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## **Prescribed argumentation, actual argumentation, reported argumentation.**

### **The management of argumentation in a public debate in France**

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#### **Abstract**

This article starts from the observation that, in order to ensure their legitimacy, the modes of governance in place in most Western democracies make more room for citizen participation in decision-making processes. The result is the implementation of various participatory mechanisms, many of which seek to stimulate a citizen's argumentative expression. Based on a case study (the public debate on a gold mine project in French Guiana), we observe the norms that govern such participation processes and their implementation in the argumentative exchanges.

#### **Keywords**

Participatory process, argumentation design, public debate, ordinary political discourse.

#### ***1. Introduction***

Political life in many Western democracies has undergone fundamental transformations in recent decades that have had important implications for the nature and modalities of political discussion. In France in particular, the urban struggles of the 1960s (Castells 1974) and the environmental conflicts of the 1970s led to the rise of demands for forms of governance that would not be limited to considering the citizen as a mere recipient of the policies put in place, but that would incorporate a "participatory imperative" (Blondiaux and Sintomer, 2002). From the 1990s onwards, this evolution towards a demand for greater citizen participation was amplified by what Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1998) diagnosed as a triple crisis of legitimation, rationality and efficiency in our democracies. This crisis results in the detachment of citizens from political parties, which no longer function as mediators and vectors of identification, in a weakened confidence in decision-makers and administrators, in a growing abstention, and in a loss of legitimacy of representatives and their decisions. In response to this crisis, one witnesses the emergence of what Pierre Rosanvallon calls a "democracy of expression" (Rosanvallon 2006), or a "democracy of the public" (in the words of

Bernard Manin; Manin 1995). To face this situation, many countries, in Europe and more widely in the Western world, are setting up, alongside the decision-making circuits proper to representative democracy, mechanisms aiming to encourage the re-engagement of citizens by broadening "the range of participants so as to include members of the general public and their points of view," beyond the traditional debate amongst experts, politicians and special interest groups (Joss and Durant 1995:9).

The modalities of this institutional offer of participation are diverse, to the point that Cécile Blatrix speaks of a "hodgepodge [French *fatras*] of devices and approaches" (Blatrix 2002: 99): consensus conferences, public hearings, stakeholder books, scenario workshops, citizens' juries, deliberative opinion polls, etc. The types of projects under discussion also vary: measures with a strong techno-scientific dimension (e.g., citizens' conference on GMOs in agriculture and food in 1998 in France; Boy et al. 2000), land-use planning projects (participatory process on an incinerator project in Tuscany, Italy; Floridia 2012), transport infrastructure projects (participatory process on the restructuring of the Stuttgart train station in Germany; Spieker et al. 2013).

In France, the National Commission for Public Debate (henceforth NCPD) is the institutional structure responsible for organizing participatory democracy through public debates. The debates it organizes use methods that may vary according to the issues at stake and the constraints specific to each project (public meetings, stakeholders' booklets, online discussion platforms, etc.), but are always framed by explicit and stable principles intended to rule the dialogue between participants. However, various studies highlight the gap that exists between the principles set upstream and intended to organize participation, and the reality of exchanges during the participatory event itself (Gourgues, Rui and Topçu 2013). Rather than concluding that the framework and the ideal of dialogue that it proposes are incapable of really constraining exchanges, and casting doubt on the very principle of participatory democracy, we should seek to uncover the causes of the gap between principles and actual communicative practices, in order to better understand the mechanisms at play, and thus make it possible to thwart them.

In this article, we focus on a case study: the public debate organized by the NCPD on Montagne d'Or, a gold mine project in French Guyana. By comparing the principles supposed to organize this debate with the reality of the exchanges, we show that there is a gap between the ideal of argumentative discussion upstream (the argumentation as prescribed by the NCPD) and its implementation (the actual argumentation). We draw on the line of research opened in 1998 by Sally Jackson on the "design" of argumentation (Jackson 1998), and dug deeper since then by numerous works that highlight the effects of certain interactional mechanisms (Mondada 2013, Doury and Lorenzo-Basson 2012, Doury et al. 2015) or of certain technical choices (Weger and Aakhus 2003) on the nature and quality of argumentative discussion. In this perspective, we account for the exchanges actually produced during the different episodes of the public debate on Montagne d'Or, from the perspective of an analysis of argumentative discourse in interaction (Doury and Plantin 2015, Jacquin 2014), in order to identify precisely the mechanisms that lead to deviate from the principles of argumentative discussion initially set. This diagnostic work makes it possible to correct some of these deviations (or at least to identify the strategies that would make it possible to correct them). We conclude with the idea that, despite these deviations, which, if they can be partially corrected, cannot be definitively eradicated, the ideal framework established upstream -- and, in particular, the very requirement for argumentation as a condition for participation, at the heart of the NCPD's conception of public debate -- has positive effects on the quality of the participative process.

