of the debated issues, and grants them the cognitive systemic status they have in public sphere disagreements. Furthermore, it explains the difficulty of overcoming this pattern in any attempt to bring to light the complexity and nuances of such issues and of debating them reasonably.

A further pragmatic consideration to be taken into account is the fact that, like in the majority of communicative uses of language, the extended use of dichotomies through their network-like associations with other domains, which is a property that strengthens their systemic status as pointed out above, is for the most part based on pragmatic rather than on semantic inferences. Unlike semantic meaning, which is constitutive of an expression's meaning and is necessary for the recognition and understanding of that expression, the meaning pragmatically conveyed by the utterance of an expression is not entailed by its semantic meaning. Recall the well-known pragmatic notion of 'implicature'—a neologism created by Paul Grice to demarcate its difference from the logical term 'implication' as well as from the literal or conventional or strict meaning of what one says.[8] Whereas the conventional, semantic meaning *determines* what is said and therefore *implies* that the speaker is *committed* to what s/he said, the implicated, pragmat-

[7] For these notions, see the following working definitions: "DICHOTOMIZATION: radicalization of a polar opposition by stressing the incompatibility of the poles, the inexistence of intermediate alternatives, the evident character of the dichotomy, and the assumed truth of the pole defended by the dichotomizing contender"; "DE-DICHOTOMIZATION: arguing that the opposition between the poles can be construed as less logically binding than a dichotomy whose poles contradict each other, allowing for intermediate alternatives between the poles, actually developing or exemplifying such alternatives" (Dascal 2008a: 34-35).

[8] "I wish to introduce, as terms of art, the verb *implicate* and the related nouns *implicature* (cf. *implying*) and *implicatum* (cf. *what is implied*)"; "In the sense in which I am using the word say, I intend what someone has said to be closely related to the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence) he has uttered" (Grice 1989: 24, 25).

ically conveyed meaning *indicates* or *suggests* some content, but bears no *commitment* to having actually said or even intended to express it. One might say that, as far as the connection between the speaker's intention and the conveyed meaning of his/her utterance is concerned, in the latter case the relation that links them is 'softer' than in the former.[9] This difference, as we shall see in the two following examples, sheds light on how CSDs develop and are able to perform their public function.

3.3.3 Dichotomization, de-dichotomization, and choice

First, most dichotomies are not strictly semantic and do not imply that their poles exhaustively cover the totality of possible choices on a given issue, so that one is obliged to accept one of them and reject the other. To assume that this is the case would be to overlook the possibility of de-dichotomizing an alleged dichotomy by proposing as a better choice an alternative to both its poles. President Obama is well known for his recurring use of this option when facing dichotomous 'false choice' situations, which have been described and also criticized as examples of 'the fallacy of false choices' (cf. Beam 2009). Consider the following examples of what the President diagnoses as dichotomy induced false choices in American public debates:[10] a) in economic policy: "[W]e need not choose between a chaotic and unforgiving capitalism and an oppressive government-run economy"; b) in the stem cell research dilemma: "Our [previous] government has forced what I believe is a false choice between sound science and moral values"; c) in environmental policy: "There's been a tension between those who have sought to conserve our natural resources for the benefit of future generations, and those who have sought to profit from these resources. But I'm here to tell you this is a false choice". Instead of submitting his decision to the alleged logical-semantic constraint of a dichotomy that restricts the number and quality of available options, President Obama undertakes to handle these issues as more complex and therefore requiring a pragmatics sensitive hence flexible strategy, thereby opening the debate to other options that may even include combinations of ideas held by the opponents—a move that a dichotomous approach would rule out as inconsistent. On the other hand, those who stick to dichotomization on the grounds that the antagonism expressed in a polarized dichotomy suffices for clearly and fully understanding, reasonably discussing, and even resolving a public issue, endow that dichotomy with the typical rigidity of the systemic and cognitive status of a CSD.

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[9] Here is Grice's example of the distinction in question: "If I say (smugly), *He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave*, I have certainly committed myself, by virtue of the meaning of my words, to its being the case that his being brave is a consequence of (follows from) his being an Englishman. But while I have said that he is an Englishman, and said that he is brave, I do not want to say that I have *said* (in the favored sense) that it follows from his being an Englishman that he is brave, though I have certainly indicated, and so implicated, that this is so. I do not want to say that my utterance of this sentence would be, *strictly speaking*, false should the consequence in question fail to hold" (ibid.: 25-26). For a case study of the relationship between 'soft' and 'hard' rationality, see Dascal (2008b).

[10] These examples are quoted by Beam (2009).

3.3.4 CSD and families of dichotomies

As a second example, let us examine a family of inter-related systemic dichotomies that are widely used in Israeli public discourse as a standard way of referring to the positions and actions of individuals and groups. The overall dichotomy that subsumes the other members of this family is a traditional political division in two 'camps': (a) the left vs. the right. Each of the camps in the subsumed dichotomies is taken to correspond to its umbrella counterpart. The whole family is thus perceived as a coordinated set of more or less hierarchically ordered meaning relations. Here are some of these associated dichotomies, listed according to the 'left' and 'right' corresponding polar camps: (b) supporters vs. opponents of withdrawal from the conquered territories; (b') opponents vs. supporters of the occupation; (c) the peace camp vs. the Land of Israel camp; (d) reasonable citizens vs. fanatic settlers; (e) doves vs. hawks. The Israeli political background and media take for granted the connections between (b)-(e) as well as their falling under the same umbrella dichotomy, (a). Nevertheless, from a linguistic and conceptual point of view, these connections are not semantic (except for the equivalence between b and b'). They are rather pragmatic inferences, based on contextual information and/or presumptions such as: (i) "leftists do not live in the settlements, hence they do not support the occupation" (though there are leftists who live in the settlements because housing there is cheaper, and there are leftists who support the occupation for national security reasons); (ii) "rightists are hawks who believe the use of military power is the only 'method' the Arabs understand" (though right wing governments have achieved long standing agreements with neighboring Arab governments and the Palestinian Authority). Notice that the fact that these inferences *suggest* but do not *entail* the conclusions drawn does not affect the fact that the dichotomies they yield are not questioned by both, declared leftists and rightists, and that they are regularly employed without qualms in Israeli public discourse—which is a clear indication of their entrenched systemic and cognitive status. It is also important to observe that other dichotomies, e.g. (f) welfare state vs. neo-liberal socio-economic policy, (g) secular vs. orthodox Jews, and (h) democratic vs. theocratic ideologies, which are traditionally associated with the left vs. right dichotomy, are not anymore unquestionably subsumed by this umbrella and have lost part of their cognitive-systemic status—perhaps due to the fact that they now overlap only partially with dichotomies (b)-(e) which nowadays have the role of (a)'s generally accepted definition.

3.3.5 CSDs, conversational implicatures, and context

Since the dichotomies widely used in the public sphere are for the most part based on pragmatic implicatures, why only some of them become CSDs? A possible explanation is the fact that there are different types of implicature, only one of which is 'hard' or 'strong' enough for becoming a CSD. In all likelihood, the best candidate seems to be the 'Generalized Conversational Implicature" (GCI), as Grice has dubbed it. It contrasts with the ubiquitous 'Particularized Conversational Implicature" (PCI), in which an implicature "is carried by saying that *p* on a particular occasion in virtue of special features of the context" and "there is no room for the idea that an implicature of this sort is normally carried by saying that *p*" (Grice 1989: 37). GCIs, on the contrary, are cases in which, in the absence of special circumstances, an utterance containing a certain form of words

"normally carries such-and-such an implicature or type of implicature" (ibid.). For example, "anyone who uses a sentence of the form *X is meeting a woman this evening*, would normally implicate that the person to be met was someone other than X's wife, mother, sister, or perhaps even close platonic friend" (ibid.).

The distinction between a PCI and a GCI, therefore, consists in the fact that, while the former is essentially context sensitive, i.e., the inference of the implicature requires the identification of some particular contextual circumstance, the latter is substantially context free, except for normal contextual and background information. Moreover, the inference of a GCI conveyed through a normal locution in a normal context is based only on the knowledge of what has been said, i.e., on the conventional commitment of the utterance; therefore, "it will not be possible to find another way of saying the same thing, which simply lacks the implicature in question" (Grice 1989: 39); consequently, "if we call this feature nondetachability, one may expect a generalized conversational implicature that is carried by a familiar, nonspecial locution to have a high degree of nondetachability" (ibid.). No wonder that, whereas the abduction process involved in the inference (or interpretation) of a PCI requires a rather elaborate heuristics (cf. Dascal 1983: 138-152; 2003: 169-193), the GCI heuristics are simpler and roughly equivalent to some of Grice's well know maxims (cf. Levinson 2001: 27-39). Furthermore, GCIs are indeed generalized, as their well-chosen name suggests: unlike PCIs that amount to particular results for particular cases, GCIs are generalizable results for many cases; they spare the interpreter the need to be constantly attentive to contextual anomalies and to decide which of them are relevant for the utterance's interpretation; instead, they operate as a sort of template suitable for use in a variety of situations; in addition to that, they are cognitively simple hence quite easy to apply to different contexts and contents.

3.3.6 CSDs and adversarial stance

These properties of GCIs no doubt fit several of the properties typical of CSDs. To conclude this section, it remains to point out a distinctive feature of the implicatures peculiar to theCSDs, which are due to their dichotomous character and their use in public disagreements. Consider again the left vs. right family of dichotomies. If someone belonging to, say, the left camp (L) perceives an individual or group as belonging to the right camp (R), this automatically implicates for him/her that R's claims, arguments, attitudes, etc. are interpreted negatively by L, e.g. as mistaken, fallacious, biased, etc. For L, it also implicates that R holds those positions in the dichotomies (b)-(e) that match their counterparts in (a). The same is the case in the opposite direction (R → L). A single utterance within the framework of a CSD may thus generate a large set of negatively or positively inter-related implicatures. To be sure, not the whole set is simultaneously activated by a single utterance, but once the CSD is alerted, what might be called an 'adversarial predisposition' takes command, opens up an agonistic disagreement space, and offers the cues and clues for the interpretation of further implicatures in the space in question. It is as if the CSD infrastructure provides, on the one hand, tags—e.g., L and R—of group identity and, on the other, a ready-made set of 'arguments' for contenders that are eager to make use of them in order to defeat the first person bearing the adversary's tag they identify. Though not far from disagreements in the public sphere, this hardly exemplifies an ideal type of reasonable argumentation.

3.4 Consequences of CSD in public debate

3.4.1 The role of CSDs in comprehensive and in specific public issues

As we have seen, the majority of public debates do not deal with encompassing seminal issues. By their very nature, they avoid the complexity of such issues and are concerned with reacting to impacting events, including governmental measures. Therefore, they rely on interpretations of such events, on governmental actual reactions to them, and on their effects. Even in cases of deep structural reforms and radical changes of internal or external policy, which have significant effects on public order and the citizen's life, be they undertaken by the powers that be or demanded by the population, as a rule one should not expect profound public discussion, taking into account the basic values involved, the broad range of questions involved, the alternative courses of action, and the long term consequences of the decisions taken. For instance, the comprehensive conception of the best way to manage socio-economic policy, which includes, among others, a cluster of factors such as: the impact of globalization; the economic and entrepreneurial role of the state in the provision of public services (the privatization dilemma); the surveillance of the relationship between workers and work providers, be they public, monopolistic, or private organizations; the implementation of a distributive justice and welfare measures; the control of the capital centralization and of capital market; and the responsibility for the prevention of economic and social crises—is hardly discussed with the detail its encompassing span deserves as a subject of profound disagreements. On the other hand, so called worldviews or ideologies—which, as we have seen, are pillars of entrenched CSDs—serve as a permanent background for endless debates about health care reform, tax reform, the restriction of trade union activities, public subvention of research universities, and countless other specific disagreements. Since such disagreements evolve in the context of a constantly—and ever more rapidly—changing reality, their appropriate discussion requires ceaseless evaluation of the arguments employed as well as of the functionality of the solutions held by the parties. It should be clear by now that, if backed by the adherence to solidly established public sphere CSDs, one can hardly expect much progress in dealing with the specific public issues that are object of public discussion. Nor would this kind of backing be of help in bringing about the necessary public debate and argumentation of the more comprehensive public issues. Under these circumstances, what can be expected from 'direct reasonable argumentation' in either kind of public issues?

3.4.2 Reasonable agents and the balance of reasons

It is important to recall that the reliance on cognitive systemic dichotomies, as well as on other forms of polarization of opinions, is practiced also by people who consider themselves rational persons, i.e. people whose self-image is that of reflecting individuals who make use of the available information and of reasons when they consider whether to espouse opinions or make decisions. Many of these individuals are at least partially aware of arguments against their views, yet tend to reject or ignore them when discussing the relevant issues. Is this behavior compatible with their self-perception? How can they discard or overlook counter-arguments they know are relevant for their ongoing cognitive endeavor and at the same time keep their belief in their own rationality?

In our opinion, this apparently irrational behavior is due to the fact that any public sphere disagreement involves a large quantity and variety of contrasting information, opinions, and reasons that must be taken into account for a reasonable deliberation (see 2.1.1). Besides the difficulty in identifying and accessing these data, the further task of evaluating their relevance, their reliability, and their adequacy to one's web of beliefs (cf. Kelly 2008), makes it virtually impossible to weigh and compare all of these factors in order to reach coherent decisions. Furthermore, even if an ideal, epistemically perfect 'balance of reasons'—as the one described by Leibniz (cf. Dascal 2005a)—were available, such a weighing could hardly be performed in it. For the simple reason that the data and concepts we need and make use of in public debates are for the most part approximate, intuitive, and informally expressed in natural rather than formal language,[11] whereas the rationality of the arguments we need and employ in such debates is not reducible to formal logic (see 3.3.5 and note 11).

For example, the comparison of the relative weights of individual privacy and of public security in a disagreement about a governmental measure (e.g., the installation of hidden cameras in public locations) cannot be formulated, say, in clear and generally accepted quantitative terms. As a result, most of the discussion will consist in sides arguing for or against the governmental action by virtue of preferences that are grounded on the relative value they assign to security or to privacy. Such preferences may be embedded in CSDs based upon worldviews or traditions, which will in turn determine the data selected for the arguments each side employs, as well as their weight.

3.4.3 Group identity and CSD

The constitution and influence of group identity is intimately related to cognitive systemic dichotomization. We have already seen the influence of the latter in the mechanism of inter-group hostility (3.3.6), which is itself a constitutive element of group identity (cf. Barghouti 2005). It plays also a significant role in the formation, maintenance and inner operation of group identity, as we shall presently point out.

One important component of the shared identity of a group consists in a set of shared beliefs held by the members of the group. It is well-known that this sharing, however, is not homogeneous, because there are individual variations in the adoption of the group's beliefs as well as in the nature and degree of influence of individual members or sub-groups on the rest of the group (see 2.1.1, 3.1, 3.2). In addition to the group's shared systemic beliefs (CSDs or other), a significant part of a member's beliefs is thus based on other members' beliefs. As we have seen, such reliance is necessary due to the complexity of the knowledge involved in public issues. Moreover, in a deliberative situation, which requires the use of the 'balance of reasons', the group's weighing is influenced by its members differential reliance on specific members—be it by virtue of sharing their opinion, acknowledging their expertise in the issue at stake, or following their leading position—is particularly noticeable, especially as regards rejecting or disregarding con-

[11] It would be absurd to demand that discussions of public issues should make use only of strictly formal arguments, for this would exclude from these discussions most of the citizens. Moreover, natural language is arguably an invaluable cognitive tool that cannot be overlooked (see Dascal 2004).

trary reasons.[12] This interactive process of belief formation and position taking within a group is unlikely to be indifferent to the extant, established group's CSDs, whose cognitive influence may either provide or withdraw support from a member's tendency to favor or oppose another member's opinion.

Another factor in the formation and strengthening of group identity is the natural feeling of belonging between people close to each other in their views (though the intensity of this feeling varies according to the depth of the shared values as worldview). The feeling of group belonging has been empirically confirmed by social psychology research (e.g., Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1986) in a variety of groups, including the so called 'minimal group paradigm' (i.e., groups based on arbitrary membership); even in such groups a clear preference for the members of one's group was detected. The feeling in question generates both positive and negative belonging. In other words, identifying your self-esteem with that of 'your' group causes the minimization of the value of other groups, thereby creating the ground for prejudice and conflict. Besides the feeling of belonging, group identity is also based upon and reinforced by a discursive process of separation between groups, through the use of inner disagreements (often on minor local issues) as a tool for strengthening the systemic dichotomies and the group identity linked with them. The same goal is often achieved by straightforward discussions about the group's identity defining properties, within the group or with sympathizers.

3.4.4 Group polarization

In connection with the preceding section, it is worth mentioning an important phenomenon characteristic of deliberative groups, which is certainly related to the dynamics of group identity and arguably also to the CSDs underlying such identity. The phenomenon in question is known as 'group polarization', and has been thoroughly investigated so far for several decades. We briefly refer here to one relatively recent study, which seeks to combine a theoretical with an empirical account and makes some worthwhile suggestions: "The law of group polarization", by the well-known legal scholar C.R. Sunstein. 'Group polarization' is defined by Sunstein (2002: 176) as the phenomenon that "members of a deliberating group predictably move toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members' predeliberation tendencies." Here is one of his examples:

> After a nationally publicized shooting at a high school, a group of people in the community, most of them tentatively in favor of greater gun control, come together to discuss the possibility of imposing new gun control measures. What, if anything will happen to individual views as a result of this discussion?" (ibid.: 175).

The predicted answer is that the group will probably end up favoring gun control quite enthusiastically, thus enhancing their previous 'tentative' support of gun control.

Group polarization, reports Sunstein (2002: 177), "is among the most robust patterns found in deliberating bodies, and it has been found all over the world and in many diverse tasks". No doubt it deserves being taken seriously. Some of its features seem to be particularly relevant to the concerns of the present paper.

[12] See Feldman and Warfield (2010) for several analyses of the relations between epistemic peers in situations of disagreement.

First, group polarization, although presupposing some sort of divergence of opinion, does not entail the assumption of a dichotomous disagreement within the deliberation group. To be sure, it consists in a radicalization of the group's position, but not one that is necessarily a shift from one position to its contradictory opposite, as is the case in dichotomous shifts. Rather, the shift consists in no more than an *inclination* of the group's predeliberation tendency toward either 'extreme'—i.e., either an increase or a decrease of that tendency; in other words, a change in the group's 'balance of reasons' (cf. 3.4.2). Of course members *may* disagree with the radicalization resulting from the deliberation process and eventually abandon the group as a consequence, but they are not *compelled* to do so in order to avoid inconsistency, i.e. to do it on logical grounds.