## ***2. The French experience of public debates and prescribed argumentation***

In this article, the term "public debate" does not refer to the expression, in the public arena, of opinions on a controversial subject, but more specifically designates a procedure under the Environmental Code<sup>1</sup> aimed at collecting the population's point of view on a project. It is therefore an institutional procedure of participatory democracy, very similar to the public hearing procedure

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<sup>1</sup> All participatory procedures in the environmental field are governed by Title II "Information and participation of citizens" of the Environmental Code, and in particular by articles from 120-1 to 127-10.  
[https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/section\\_lc/LEGITEXT000006074220/LEGISCTA000006143733/#LEGISCTA000006143733](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/section_lc/LEGITEXT000006074220/LEGISCTA000006143733/#LEGISCTA000006143733)

(Bacqué and Gauthier 2011:52). In France, the NCPD, created in 1995 after numerous environmental conflicts and inspired by the Quebec experience of the public hearing office, is in charge of organizing them.

The aim of a public debate is to organize public participation as early as possible to discuss the objectives and main characteristics of a project, at a time when it is still possible to reconsider and substantially modify it. The public debate procedure is a preliminary stage that is implemented upstream of a whole series of procedures and decisions. After a public debate has been held, a first decision is expected concerning the continuation or abandonment of the project. Subsequently, further authorizations and decisions are required before the decision-making process is completed<sup>2</sup>.

### *2.1 The NCPD: an institution with three missions*

The NCPD was set up as a "third party guarantor" of the debate, as a neutral, independent and impartial entity<sup>3</sup>. According to environmental code, it has three missions. First, it aims at ensuring the constitutional right to public's information and participation. It is also intended to organize public debates in accordance with six principles (see below). Its third mission is to report on the results of the debates. At the end of the consultation or the public debate, the NCPD draws up a report (minutes and/or assessment) which is sent to the project leader and made public.

This report does not contain the commission's opinion on the project. It provides a detailed mapping of the arguments of all the participants in the debate. The project leader is obliged to respond in detail, within three months, to these recommendations and to indicate publicly what he or she has retained from the debate or the consultation.

### *2.2 Prescribed argumentation*

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<sup>2</sup> The details of the decision chain are specified in the environmental code; see note 3.

<sup>3</sup> When the national commission decides to organize a public debate, it appoints a local commission composed of 3 to 10 people in charge of organizing, animating and reporting on the debate.

Argumentation is a key-value of the NCPD.<sup>4</sup> The values adopted by the Commission, which it seeks to implement in every public debate process, are derived from the law<sup>5</sup> and from the concrete practice of public participation since 1995. Two values concern the NCPD itself, four concern the public debate.

a. Independence: The NCPD is an independent administrative authority. It is not under the supervision or the authority of any ministry. Its decisions are not subject to any approval or authorization.

b. Neutrality: Members of the NCPD and the people it appoints must remain neutral in all circumstances. By no means may they express an opinion or a position on the projects under discussion.

The other four values are closely linked to argumentative issues. Their correct implementation is supposed to have an impact on the efficiency of the procedure and on the quality of the exchanges between participants.

c. Transparency: The NCPD must ensure that all the information on the project is made available to the public. The Commission may decide to request additional expert opinions. It ensures that no issues or opinions are dismissed. In the context of a public debate organized by the NCPD, all the questions asked by the public must be answered by the project leader.

d. Equality of treatment: the NCPD must enable all persons, whatever their status, opinions or motivations, to freely express themselves and be treated fairly and equally.

The correct application of this value implies that all arguments, even the most "absurd" or false or anti-environmental ones, must be reported by the Commission in its final report to the decision maker.

e. Argumentation: during a public debate, the NCPD asks people to justify their support or opposition to the project which is being examined. Participation is a process of exchange and

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<sup>4</sup> The detailed description of the 6 values advocated by the NCPD is available here: <https://www.debatpublic.fr/node/1285>

<sup>5</sup> The requirement that the NCPD be independent and neutral was established by the law of 27 February 2002 on proximity democracy. <https://www.debatpublic.fr/node/692#scrollNav-3-4>

discussion: it must enlighten the preliminary decisions of the project leaders and, more generally, of the decision-makers.