Second, the fact that group polarization does not entail dichotomization allows for depolarization. Sunstein observes that not all groups polarize, some ending up "in the middle, not toward either extreme" (ibid.: 180). He believes that it is possible to construct either groups that depolarize or not; depolarization will happen when new persuasive arguments, opposite to the direction initially favored by the group, are offered; it will also be found when the relevant group consists of individuals drawn equally from two extremes (ibid.: 181-182). On the other hand, if people feel they belong to a group with a degree of solidarity, "group polarization is all the more likely, and it is likely too to be more extreme" (ibid.: 181); furthermore, the familiarity with an issue often discussed by the group is unlikely to depolarize for "with respect to such issues, people are simply less likely to shift at all" (ibid.: 180).[13] The main causes of polarization or depolarization are, respectively, a sense of shared identity [that] will heighten the shift, and a belief that identity is not shared [that] will reduce and possibly eliminate it (ibid.: 180).

Third, further exploration of group depolarization, in the light of the above mentioned typical conditions of this phenomenon, shows that the less uniformity of opinions there is in a deliberative group, the lower the probability that the group's deliberations will approach a state of 'fixation of belief' vis-à-vis a certain position—and vice-versa as regards group polarization. In the latter case, one of the generally accepted reasons has to do with the 'limited pool' of persuasive arguments used in deliberation: it is argued that, since a group's members are from the start inclined in a certain direction, most arguments in the deliberation will support the same direction, and the discussion's result will move individuals further in that direction (Sunstein 2002: 179). In group polarization experiments "like-minded people, not exposed to others, shift in large because of that limited exposure", but "the arbitrariness that can be introduced by skewed argument pools" (ibid.: 189) can be overcome: heterogeneous groups, where a variety of opinions stemming from a

[13] Sunstein quotes Brown's (1985: 226) remark that "familiar and long-debated issues do not depolarize easily" and points out that in experiments involving people who meet regularly and engage in repeated deliberative discussions one observes repeated shifts toward, and past the defined pole (Sunstein 2002: 182)—a result he considers very important for democratic deliberation. Nevertheless, it seems to us that the recurring upgrading and confirmation of roughly the same position suggests that under certain circumstances a group's tendency may become not only polarized but also entrenched to such an extent that prevents depolarization altogether, thus becoming a CSD. If this occurs within groups, a fortiori it can happen in inter-group environments, where it is well known that the ingroup vs. outgroup pair is a potential candidate for a host of powerful CSDs (cf. 3.4.3) as Sunstein (2002: 184) stresses: "Recall that polarization increases when group members identify themselves along some salient dimension, and especially when the group is able to define itself by contrast to another group".

variety of perspectives is present *and* manifested, are capable to balance such a biased pool; and, moreover, to enlarge and enrich the pool with innovative ideas and arguments.

What can be learned from this brief excursion into group polarization is relevant to the treatment of CSDs and to the use of argumentation and deliberation in the public sphere, in ways we at least have hinted at above. More will be said in the following sections. It is particularly important to stress the importance of heterogeneity—a theme to which Sunstein (2002) devotes several pages. The enriched pool of arguments not only contributes to the first step (depolarization). The development of its innovative ideas through the group's dialectic deliberative process also provokes new rounds of deliberation where the discussion may lead to a re-polarization of the group's position in the new, imaginative, and creative terms which are indispensable to face the challenges of CSDs in the public sphere.

3.4.5 Breaking down CSDs: a promising strategy for argumentation in the public sphere

Of the vast field of psychological research, cognition receives perhaps most attention, and reasoning, reasonableness, and rationality are among the most studied cognitive phenomena. Naturally these studies provide a rich crop of insights on the difficulties—particularly alleged obstacles and miscarriages—affecting these key mental phenomena. This crop sheds light on many types of cognitive bias, on heuristics and reasoning under uncertainty, on social, emotive, and linguistic influences on reasoning, on the workings of persuasion, and on a variety of specific mental processes relevant to the topic of this paper.[14]

We have decided to focus on CSD due to its effects on argumentation and to the fact it has been so far overlooked in argumentation theories. The real challenge represented by the omnipresence of CSDs in public sphere disagreements and arguments lies in the fact that, although their reproachable consequences (e.g., falling prey to stereotypes and prejudice) are easily identifiable hence removable, their systemic infrastructure is sufficiently complex to be singled out and properly analyzed single-handedly even by participants in the public debate who adopt a rational posture. Furthermore, if analyzed through a cooperative dialectical exchange with others, it is still necessary to identify the level of cognitive detail and generalization that is contextually adequate for successfully arguing in each of the specific public issues to be discussed. The problem is that the systemic dichotomies in use in the public space are for the most part too general, as well as grounded in powerful traditions, and consequently inadequate for dealing with a dynamically changing cognitive environment. Before concluding this relatively long section 3, we want to stress that the meta-analysis we have endeavored to perform in this section in order to discern the sources, components, and mechanisms of CSDs, as well as of the cognitive obstacles they raise, is intended to help those who engage in argumentation in the public sphere or theorize about it to realize the gap that separates a CSD based perception of the public issues they argue about from a presumably more adequate way to do so. In the next sections we undertake a comparative discussion of the possible contribution of such an analysis from the perspective of two current theories of argumentation whose approaches are significantly different.

[14] It would be pretentious of course to give the reader a list of references. For some examples, see Petty and Caccioppo (1986) and Janis (1996).

4. PRAGMA-DIALECTICS, THE PUBLIC SPHERE, AND COGNITIVE SYSTEMIC DICHOTOMIZATION

The Pragma-dialectic (PD) approach has made a valuable contribution to the development of argumentation theory. As a representative of the argumentation branch of 'normative dialectics', it allows to examine the relationship between argumentation and the CSD phenomenon; furthermore four of PD's characteristics, which will be discussed in this section, permit to consider the role of this theory in public sphere argumentation. The first is the theory's proponents' general model of 'critical discussion', which they consider applicable to all domains, including public disagreements. The second is the similarity that can be observed between PD and the Habermasian conception of argumentation in the public sphere (cf. 2.2.2). The third is the fact that PD views itself as praxis based normative approach, which is therefore capable of facing the challenges discussed in sections 2 and 3. And, related to the former characteristic, the fourth is the fact that PD indeed explicitly mentions the problems of political discourse, while insisting that critical discussion is a useful—and perhaps the only feasible—tool for achieving participatory democracy. We assume that the readers are familiar with PD (cf. van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004), and therefore we will examine only those aspects of the theory's basic model that are relevant to argumentation in the public sphere and to the CSD phenomenon.

4.1 Adapting critical discussion to the public sphere according to the PD view

In several publications, including his recent book published in 2010, Frans van Eemeren claims that critical discussion is a general model which is adequate for handling differences of opinion in the public and political spaces:

> The standpoints at issue in the difference of opinion can pertain to any kind of subject and they can be descriptive as well as evaluative or prescriptive…can be encountered in all areas of life, from the family circle…to…political arenas (van Eemeren 2010: 1-2).

He opposes positions whose 'exclusionist' outlook rejects the normative approach to the political sphere on the grounds that "normative statements can never be subjected to a reasonable discussion" (ibid.: 2), because—he argues—the discussion of politics "is an area of vital interest to all of us and should clearly not be excluded from argumentative reasonableness" (ibid.: 3)—a view with which we are prone to agree. Nevertheless, he admits that in the present situation critical discussion is far from being systematically and successfully applied to that vital area: "In representative democracies, however, the outcomes of the political process tend to be predominantly the product of negotiations between political leaders rather than the result of a universal and mutual process of deliberative disputation" (ibid.). Political debates, therefore, are 'quasi-discussions', i.e., "monologues calculated only to win the audience's consent to one's own views", rather than 'genuine discussions', i.e., serious attempts to have an intellectual exchange, which is typical of critical discussions (ibid.). In order to overcome this situation, "democracy should always have promoted such a critical discussion of standpoints as a central aim. Only if this is the case can stimulating participation in political discourse enhance the quality of democracy" (ibid.). This can be achieved, however, only by following "the dialectical rules for argumentative discourse that make up a code of conduct for political

discourse [and] are therefore of crucial importance to giving substance to the ideal of participatory democracy" (ibid.: 4); thereby fully acknowledging that "education in processing argumentation in a critical discussion is indispensable for a democratic society (van Eemeren 1995: 145-146).

The reasons provided for the failure of the adoption of the critical discussion model in reality ranges from a general allusion to human nature ("in real-life contexts, it has to be taken into account that human interaction is not always automatically 'naturally' and fully oriented toward the ideal of dialectical reasonableness "; van Eemeren 2010: 4) to specific political sphere argumentation handicaps (unwillingness of people "to subject their thinking to critical scrutiny"; "vested interest in particular outcome"; "inequality in power and resources; "different levels of critical skills"; and "a practical demand for an immediate settlement"; van Eemeren 2010: 4). Although these causes may have some explanatory value in some cases, in our opinion their *modus operandi* is not accounted for and, what is more important, they do not cover the full spectrum of challenges that the successful use of critical discussion in the public and political spheres must face, as we have seen (cf. sections 2 and 3).

No wonder that van Eemeren himself raises the question "whether maintaining the dialectical ideal of critical discussion in political and other real-life contexts is not utopian" (ibid.), to which he replies by admitting that "[t]he ideal of a critical discussion is by definition not a description of any kind of reality but sets a theoretical standard that can be used for heuristic, analytic and evaluative purpose" (ibid.). This ideal seems to be so inspiring that it remains valid as a *pure* theoretical ideal, "even if the argumentative discourse falls short of the dialectical ideal" (ibid.).

In the light of the substantial gap between the normative ideal and the actual practices of public and political argumentation that PD's description and explanation provides, a number of doubts arise: Are there structural, rather than merely contingent obstacles in idealized critical discussion that prevents even its approximate use in the public sphere? Can a theory that claims to be a praxis based normative system fulfill its promise if it sets up a threshold that no one who tries to apply it to the public sphere can reach? Doesn't the very fact that argumentation is excessively idealized in the model PD proposes cause the gap by distancing people concerned by public issues from argumentation at all? All these doubts suggest that a powerful structural phenomenon like the existence of CSDs in the public sphere is perhaps overlooked by PD and requires, for its overcoming, a radically different approach.

4.2 Discrepancies between the PD approach and reasonable argumentation in the public sphere

The discrepancies in question have to do with basic parameters relevant to every argumentative process, namely:

(A) The discussants' goals and targets: what do they expect to achieve through the argumentation process and what is it capable of providing.
(B) The preconditions for initiating a critical discussion: what are the discussants presumed to know and accept of these preconditions.

(C) The argumentative process that is supposed to lead to the achievement of the discussants' goals.
(D) The influence of context and agents on the argumentative process.

4.2.1 Goals

Assuming that argumentation is a voluntary endeavor, the parties are presumed to engage in it if and only if: (i) the process will serve their goals; (ii) these goals cannot be achieved by different, better means.

(i) PD describes as follows the aim of engaging in an argumentative process:

> Argumentation is basically aimed at resolving a difference of opinion about the acceptability of a standpoint by making an appeal to the other party's reasonableness. (van Eemeren 2010: 1, with reference to van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004: 11-18)

> The difference of opinion is resolved when the antagonist accepts the protagonist's viewpoint on the basis of the arguments advanced or when the protagonist abandons his viewpoint as a result of the critical responses of the antagonist. (van Eemeren 2010: 33)

Simply put, the basic assumption is that a critical discussion's aim consists in putting forth a certain position by one of the parties for the critical examination of the other, who calls it into question. The latter undertakes to refute the former's position, while its proponent is committed to defend it. Four stages (see below) are supposed to ensure a valid performance of the refutation and defense tasks. The essential point is that at the end of the four stages the parties clearly agree whether the proponent's position has been refuted or not and, accordingly, change their position (either retracting it or withdrawing from his questioning). In 'mixed' disagreements, in which the antagonist not only questions but also puts forth an opposed position, the same process takes place sequentially, i.e., at first one side (A) attacks trying to refute the other's (B) position, and after this stage is concluded, they switch roles and the second side (B) proceeds to attack the first (A) in the same fashion.

Regardless of whether the described process is indeed capable to yield a conclusive decision about the refutation of a position, and of whether the linearity of the refutation process makes sense, it is obvious that debates in the public sphere are for the most part 'mixed'. Furthermore, in so far as these debates involve dichotomous positions (rather than just opposed ones), it is necessary that at the end of the PD process one of the parties accept the position of the other.

It is also worth noticing that, contrary to deliberative democracy approaches, which in some cases approve the attempt to reach agreement in a (public) debate as a form of justification of political systems, PD claims that it is not a consensus theory at all. Instead, it conceives itself as a theory based on Popper's critical rationality, i.e., as having as its principal goal to provide each party with the means—i.e., refutation attempts—to test critically its position:

> [T]he conception of reasonableness upheld in pragma-dialectics insights from critical rationalist epistemology and utilitarian ethics conjoin … The intersubjective acceptability we attribute to the procedure, which is eventually expected to lend conventional validity to the procedure, is primarily based on its instrumentality in doing the job it is intended to do: resolving a difference of opinion. … This means that, philosophically speaking, the rationale

> for accepting the pragma-dialectical procedure is *pragmatic*—more precisely, *utilitarian* [italics in quoted text]. … However, based on Popper's falsification idea, this is a 'negative' and not 'positive', utilitarianism. … Rather than maximization of agreement, minimization of disagreement is to be aimed for. (van Eemeren 2010: 34)

The distinction between maximization of agreement and minimization of disagreement purports to stress that PD doesn't view agreement as the suitable end of the process, but just as "an intermediate step on the way to new, and more advanced, disagreements" (van Eemeren 2010: 26n). Nevertheless, no explanation is given of how these "more advanced disagreements" are engendered as a part of the dynamics of the critical process, nor what is the role or value of such disagreements in the public sphere or elsewhere. This may be due to the fact that PD's 'critical discussion' is not tuned to the generation of new positions or ideas but only to the testing of extant ones, thus echoing once again Popper, now in his focus on the *justification* rather than on the *discovery* of theories (see sections 4.2.4 and 5).

In any case, it is quite clear that the only practical result of the critical discussion à la PD of opposed positions on a public issue is to determine whether one discussant succeeded in refuting the other's position, thus obtaining the adversary's agreement, who will then share his/her position, at least for some time. In this respect, PD's critical discussion is close to Habermas's 'reasonable argumentation', whose aim is to reach consensus.[15] In spite of the apparent difference between a critical examination of a position aiming at its refutation or at its acceptance, even van Eemeren admits, to some extent, their similarity. He points out that "the pragma-dialectical procedure deals only with 'first order' conditions for resolving differences of opinion on the merits by means of critical discussion" (van Eemeren 2010: 34), and stresses that there are 'higher order' conditions, 'internal' and 'external', that are "beyond the agent's control", conditions that are similar to Habermas's "ideal speech conditions" (van Eemeren 2010: 35n). Anyhow, whether according to PD the main goal of the critical discussion process in the public space is to create the opportunity for refutation or for agreement (meaning that one of the discussants acknowledges that his position is wrong), the essential assumption of this process is that the participants in it in the public sphere (or elsewhere) must be aware that one of them holds a wrong position and will have to explicitly acknowledge this.

Is such a goal, especially when conceived as the ultimate aim of the proposed argumentative process, feasible and acceptable in the public sphere?

In our opinion, there are at least four reasons for arguing that it is a utopian, hence unacceptable goal, if one takes seriously what should be expected from argumentative practice and theory in the public sphere. First, because PD deserves a critique similar to the one leveled against the Popperian version of critical rationalism it espouses,[16] which defends a theory of knowledge "without a knowing subject" (Popper 1972); obviously, such a-contextual position becomes even more problematic if applied to the public and political spheres, where it must operate in a context essentially involved with practical rationality. Second, due to its analogy with theories such as Habermas's that were discussed in this section as well as in 2.2—an analogy that deserves additional criticism because, unlike Habermasianism, PD overlooks the relationship between the political and public context and argumentative practice. Third, because of PD's total overlooking of

[15] They also resemble in their 'rules of the game'.

[16] For a critique of this sort, see for instance Dascal (1997).

the role of CSDs in public argumentation (cf. 4.2.2). And fourth, due to unilateral value judgments of positions in the public sphere, which lead to simplistic criteria of refutation or acceptance in a domain where complexity is the rule (cf. 2.1.1 and 4.2.3).

(ii) Let us admit, for the sake of argument, that the refutation goal as claimed by PD is central, feasible, acceptable, and useful in public argumentation. Aren't there better ways to achieve this goal?

The refutation and defense moves stipulated by the PD critical discussion model include, on the one side, the antagonist's critical remarks or demands and on the other, the proponent's replies. We believe that it must be assumed that neither the critique nor the replies are previously known to the contenders, which is why they have an interest in engage in the argumentation process: presumably, the expression of both, counter-arguments and defensive-arguments, is good to both sides. In spite of its usefulness in certain situations, this kind of exchange does not amount to the full manifestation of the dialectical critical process, wherein the context and co-text of the dialectical exchange, as well as the cognitive interaction that takes place and evolves throughout the exchange, play a decisive role in the design and 'inner' justification of each of the participants' moves. Argumentation strategies that take into account these resources and make full use of their potential are no doubt setting up another, broader span of goals for the argumentative process, and are more likely to achieve these goals more effectively than they certainly would achieve their PD more limited counterparts (cf. 4.2.4 and 5).

4.2.2 Preconditions

The ideal PD critical discussion can only be realized if some preconditions are satisfied. The most important ones are a) a clear-cut identification of the standpoint that provokes the disagreement, b) the decision of the parties to engage in a discussion, and c) the participants' commitment to obey the procedural rules. As we shall see, these preconditions share a common assumption, which calls into question the feasibility of using critical discussion in the public sphere.

(A) This precondition assumes that it is possible to isolate rigorously the subject matter of a critical discussion, so as to conduct a focused discussion that makes use only of relevant arguments. This precondition is quite strict, for whenever both discussants defend contrary standpoints, their disagreement should be treated as two separate fully fledged discussions: "… if another discussion begins, it must go through the same stages again—from confrontation stage to concluding stage" (van Eemeren 2010: 10n).

(B) This precondition subordinates the decision to engage in the discussion to the evaluation that the discussants share enough common ground to pursue it adequately: "After the parties have decided that there is enough common ground to conduct a discussion …" (van Eemeren 2010: 33).

(C) This precondition stresses the 'contractual' character of a critical discussion, which requires explicit mutual commitments by the discussants. Its rationale is that without such commitments the aim of the critical discussion, i.e., the resolution of the difference of opinions, will not be achieved, which makes engaging in

> the discussion pointless: "There is no point in venturing to resolve a difference … if there is no mutual commitment to a common starting point, which may include procedural commitments as well as substantive agreement" (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 60).