In other words, the NCPD has a “tell us why?” approach to argumentation. This approach derives from four necessities (Casillo, 2020). The first is the need to distinguish public debate from any approach aggregating preferences: the NCPD does not aim at measuring the "pros" and "cons" in a debate. A public debate is not a survey or a referendum. The second necessity is the need to understand the reasons of participants for rejecting or accepting projects. The third one is the need to mitigate or avoid the problem posed by the strict application of the principle of equal treatment. As the NCPD sees it, the requirement of argumentation is likely to preserve the discussion from extreme postures (Casillo, 2020), since it will discourage those who defend extreme or fanciful points of view, which they would be unable to substantiate. The last need is related to the fact that the results of the public debate are not binding for the decision maker. For the NCPD, opinions supported by reasons are more likely to influence the final decision than simple positions, without any support.

f. Inclusion: all publics must be able to exercise their right to be informed and to participate. The NCPD takes into account the differences in situations and ensures that those who are the furthest from the decision are able to participate.

It is within this framework that the "Montagne d'Or" public debate takes place, which we examine below.

### *2.3 The debate on the gold mine in Guiana: David against Goliath?*

French Guiana is an overseas department of France on the northeast coast of South America, composed mainly of tropical rainforest. It is the most promising and attractive French region for potential gold deposits and more and more gold exploration projects are being carried out there<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://cpdp.debatpublic.fr/cdpd-montagnedor/images/DocumentsMO/dmo.pdf>

FIG 1 “Geographical location of French Guiana and the Montagne d'Or project” (Source:

<https://montagnedor.fr/mdo-le-projet/localisation-et-histoire/>)

+FIG.2 “Planned site for the Montagne d'Or project’s mine” (Source:

<https://montagnedor.fr/mdo-le-projet/localisation-et-histoire/>)

Montagne d'Or, led by a Russian-Canadian consortium, is the largest primary gold mining project ever proposed in France. Covering an area of 8 km<sup>2</sup>, it includes a 100-hectare pit, for a 12-year operation of 6.7 tons of gold per year, south of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, in the equatorial forest.

The project plans to dig a 2.5 km long, 500 m wide and 400 m deep pit in the middle of the equatorial forest, close to two biological reserves.

For those who support this project, it will make it possible to create a gold industry in Guiana, resulting in the creation of direct and indirect jobs. It will help tackle illegal gold washing. It may contribute to the influence of French Guiana in the equatorial zone of South America. Last, it is expected to generate significant financial spin-offs, both social (salaries) and fiscal (taxes)<sup>7</sup>.

For opponents of the project, Montagne d'Or is both an ecological disaster and an economic mirage. From an ecological perspective, the implementation of the project necessitates the total deforestation of 1,513 hectares including deforestation of primary forests. It involves industrial risks such as dam failure, acid mine drainage, transport and handling of hazardous materials, or landslides. Besides, the project is considered an economical nonsense: the subsidies of the project should rather be allocated to promising sectors such as agriculture, fishing, forestry or tourism and ensure an inclusive and sustainable development of Guiana.

Before the start of the debate, everything seemed to be played out in advance. The French President, Emmanuel Macron, strongly supported the project. The companies involved in the project had significant financial resources and were in direct dialogue with the decision-makers. The project was supported by almost all the elected representatives of the coast and by the MEDEF, the main

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<sup>7</sup> In the file produced by the Montagne d'Or Company, all the advantages of the project are detailed. <https://cpdp.debatpublic.fr/cdpd-montagnedor/images/DocumentsMO/dmo.pdf>



French employers' union. Lastly, the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights described the public debate procedure on Montagne d'Or as "belated" because the various stages of exploration and studies had already started.

In short, there was a very strong asymmetry between the project owner and the public in terms of access to power (the opponents of the mine figure as David fighting against a Goliath of unparalleled economic and political power), in terms of repertoires of action and means of influencing the decision.

#### *2.4. The data*

This case study is built on the very rich data made available to all on the website dedicated to the Montagne d'Or debate (<https://cpdp.debatpublic.fr/cdpd-montagnedor/>).

In addition to the presentation of the principles of the public debate, the project owner's file and various technical files concerning specific points of the project, audio and video recordings of most of the fifteen events (public meetings, round tables, workshops) organized during the participatory process are available, as well as the corresponding verbatims. Also available are the conclusions of the public debate, as they appear in the summary and evaluation produced by the NCPD.