These 'first order' preconditions, as they are labeled in PD (cf. van Eemeren 2010: 33), are the conditions that candidates to participate in a critical discussion must fulfill if they intend to do so and can afford it personally (a 'second order' condition) and politically (a 'third order' condition).[17] In addition, the first order conditions demand from the prospective discussants a clear, distinct, and detailed picture of the scope of the discussion that they are about to engage in. This means not mixing up the various differences of opinion that the discussion may involve, and being able to separate them properly as the subject matter for independent discussions; a further requirement is the anticipated identification of the pieces of the 'substantive agreement' forming the starting point in order to ensure that they are sufficient for conducting the discussion up to a satisfactory closure.

Unfortunately these conditions are hardly achievable in most public sphere discussions. To be sure, in very simple local disagreements, it is possible to isolate the issues involved and to treat them independently of each other. However, as we have seen (cf. section 2), most public disagreements display a complexity and thematic inter-dependence that prevent their clear-cut isolation, i.e. the fulfillment of precondition a); and, given the dynamics of public issues' discussions, the anticipations required by preconditions b) and c) are even less capable of fulfillment. Besides the complexity and inter-dependence of the structural constraints of the public sphere, we must also take into account the CSD phenomenon that pervades the public space (cf. section 3), which adds further obstacles to the satisfaction of PD's preconditions. CSD's dichotomous nature precludes the fulfillment of b) and c), for it rules out the very possibility of pre-establishing any substantive agreement between individual or group standpoints between which the maximization of disagreement prevails, while its systemic nature, which schematizes and tightly connects different standpoints under the same label, precludes the fulfillment of condition a).

4.2.3 Process

The critical discussion process comprises four stages, two of which—'confrontation' and 'opening'—are related to the goals and preconditions (cf. 4.2.1 and 4.2.2). We shall now focus on the core of the process, the 'argumentation' and 'concluding' stages. Nine of the ten 'Rules of Conduct for Reasonable Discussants' (henceforth 'Rules'; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 187-196; van Eemeren 2010: 7) apply to these stages. We shall not discuss all of these rules, and will focus on the central problems regarding their application in public sphere disagreements: a) linearization of the dialectic process; b) relevance assumption; c) lack of priorities; d) conclusiveness of refutation assumption.

(A) Two kinds of linearization occur in the critical discussion process. The first is the sequential approach to mixed differences of opinion. The second is the underlying assumption that the connection between the standpoints under discus-

[17] See, for instance, van Eemeren (2010: 35n). See also 4.2.1.

sion and the agreed upon starting point can be fully reconstructed in terms of a linear path tracing back the former to the latter (Rules 3, 5, 6, 10).

(B) It is assumed that the use in the process of non-relevant arguments is not acceptable (Rule 4). No criteria of relevance are specified, but it is assumed that judgments of relevance are shared.

(C) The proponent of a standpoint must reply to all objections raised by the antagonist in the process (Rule 2). It follows that any objection is permitted regardless of its importance for the discussion, the time required to deal with all objections, and their order of priority.

(D) It is assumed that the process cannot be inconclusive, for a standpoint is either conclusively and validly defended or refuted (Rules 7, 8, 9).

Although the sequential, separate treatment PD requires for cases of mixed differences of opinion (which comprise most of public disagreements) was already discussed (see 4.2.1), it is convenient to add a few important remarks. First, in the public sphere, especially when CSDs are involved, mixed differences of opinion involve dichotomies rather than just opposed positions, which means that the refutation of one of the standpoints entails the confirmation of the other. Second, even in the non-dichotomous mixed cases, the defense arguments usually serve as the attack arguments once the roles are switched. Third, the separate treatment procedure implies that the discussants may be required to wait for quite a long time until they can react to the attack or defense arguments used in the 'other' difference of opinion, thus wasting the power of the spontaneous direct dialectical reaction. Finally, the sequential procedure doesn't permit to take advantage together of the full spectrum of arguments available in any multi-positions disagreement. For all these reasons, it doesn't make sense to follow the sequential requirement in public argumentation. As for the linearity of the chain of arguments leading from starting point to standpoint or vice-versa, it is not feasible in the public sphere because of the virtual impossibility of reconstructing this chain, given the difficulties in establishing starting points (cf. 4.2.2) and the consequent danger of getting entangled in an infinite regress.

The rule of relevance is rather irrelevant in real cases of public disagreement. First of all because a significant portion of such disagreements derives from the lack of agreement about what are the relevant arguments in support of the opposed standpoints. For this reason, this rule is perhaps useful for an independent observer of the critical discussion, though in order to evaluate relevance, s/he should be very well informed about the content and context of the discussion. On the other hand, the obligation of the proponent to respond to all of the antagonist's objections causes an unbearable and unnecessary burden in the public sphere argumentation arena. The obvious solution which is an agreed upon order of priority based on the relative critical importance of the objections is unfortunately blocked by Rule 2 and other PD procedural requirements.

From the public sphere and CSD perspective, the least convincing piece of the argumentative process is the reliance on the conclusiveness of refutability. First of all, because the public sphere is primarily concerned with practical issues sometimes intermingled with theoretical ones. To be sure, argumentation is central in practical discussions as it is in theoretical ones; however, refutability is certainly not a generally accepted criterion in the evaluation of practical arguments, especially as regards domains where

value disagreements prevail.[18] Moreover, in the public space, the decisive question in a difference of opinions is not to determine whether a standpoint is refuted or not, but whether the balance of reasons has been properly applied to its evaluation without overlooking 'undesirable' evidence and reasons. The improper use of the balance is very common, as we have shown, under the influence of CSDs (cf. section 3). Furthermore, the presence of CSDs largely reduces the applicability of refutation to a disagreement, since to conclusively refute a CSD based position would imply destroying the whole family of dichotomies that constitute it, an endeavor that would mean the destruction of the group identity of which the CSD in question is a constitutive systemic part.

4.2.4 Context

In the preceding sections we have examined the discrepancies between the goals, the preconditions, and the argumentative process of the PD 'critical discussion' model and the kind of argumentation needed to fit the conditions of the public sphere, including the CSD phenomenon. We conclude our discussion of the adequacy of the PD model to those conditions by examining other fundamental parameters that are not taken into account in the model's normative approach, focusing particularly on the role of the context and of the agents in the public space.

One discrepancy derives from the fact that different argumentative environments and purposes demand different kinds of 'reasonable argumentation' modalities. This contrasts with PD's assumption that there is a universal 'critical discussion' process that fits the resolution of all kinds of 'differences of opinion', with at most some minor adaptations. In fact, research has shown that there are significantly different types of argumentative processes—'critical discussion' being just one of them—that are appropriate for different contexts and needs of critical argumentation (cf. Walton 2007).

One should also stress that the PD model overlooks factors related to group and individual identity and their emotive consequences, which are part and parcel of debates and argumentative processes, especially in the public sphere. Although cognition is at the center of attention in argumentation, the identity and feelings of the discussants cannot be ignored, be it for their negative influence or their possible positive uses in direct reasonable argumentation.

Finally, one of the most important challenges of the PD approach vis-à-vis the eventual contribution of reasonable argumentation in the public sphere is the lack of a clear standpoint about the value of differences of opinion and disagreements as such. PD focuses on the resolution of such differences and for this purpose insists that the attention of the discussants as well as of analysts and observers must be called almost exclusively to the process of refutation or justification of standpoints. In so doing, the intrinsic value

[18] For a recent more extreme view of the gap between practical and theoretical reasoning, see Kock (2007a, 2007b). Although we do not accept entirely his position, we share his critique of the adoption by PD of a refutability criterion applicable to all kinds of argumentation, including practical reasoning: "… in practical argumentation no party can be logically *proven* to be either right or wrong. In principle, arguments in the practical domain can never be "valid" in the sense of *entailing* their conclusion, nor can they be "sufficient" to entail a conclusion. No matter how many arguments you muster for your proposal, your opponent is never *compelled* by those arguments to accept it. This is why, as we have seen, the practical domain is one of choice" (Kock 2007a: 9).

of the plurality of opinions and their confrontation is practically ignored, along with the importance of the dialectical process itself for the creation of new ideas, viewpoints, and other forms of social innovation. In this respect, the very existence of differences of opinion is as important as, if not more important than their elimination or resolution via a critical discussion, and the critical interaction inherent to a dialectical exchange is no less important than its result. Furthermore, it must be recalled, especially in the context of this paper, that this interaction plays an essential role in the undermining of entrenched CSDs that tend to monopolize argumentation in the public space.

5. CONTROVERSIES THEORY, THE PUBLIC SPHERE, AND COGNITIVE SYSTEMIC DICHOTOMIZATION

Structural disagreements are an essential part of the public space and play an important role in its evolution. In general, they are not resolvable in terms of full agreement, and to some extent this is not necessary. It is well known that heterogeneity and disagreement contribute to social improvement. To be sure, some of this improvement is due to the exercise of power and to circumstantial factors, but no doubt other ones are the result of the exercise of judgment, social learning and rational controversies that emerged out of those disagreements. There are, however, public disagreements such as the CSDs we have described that are only partially structural; their bulk rather consists in *perceived* differences, which can undergo substantial changes, some of which are socially desirable for the cooperative handling of public divergences. The controversies theory (CT) approach attempts to reach a reasonable equilibrium in the treatment of the structural and perceived public divergences. This approach addresses disagreements, with a view to mapping, analyzing, and evaluating the role of controversies in various domains, past and present. CT comprises a typology of polemic exchanges, with special attention to the type it calls ‘controversy’—a type of debate that features ‘direct reasonable argumentation’ characteristics (see note 1) as well as other properties relevant to public discourse. In what follows, we succinctly discuss CT’s main tenets and its adequacy for meeting the requirements of a satisfactory treatment of disagreements and argumentation in the public sphere. Our aim is not a full comparative analysis of CT and PD, but our discussion will reveal the differences of these two approaches vis-à-vis their application to the public sphere.

5.1 Types of disagreement and types of polemic exchange

Disagreements can be divided in two kinds:

(A) Disagreements resulting from mistakes that can be detected and precisely and convincingly clarified, thus allowing reasonable persuasion towards one of the positions. Disagreements of this kind address a well-defined issue that can be clearly discerned from others. They display identifiable epistemic characteristics that can be explicitly acknowledged and agreed upon by the contenders, including methods for resolving the difference of opinions.

(B) Disagreements stemming from differences in worldview, values, or cultural frameworks, coupled with distinct systems and ways of processing information

> and of interpreting and assessing facts and values. Disagreements of this kind can manifest themselves in a broad range of issues and/or in specific points.

It is important to notice that the above description of each type of disagreement comprises two sorts of elements: one has to do with the opposition of ideas or opinions; the other, with the opposition between the persons who hold these ideas. The former includes, for instance, the scope of the issues discussed, their epistemic properties, their relationship with ideologies or theories, etc.; the latter, the discursive strategies employed by the contenders, the ways they can be persuaded, etc. The kind of interaction between these two components in (a) and (b) may help to explain the varieties of possible resolution of these disagreements. Disagreements of type (a) depend primarily on particular contingent beliefs of the disputants, which can change as a result of the discussion and thus lead to the disagreement's resolution; type (b) disagreements, on the other hand, also involve structural divergences concerning the issues at stake between the contenders, which consist in a web of beliefs that can hardly be dissociated, a fact that renders virtually impossible complete agreement and therefore a definitive convincing resolution of the disagreement. A dialectical process, which contributes to shaping the positions of the sides, no doubt influences the discussion's result in both types (a) and (b) of disagreements, although in different ways, as will be pointed out in what follows.

The framework developed by CT offers a typology of dialectical processes used for handling disagreements (see Dascal 2008b and the references therein), which seeks to fit the empirical findings of the study of polemic exchanges. Two of the ideal types discerned in this typology correspond to the two types of disagreement described above: type (a) disagreements are typically the object of *discussions*, in Dascal's terminology, while type (b) disagreements are the object of *controversies* in his terminology. A *discussion* bears some similarity in its conception and applications to PD's 'critical discussion' (cf. section 4), and the notion of *controversy*, which is used in the rest of this section, will be further explained as we argue for its appropriateness for the reasonable treatment of public sphere disagreements. At this point, let us just mention that *controversy* differs from *discussion* in that, while it is predicated upon the possibility of rational persuasion in handling disagreements, it does not assume that its end result must be a dichotomy based yes/no decision resulting from the application of a strict decision making procedure to contenders' arguments that are supposed not to violate a shared 'starting point' which is a precondition, according to PD, for the polemic exchange to take place at all.

Unlike its two counterparts, a third type of polemical exchange in CT's typology, dubbed *dispute*, can hardly be viewed as a form of reasonable argumentation and, although it is largely present in the public space, will not be the object of detailed discussion in this paper. It is sufficient to point out that it is comparable to a battle of wits whose aim is sheer victory over the adversary, rather than cooperative interaction in resolving a disagreement.

In sections 2 and 3, we have seen that disagreements in the public sphere are for the most part of type (b), while section 4 confirmed that the critical discussion process is unfit for properly dealing with public sphere disagreements. We shall presently undertake to show why *controversy*, which—as claimed above—corresponds to type (b) disagreements, provides a reasonable option for a different way of 'resolving' this type of disagreements. For this purpose we will discuss, as in in section 4, the role of goals, preconditions, process, and context in *controversies* in the public sphere.

5.2 Controversies and the public sphere: goals, preconditions, process, and context

5.2.1 Goals

In order to define the goals of a process capable of improving a given situation, it is necessary to analyze the situation and spell out the properties of the process that can improve it. As we have seen, a major component of the public sphere that influences the nature and course of its disagreements is the presence of CSDs (cf. section 3), which underlie disagreements and determine the adoption of positions without taking into account the role of structural factors in such disagreements (cf. section 2). Consequently, a central goal of *controversies* in the public sphere could be contributing to induce a combined treatment of disagreements, focused on de-dichotomizing the opponents' positions, so as to allow for the disclosure of occult structural disagreements. In contrast to other goals we have discussed, in which the goal predetermines the kind of result of the process, in the suggested *controversy* based process, no single target is pursued by the contenders. Instead, several possible aims are achievable, according to the current state of the question and its discussion, the contextual conditions, and the discursive cooperation of the parties. Such aims comprise cognitive and other mental gains, practical improvements, and changes of opinion as well as the creation of new options, which may lead to partial agreements. To be sure, such improvements can benefit also from an individual learning process based on personal reflection. Nevertheless, they can be more effectively accomplished through a dialectical process of direct reasonable argumentation, provided it is performed in a cooperative critical vein within a *controversy* framework, which under these conditions is not only effective, but also provides what seems to be the only available disagreement handling process capable to yield the desired de-dichotomization of CDS-based dichotomous conflicts.

The use of *controversy* processes for disabling systemic dichotomies, therefore, acts as a vehicle for achieving epistemic gains through discovery (e.g., of hidden dichotomies or disagreements) and invention (e.g., of alternatives to polarized conceptualizations), which can lead to the accomplishment of various aims, such as:

- Argumentative evaluation of beliefs or position by activating the 'balance of reasons', which can yield refutation/full justification as well as defeasible conclusions;
- Dialectically generated and tested innovations, including position reframing;
- Self-understanding improvement and insights (e.g., better organization of one's belief web);
- Attitude changes in inter-relations between opponents;
- Substantial or partial agreements on general or specific contended issues.

It is clear that, in the public sphere, the accomplishment of these and many other goals the *controversy* approach makes possible, amounts not only to partial or local successes; it also paves the way to an ample reframing of the whole public arena in so far as argumentative panorama and corresponding prospects are concerned.

5.2.2 Preconditions

Controversies are able to lead to innovations, among other things due to the fact that they do not restrict a priori the level, depth, method, and content of the disagreements that may arise in the course of their conduct. It is this absence of predetermined 'taboos' that ensures their openness and extends their scope, if compared with other kinds of reasonable argumentation. This fact of course affects the question of whether 'preconditions' are compatible with the nature of controversies and, if this is the case, what can they be in general, and in the public sphere in particular.

As we have already observed, in public disagreements, it is hardly possible to reach preliminary agreements, be they substantive or procedural, before the beginning of a polemic exchange. Only as the discussion process unfolds fragmentary agreements begin to appear (e.g., "I do not entirely agree with your proposal, but it has certain valuable points"). In *controversies* such very partial concessions are often the first steps of successful de-dichotomization, even though they don't touch substantial divergences between the contenders. They emerge precisely due to the 'no taboos principle' which ensures the openness mentioned above. This implies that, unlike other models of reasonable argumentation, CT cannot admit that controversies comprise preconditions other than the agreement of the contenders to engage in a process of debate in which they are equal participants, interested in the issues at stake, and willing to clarify them (rather than to 'decide' or 'resolve' them according to a pre-established method or pattern). Neither what is the disagreement about ('the issue at stake' or *status questionis*), nor why it is interesting or important, nor how can and should be clarified (e.g., restricting or enlarging the scope of the debate by denying or accepting recourse to certain pieces of knowledge, argument types, disciplines, etc.) has the status of a *precondition*, for these are questions that arise in the context of the dialectic process and can only be reasonably decided (by mutual agreement, of course) in the light of the reasons for their appearance at that particular occasion and of their eventual consequences. Notice that the 'mutual agreement' requirement expresses a quite strong 'equality principle' which it is convenient to make explicit: it is not only equality as freedom of expression of one's standpoint or of one's judgment about the truth of a statement, validity of an argument, etc. It is also, and most importantly, the acknowledgment of the fact that the contenders are entitled to such a freedom of expression and are called to use it in the joint decisions because they are trusted as willing to cooperate in the dialectical process, as capable of reasonable decisions, and as being aware of and fully admitting the possibility that *each of them* (not only the adversary) can be mistaken.

To sum up, the preconditions of *controversies*, especially in the public sphere, consist in the commitment of the controversialists to the time span required for the process and to the principles of 1.*Equality*, 2.*Openness*, 3.*Cooperation*, 4.*Trust*. Although this may not seem much, along with their consequences, these commitments, if fulfilled, ensure not only a reliable and fruitful conduction of *controversies* as a form of direct reasonable argumentation but also their chances to contribute significantly to the application and improvement of reasonable argumentation in the public sphere.

5.2.3 Process

As we have stressed, a major obstacle for reasonable argumentation in the public sphere is the widespread use of dichotomies. A satisfactory process for conducting controversies in the public sphere must, therefore, prioritize and facilitate de-dichotomization. Of course there are more than one way to perform this task, and the chosen way will depend on the disagreement, the participants, the background, the urgency of the issue and the available time for discussion, and other contextual factors. Nevertheless it is possible to sketch a process outlining the main elements that must figure in a process that indeed facilitates de-dichotomization.