### ***3. Actual argumentation: Integration of the prescribed argumentation in the speech event***

If one now looks at the way the debate on the Montagne d'Or project has unfolded, one can first examine the way in which the prescribed argumentation is made present during the debate *via* the website devoted to the public debate, which lists the standards which should guide the discussion:

FIG\_3

Fig. 3. The "Objectives and principles" page of the Montagne d'Or public debate website (montage), <https://cpdp.debatpublic.fr/cdpd-montagnedor/le-debat/objectifs-et-principes.html>

These norms and principles are the same as the ones governing the public debate in general.

The standards of the debate are also recalled during the meetings, as a prerequisite to the discussions<sup>8</sup>:

(1) President of the Local Commission for Public Debate (hereafter PST): Three principles characterize the public debates that the National Commission has been conducting for many years now on major projects.

- Transparency: one introduces oneself when one takes the floor.
- Argumentation: it is the weight and strength of the arguments that builds a collective dialogue.
- And the equivalence of treatment of the opinions expressed. Everyone listens to each other courteously and no one monopolizes the floor.

Each speaker must respect these principles. Respect for the principle of equivalence of treatment, which means that all those who wish to do so should have the opportunity to express themselves without it taking all night, speaking times will of course be limited (opening meeting, April 3, 2018, Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni)

Strikingly, the presentation of the main principles of public debate is here reduced to rather trivial instructions, which shows that PST orients himself towards the concrete management of exchanges rather than towards the political model they are supposed to implement. The standards of the debate are also called upon in hectic stages of the discussion.

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<sup>8</sup> All examples are taken from the verbatim reports of the public meetings available on the debate website, <https://cpdp.debatpublic.fr/cdpd-montagnedor/les-rendez-vous/les-rencontres-publiques.html>

#### ***4. Actual argumentation: principles put to the test***

In what follows, we try to measure the extent to which the norms set up by the NCPD and the exchange process that is supposed to embody them are manifested in actual argumentative practices. In this sense, the approach we adopt is reminiscent of the approach adopted by Jackson (1998), Harry Weger and Mark Aakhus (2003) or, more recently, by many contributors to the *Journal of Argumentation in Context* issue directed by Marcin Lewiński and Dima Mohammed (2013), except that it is not the pragma-dialectical ideal, but the ideal proper to the NCPD, that we take as a point of reference.

To this end, we consider that the analysis of argumentative discourse is primarily an analysis of discourse (Amossy 2009, 2021; Doury and Plantin 2015). Its exercise must therefore take into account both the phenomena traditionally considered to be part of argumentation analysis (identification of the functional components of the argumentative sequence, the type of argument to which it belongs, its structuring, the taking on of the burden of proof, etc.), the interactional dynamics of argumentative exchanges (Doury and Lorenzo-Basson 2012, Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2017, 2019, Jacquin 2014) and the mutual configuration of the discourse and its context of enunciation (institutional positions, genre constraints, rules of politeness...) (Amossy 2021, Doury & Plantin 2015).

This approach to the data will allow us to show, by looking closely at the discourses produced in the course of the Montagne d'Or debate, how the participants implement or renegotiate the normative constraints that the institutional mechanism (the general principles set by the NCPD) and the techno-interactional mechanism (the concrete rules that are intended to govern the exchanges) seek to impose on them.

##### ***4.1 Principle of equivalence***

With respect to the actual argumentation, the principle whose interpretation seems most problematic is the principle of equivalence. In the sense specified in the foundations of the NCPD, the principle of

equivalence states that all positions expressed should be taken into account, regardless of the number of people who hold them. This interpretation is a bone of contention between the members of the Commission and the opponents. From the very first public meeting, a speaker in the room urges members of the public opposed to the project to stand up, in order, he says, to “know a little bit about the forces at work.” PST’s reaction condemns this behavior as contrary to the spirit of public debate:

(2) PST: A public debate doesn't work that way. I'm sorry. A public debate is not a referendum. [...] It is not a poll. It is not designed to measure the proportion of those for and against. It is designed to ensure that a consultation process will allow each of the leaders to take their responsibilities. (opening meeting, April 3, 2018, Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni)

The discussion renders manifest the existence of a clash about the decision-making procedure that should be preferred. The first procedure (supported by the opponent) makes the outcome depend on the balance of power, while the second (supported by PST) values a discussion on the merits.