A *controversy* is at the same time cooperative and antagonistic, and an interactive rather than individual process. In order to obtain results that justify the cognitive effort, the time spent, and the resources involved in the former, as compared to the latter form of learning, the parties need to choose from the outset the most influential issues in the disagreement for each of them and agree about their alternate order of discussion, making sure that it respects what is important for each contender. This arrangement ensures the progressive development of the interactive dialectical confrontation through which the contenders deepen their understanding of each other and refine their justifications for their own position accordingly. It therefore allows for a more profound preparation of arguments and responses, as well as for the identification of eventual underlying CSDs. It also makes the process really interactive at every step, permits to reach the core of the disagreement stepwise, and precludes the overlooking of the opponent's reasons and supporting evidence.

Obviously this outline gives only a few indications of the kind of process we believe fits both, the extant conditions of the public sphere and the characterizing properties of *controversies*. Even in this succinct form, however, its implications both for the development of the process and for the results of its application are quite clear. We conclude this sub-section with a couple of examples.

As for the development of the process itself, it is noteworthy that the proposed outline suggests objective criteria for relevance judgments that are inevitably embedded in polemic exchanges, but usually rely on intuition rather than on justified ground. The contenders' explicit exposition of the scales of importance they attribute to different components of a disagreement and the organization of the discussion through their mutual acceptance of these scales in fact amounts to a clear, agreed upon, and easily applicable criterion of relevance for the issues, arguments, positions, and contexts presented in the *controversy* arena.

An important consequence of the *controversy* process here sketched, on the other hand, is the increase of the influence of the 'balance of reasons'. Contrary to the absence of any deliberative weighing of reasons in fixated CSDs, the necessity to face ideas or positions presented by one's adversary in a *controversy*, ideas that are often opposed to those one holds by virtue of dominant CSDs in one's community, creates the opportunity not only to use the balance of reasons and to recognize its power. For this opportunity, which may shake entire webs of beliefs—including self-perceptions, other-perceptions, perceptions of the possibility of social change—is also the opportunity to make use of *controversy*'s dialectical power for re-evaluating and restructuring the associative networks that rule the public sphere.[19]

[19] The here proposed analysis of the controversy process opens the possibility of employing 'conductive arguments' in this process. Their relationship to our use of the notion of 'balance of reasons', their sig-

5.2.4 Context

The openness of *controversies* (see 5.2.2) makes this type of polemical exchange especially context-sensitive. It implies that the understanding of and reaction to argumentative moves in a *controversy*, as well as the choice of such moves, may vary along with virtually any relevant contextual variation—ranging from the specific immediate environment in which the *controversy* process takes place through content nuances up to the associative network and the underlying background.[20] In this respect—and also for other reasons—*controversy* is perhaps the most pragmatic of the dialectical argumentative exchanges (see Dascal 1995).

It so happens that the public sphere too has a particular relation with context. On the one hand as the social and cognitive context wherein beliefs and values are formed and individual or group actions are performed. On the other, its dynamics makes it sensitive to contextual factors such as cultural contacts, governmental changes, etc. But, as we have shown, the public sphere comprises also influential phenomena—e.g., the CSDs—that tend rather towards de-contextualization and thus reduce significantly the context-sensitivity of the public sphere. If, as we have suggested, *controversy* is acknowledged as an appropriate form of handling public disagreements, capable of meeting the challenge of CSDs, and is actually used in the public sphere, it will certainly contribute with a significant dose of context-sensitivity much needed in this sphere's reasonableness.

6. EPILOGUE

We would like to conclude this paper sharing with you some of our personal experience. Obviously, our concern for the current difficulties of resolving disagreements and conflicts in the public sphere by means of direct reasonable argumentation is not purely theoretical. Hence, the enthusiasm for having identified what seems to be a major cause of those difficulties and a possible way of helping to overcome them—which certainly transpires in our text. Yet, a warning is in order. For decades we have been engulfed in a bloody conflict and have supported and participated in initiatives for its resolution, with their ups and downs. Though some partial results have been no doubt achieved, they are still in danger, largely due to our own failure as argumentation theorists to initiate and lead the much needed changes in the public sphere. We believe that overcoming this failure is feasible. Nevertheless—and here comes the warning—we must be aware that peacemaking must be acknowledged as what it really is: a very demanding and complex ongoing dialectic process. And *controversy*, a version of direct reasonable argumentation in whose virtues we believe, is not a magical recipe easy to apply and capable of quickly solve all the problems.

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nificance for understanding the different focus of PD and CT, and their relevance for the de-dichotomization of CSDs, involve potential contributions to the CT approach, which unfortunately cannot be reviewed in this article (see Zenker and Fisher, forthcoming).

[20] For an analysis of kinds of texts and an integrated model of the roles of context in interpretation, see Dascal (2003: Chapter 8).

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Commentary on "'COGNITIVE SYSTEMIC DICHOTOMIZATION' IN PUBLIC ARGUMENTATION AND CONTROVERSIES" by Marcelo Dascal and Amnon Knoll

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1. INTRODUCTION

I suppose gratitude is in order, but it would be like thanking the physician who has just given you bad news, for Doctors Dascal and Knoll have examined the democratic body politic and have rendered their diagnosis: chronic cognitive systemic dichotomization, a condition that is every bit as fearsome as it sounds. They have carefully and thoroughly laid out its symptoms and searched out its causes; they have offered a prognosis and even identified some ameliorative treatments; but it is chronic and I am afraid there is the possibility that it could be irreversibly degenerative. Even such popular and generally effective courses of treatment as pragma-dialectics, they ably argue, are of limited help here. The little that I would like to add to their analysis is not encouraging. I fear that the contingencies that create and sustain the clusters of positions in a CSD make them even more resistant to direct reasonable argumentation than previously imagined. It is hard to be optimistic about the long-range outlook for deliberative democracies.

2. AN ANECDOTE

In the fall of 2004, I was in a reading group of faculty and students representing a rather broad sample of academic disciplines, political viewpoints, and personal histories. The book was Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*, his idiosyncratic history of the political Left and what remained of it in the United States. Rorty's main point was about the split between New Deal economic, "lunchbox" liberals and the more recent academic liberalism of "identity politics" and the contingencies of history that brought them together. It was during the Bush-Kerry campaigns for the presidency, so it was an extremely tense and polarized atmosphere. Nevertheless, the group was politically diverse, with 6 or 8 folks who could be fairly described as either pretty far to the left or *very* far to the left, 4 or 5 occupying similar positions on the right-wing of the spectrum, and, surprisingly, a few people who, while politically savvy and politically active, were nonetheless hard to fit anywhere along the spectrum from left-to-right. For the partisans among us, that was inconceivable! It was baffling that anyone paying any attention at all could still be neutral between President Bush and Senator Kerry when so much was at stake and the differences so clear. How was that even possible?

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The explanation became clear as we grappled with another question: Why is it, one of the students asked, that when she knew someone's position on, say, abortion, she also had a pretty good idea of what that person was likely to say on a host of other related *and unrelated* issues, ranging from school vouchers and cap-and-trade legislation to the privatization of social security and the war in Iraq? What, after all, does the capital gains tax rate have to do with gay rights? Rorty's analysis was helpful here, pointing to the genealogy of these positions and the historical contingencies that brought them together. Things could have been different. Civil rights, for example, could easily have remained in the constellation of issues atop the conservative agenda in the U.S. rather than being ceded to the liberals. Conversely, liberals might have kept all their emphasis on jobs and workplace issues rather than spend any of their political capital on environmental issues.

And this analysis helped with the earlier question because, not by chance, the students and faculty members who did not fit into the Democratic Left-versus-Republican Right dichotomy were all foreign nationals from South America and Europe. They were from societies whose political histories did not pair up Cold War anti-communist militancy with pro-life politics or environmental activism with any position at all on whether the deficit as a percentage of the GNP was too high.

2. ARGUING OUTSIDE THE BOX

The presence of people from outside the American CSD context brought an unexpected benefit: everyone else found them much easier partners in argument. We could argue with them about some particular topic without finding ourselves inexorably embroiled in all the other political issues. Separate issues could be argued separately. Consequently, a programmatic approach to argumentation along the pragma-dialectical lines could be useful in making sense of those exchanges and, if followed, could also be of great help in furthering their chances for successful resolution. However, as Dascal and Knoll point out, this contrasts greatly with argumentation immersed in the complex networks of CSD contexts. Argumentation theories in general, and pragma-dialectics in particular, have a harder time gaining traction because of the Gordian knot of interconnections tying together the myriad of conceptually distinct but practically inseparable standpoints.

The presence of people from outside the particular American CSD context had another, less appealing effect: it unexpectedly brought a negative fact into focus. One of the reasons it was so much harder to argue across the dichotomous divide was the simple fact that some of the connections holding the clusters together were contingent accidents of history rather than anything logical. It is precisely because there is no relevant logical connection between right-to-die laws and climate change that their connection is logic-resistant. Argumentation presupposes reasons-responsiveness, so where there are no reasons, there can be no argument.

Let me give another example. The current political situation in the United States includes something that has been referred to as "Obama Derangement Syndrome" or ODS. The term derives from Charles Krauthammer's earlier coinage, "Bush Derangement Syndrome," and like that predecessor, it refers to the irrational knee-jerk fear, hostility, and opposition to anything said or done by the President in question. *The Daily Show*'s Jon Stewart offered the portmanteau word "baracknophobia" for the same phenomenon and that word, too, has caught on. Birthers may have been the most prominent

examples, questioning President Obama's legitimacy long after the question had been settled to everyone else's satisfaction, but even members of Congress have been known to show some symptoms. In one stunning display of ODS, the Republican Congressional leadership opposed a motion to create a bipartisan commission on debt reduction *that they themselves had so-sponsored* as soon as Obama endorsed it. In such cases, direct reasoned argumentation has no chance. Reasoned argumentation about the pros-and-cons of such a commission would be irrelevant because, to put it bluntly, the issue was not the issue. It was about President Obama.