The principle of equivalence can also be interpreted as guaranteeing the same treatment to all positions, no matter by whom they are held. From this perspective, there is no doubt that the principle of equivalence is undermined by the spatial layout of the room, which gives Montagne d'Or increased visibility. This spatial arrangement is challenged from the very first public meeting by an opponent of the project:

(3) OPP: Good evening everyone. Concerning fairness, I realize that the very layout of the room is not that of a fair debate. In principle, we should be in a circle or something like that, so that we can all be equal. Here we have teachers in front of us. What are we? Mere pupils, disciples? (opening meeting, April 3, 2018, Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni)

This hierarchy is reinforced by various elements of the design-work (Aakhus 2013, Mondada 2013). In particular, only the members of the Commission and the Montagne d'Or Company have permanent access to a microphone, whereas members of the public must ask for a microphone and wait for it to be handed to them before they can speak. The scenography thus makes some participants legitimate permanent speakers, while the participation of others needs to be validated, which suggests that they are seen as second-class speakers.

The third interpretation of the principle of equivalence is perhaps the dominant one. It consists in considering that it guarantees equal speaking time between supporters and opponents of the project. This interpretation is in no way proposed by the Commission. However, for the public, strict equality of speaking time is the predominant model of fair debate, as it is implemented for example in televised political debates (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2017, 2019). So, from the very first public meeting, the application of this principle is demanded by the opponents of the project.

This interpretation of the principle of equivalence is rejected by the President of the Commission on the ground that it would be impossible to implement. It will be suggested in the final section of this paper that the refusal to grant equal speaking time to the project owner and to the opponents is also due to the fact that the Commission sees the Montagne d'Or Company first and foremost as a provider of information invited to answer questions from the public rather than as a participant in a debate that is supposed to provide arguments to defend its position: in a Question and Answer system, the inequality of speaking time is justified.

The management of speaking time by the Commission is based on fuzzy and changing principles which have a double consequence. They create an inequality of speaking time at the expense of the opponents of the project. In addition, they blur the distinction between the different speakers, lumping together the project owner, the Commission and the experts, which casts suspicion on the impartiality of the latter in the eyes of the opponents.

#### *4.2 Principle of transparency*

It is now clear that the principle of equivalence is subject to multiple interpretations, some of which jeopardize the spirit which is supposed to rule public debate. As for the principle of transparency, it is rephrased twice by PST as: “one introduces oneself when one takes the floor,” which results in a drastic limitation of the initial principle.

The application of the principle of transparency does not allow for the establishment of conditions of trust in the word of an expert, since any intervention by an expert closely or remotely linked to the Montagne d’Or Company is disqualified as an attempt at smoke and mirrors, manipulation of the facts, or even as an outright lie. Statements that are presented as purely informative are systematically interpreted as subordinate to hidden persuasive purposes -- hence a constant renegotiation of the boundaries between information and argumentation, to which we will return.

#### *4.3 Inclusion principle*

The final principle supposed to govern public debate is inclusion. The desire to include the First Peoples led the Commission to translate the main documents into Kali'na and Bushinengue, and to organize meetings with the traditional chiefs. But the goal of inclusion was only partially achieved. The Montagne d’Or company did not participate in these meetings, arguing that the safety of its representatives was not assured. Its attitude was seen as a sign of contempt for indigenous people. Furthermore, the Commission’s efforts to provide information on the project and on the meetings were hindered by the fact that access to the various documents is conditioned on knowing how to read and having access to the Internet, which is very problematic in Guiana.

The principle of inclusion is also compromised by the very technical nature of many of the discussions. Below are two examples of this opacity in the words of experts, among many others:

(4) The water treatment system planned is a reverse osmosis system for both contact water and process water. (workshop “Mine and environment”, 22 May, 2018, Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni)

(5) Here I am showing you an open pit, which is currently being operated, with heap cyanidation.  
(workshop “Risk management”, 4 April, 2018, Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni)

The speakers excluded from the debate by highly technical discussions sometimes try to replace the recourse to legal-rational authority with an authority based on tradition or charisma, which is better able to legitimize what they say:

(6) A Native American opponent to the mine: Since earlier, I've been hearing a few experts on the issue talking about numbers, arsenic levels, rates... we do not need these experts, we have our own experts. You know, when an elder tells you, when someone who has inherited a memory, a science and a thousand years of intelligence, tells you, “Making a hole that size is crap.” Then, I listen to him.  
(opening meeting, April 3, 2018, Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni)