3. ARGUMENT IS FOR CONSERVATIVES

Simon Blackburn, reviewing a book on Richard Rorty, wrote, "As he rightly reminds us, argument requires premises and conclusions that belong to the same conceptual family, or as S E Toulmin would say, 'field.' Argument, it follows, is for conservatives." What he means by "conservative" here has little to do with the politics of Left and Right. Its correlate term would be something like "radical" or "revolutionary" rather than "liberal." But that is to say that it has everything to do with the kind of political discourse that we want but so rarely get in CSD situations. The problem is not so much one of polarization *per se* but of radicalization and the kind of zealotry that leads to derangement. That is what gets in the way of mutual engagement and deliberation, and direct reasoned argumentation. And that is one of the main reasons why Dascal and Knoll are so pessimistic about the prospects of traditional argumentation theory to provide much practical help in elevating political discourse. Controversy theory, they conclude, is a better tool for the job.

Before we get too optimistic, however, I'd like to focus for a moment on another important factor that is included in their explanation of the failures of argumentation theories to alleviate CSD situations: our deep personal identification with our own sides of the dichotomy. In America, being on the Left or the Right has become a defining part of who each of is. If the country has perhaps become a little less socially segregated by race and religion, if not also by income and education, we seem to have become more socially polarized politically.

The fact that our participation in this or that dichotomous cluster is woven into our sense of who we are as human beings and as citizens has enormous significance for the possibilities of argumentation in the public square. First off, it means that if the resolution of a difference in standpoints requires successful rational persuasion, then it is not merely our positions that must change, we ourselves must change. And that makes the situation almost hopeless because the kind of cognitive change that would have to come about in order to bring two people from opposing camps into alignment would be more like a full-scale conversion than a simple case of changing one's mind in response to reasons. And if that is what is called for, then it is not only argumentation theories that fall short, but controversy theory, too. Conversion does not come about by argument, whether reasonable argumentation, critical discussion, or controversy. The added tools that controversy theory brings to the table—notably, negotiation, compromise, and various de-dichotomization strategies—are still not the right tools for the job.

4. ARGUMENT IS FOR THE PERSEVERING.

As I said, I cannot offer a very optimistic prognosis for deliberative democracies in these increasingly fragmented, polarized, and dichotomized times. The echo chambers provided by blogosphere foster and sustain epistemically closed world-views, cutting off rational engagement from even getting started.

However, to say the situation is bleak is not counsel to give up because the alternatives to faith in reason are even more painful to contemplate. And there are more than just straws to grasp at in helping us persevere. First and foremost, as Dascal and Knoll note, peacemaking—and that is what this is all about—is difficult but it is not impossible. There are many things that can be done to help bring about de-dichotomization. The failure of one particular strategy in one particular situation does not imply the failure of them all. There is no algorithm for negotiating our way safely through controversies. Second, we are once again reminded that real-life argumentation always implicates more than its narrowly-defined subject matter. For some situations, it is likely that the resources of psychology, especially social psychology, will turn out to be more important than anything critical thinking, informal logic, and argumentation theory, all narrowly understood, can provide. And third, while it often seems that we live perilously close to the End of Times, History has a way of reminding us that we are not as special as we like to think. Nothing is unprecedented, so if we persevere, perhaps we can survive after all. Dascal and Knoll have at the very least given us help in that endeavor.

Reply to Daniel H. Cohen

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First of all we wish to thank Daniel Cohen for having heroically performed the task of reading and commenting the long article that was assigned to him. Reading his commentary was for us a great pleasure, for it provided, to say the least: a clear readable 'translation' and summary of what we deemed might be a hard to grasp mosaic of ideas derived from different sources and perspectives; an immediate adoption of our esoteric concept of 'Cognitive Systemic Dichotomization' (CSD), which thanks to him became for the audience and even for ourselves a natural and familiar tool for discussing key problems of argumentation in the public sphere; the selection of extremely well chosen and significant present-day examples of such problems and their use as convincing illustrations of the relevance of CSD and of our suggestions, at least for properly understanding and perhaps even being able to solve such problems; and finally the subtle performance of his critical task, by expressing skepticism as to how far can our analysis and proposals help for "negotiating our way safely" out of the complex web of problems contemporary society faces, while at the same time stating his encouraging belief that even in such a bleak situation "alternatives to faith in reason are even more painful to contemplate".

The best response to Daniel Cohen's Commentary would have been simply to refer the reader back to it, hoping thereby to make ourselves better understood and more persuasive. Our brief Reply, in any case, is nothing but a comment on his Commentary. We will first take advantage of his contribution as providing further support to our position and, second, we will defend our position from his well taken critique of our argument to the effect that an approach based on Controversy Theory, unlike those based on current argumentation theories, is capable of successfully confronting even the most entrenched CSDs.

Besides being a very good example of the effect of a CSD and of how contextual contingencies determine its content, the story Cohen relates at the beginning of his Commentary also provides empirical evidence of the existence and influence of CSDs. Of particular importance in this respect is the fact that, as he observes, the students and faculty members of the reading group who did not fit into the Democratic Left vs. Republican Right dichotomy were all foreign nationals. Since they had not shared with their U.S. born colleagues the same specific 'mind colonization' process of CSD formation and absorption, they were not under the spell of the associative network that characterizes the particular CSD relied upon by the majority of participants in the reading group, and naturally perceived as independent those issues that were inseparable for their counterparts. Such non-intentional liberation from CSD cognitive dominance also shows that breaking down CSD entrenched associative links is possible and thus supports our claim that the application of Controversy Theory, which permits to break down such links deliberately, is a better tool for an efficient handling of CSDs than traditional argumentation theory, and can therefore contribute to overcoming an important obstacle to the quality of public sphere debate.

Nevertheless, soon after granting that Controversy Theory "is a better tool for the job" of "elevating political discourse", Cohen warns that this shouldn't raise our level

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of optimism, and launches an attack on something we have discussed in our paper and, to a certain extent agree with him, namely the role of group identity as an obstacle for successfully combating CSDs, due to "our deep personal identification with our own sides of the dichotomy". Taking the example of the U.S., where according to him political belonging is rapidly replacing other forms of group identity such as race and religion, he argues that "being on the Left or the Right has become a defining part of what each of us is". This fact, he claims, is of "enormous significance for the possibilities of argumentation in the public square", for it implies that a change of position in a public debate amounts to an identity change, which he describes as similar to a "full-scale conversion", rather than to a simple change of mind "in response to reasons". Since "conversion does not come about by argument", he concludes, Controversy Theory, as any other use of argument, becomes irrelevant for significantly initiating, conducting, and resolving debates in the public sphere, in spite of the "added tools … it brings to the table".

Cohen's argument is persuasive insofar as it highlights the unquestionable fact that the rising of a particular model of group identification to a dominant position broadens and deepens the scope of its corresponding CSD—hence further entrenching and empowering it. Thereby it becomes an encompassing 'umbrella CSD' (see our discussion of the Left vs. Right dichotomy in Israeli discourse), which can no doubt reach the status of an 'identity defining' CSD. As we have pointed out, however, even under these circumstances the total elimination of CSDs is neither possible nor desirable, for they play an indispensable pragmatic, socio-psychological role, e.g., in the constitution and functionality of communities and their identities, which are essential components of the civil society. This is one of the reasons why we do not espouse the idea that genuine changes of opinion must involve 'full-scale conversions', just as we do not accept as feasible or desirable the model of deliberative democracy that requires full consensus. In both cases, the maximalist approach is a victim of the very problem it seeks to overcome: dichotomization. After all, the main problem in the current situation of public debate is that the standpoints adopted and the collective identities carved out are systematically based on the wide-ranging negation—hence exclusion—of "the other", be it through the denial or de-legitimizing of his/her beliefs, his/her personal identity, or his/her collective identity. The obvious consequence is totally overlooking the value and usefulness, however moderate, of what is thrown by the board.

Real controversies are precisely those dialectical exchanges that do not require either absolute identification with one of the sides or absolute rejection of the other. These controversies are pervaded by "yes … but" as well as by "no … but", i.e., by the realization that both sides may have some value that deserves being seriously considered. They thus call into question the monolithic pretence of CSDs and pave the way for their de-dichotomization, without demanding their total dismantling and the elimination of all their components, and without forcing their former addicts to nothing less than full fledged conversion to the antagonistic CSD addiction.

As we have emphasized in our paper, the controversy approach offers no ready-made recipes for achieving what may seem to be no less than a set of miraculous results. It only proposes a modest alternative to other approaches that either are not aware of the CSD obstacle for the application of standard argumentation-based 'solutions', or are aware of it but still believe they can sidestep or overcome that obstacle, or simply give up any serious attempt to understand and face it. Unlike these approaches, ours does not de-

pend on a consensual vision of the expected results to which the process to be undertaken and the participants must subordinate themselves from the outset. However, as we have shown, the potential benefits are sufficient in order to lead the participants to take part in the process, willingly and cooperatively, regardless of their ignorance of the final result.

Once a controversy begins, no one can predict how—if at all—it will end. Daniel Cohen is right: there is no algorithm capable to guide us safely through controversies. But this does not mean that, for the sake of the false security of conforming to an established CSD, we should not opt for trying a controversy-based new alternative to deal with the embattled and stagnant public sphere in which we are entangled.