The shift from legal-rational authority to traditional authority results in a partial renewal of argumentative materials, the use of which requires less, or different, training (for example, songs, T-shirts, banners, leaflets...). This observation pleads for an approach to participatory mechanisms that is not exclusively logo-centric, as suggested by Berger (2014), in order to account for what he calls the “semiotic turn” of participatory practices. This search for legitimacy can go as far as turning the exclusion against the ones who initially exercised it, which is not the objective pursued by the Commission either; this reversal of the exclusion is achieved by switching to an Amerindian language, thereby addressing the speakers of this language present in the audience to the exclusion of all others.

Beyond the specific problem of indigenous participation, the inclusion principle aims more broadly at encouraging and legitimizing the participation of individuals with little schooling, who are not used to public speaking and who have a poor mastery of the norms of expression practiced by the Commission or the project owner. Regrettably, this initial asymmetry is made worse by behaviors on

the part of the project owner that are not very conducive to inclusion. More surprisingly, similar behaviors are endorsed by the Commission, as in the following sequence, during which a speaker produces a non-standard plural adjective in French (“mentals” instead of “mentaux”):

(7) OPP: And tonight I see that we're all “**des esclaves mentals**” [mental slaves, with an incorrect plural form]. The word, the word is a little strong, but we are all “**des esclaves MENTALS.**”

PST: “**mentaux, mentaux. MENTAUX.**” [= correct plural form]

OPP: “Mentaux” if you prefer [= correct plural form].

PST: I prefer. (opening meeting, April 3, 2018, Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni)

While behaviors deliberately aimed at demonstrating dominance over the audience are rare, they are likely to have devastating effects on individuals who had to struggle with their own reluctance to participate in meetings and to speak in public.

##### ***5. Discussion. Hesitation between two models: participation / communication***

Some of the tensions manifested in the previous examples may be considered as being generated, or at least reinforced, by uncertainty in the model of public involvement that is being implemented in the Montagne d’Or debate, and specifically, uncertainty concerning the respective place of information and argumentation in the method of public participation at work.

In order to highlight this issue, one may turn to Gene Rowe and Lynn J. Frewer (2000, 2005), who elaborate a typology of methods of public participation based on different levels of public involvement: “the lowest level involves top-down communication and a one-way flow of information” from scientists or regulators to the public, without the public’s input playing any decisive role, “while the highest level is characterized by dialogue and two-way information exchange” (Rowe and Frewer 2000:5) and seeks the active participation of the public. Rowe and



Frewer's work is highly relevant for our concern because of the importance it gives to the direction of the communication flow.

How can this typology shed light on the public debate as it is conceived in France, and as it is implemented in the case of Montagne d'Or? As mentioned before, the two objectives of a public debate are information and participation. Even if it is not made explicit, it seems that information is expected from the project owner and the experts in direction of the public, and "participation" refers to what is expected from the public in the form of a standpoint supported by arguments. Such a double objective suggests that the Montagne d'Or debate involves two distinct types of public involvement. According to the "public communication," low-level method, the Montagne d'Or Company and the Commission unilaterally disseminate information to the public. According to the high-level "public participation" method, an input is solicited from the public, and is likely, in a non-binding way, to have an effect on the final decision.

However, Rowe and Frewer's work is questionable in that it identifies what is being conveyed by communication as a "flow of information," as if public engagement were only a matter of information, and as if what is being communicated by the "sponsor" had nothing to do with argumentation, whereas in a debate, the informational dimension is largely subordinated to the orientation of the participants' interventions to argumentation. In such a context, there is something like a tropism towards argumentation, as Christian Plantin (2010) advocates strongly:

In an argumentative situation, the question [here, for or against Montagne d'Or] sets the principle of relevance that will be applied to each of the acts of the participants involved in the situation. [...] The question forces the argumentative interpretation of the field it orients. It is a kind of magnet that bipolarizes the interventions: any utterance, gesture, manipulation of object, takes on meaning in relation to the poles constituted by the positions taken, that is to say, the answers given to the question. (Plantin 2010:33)

In the Montagne d'Or debate, the illusory expectation of a clear dividing line between information and argumentation feeds tensions that run through the whole process. As for the Montagne d'Or Company, it seems to subscribe to the so-called "deficit model," according to which "public misunderstandings and objections might be overcome by better expressing the views of experts" (Rowe and Frewer 2000:6). This framing of the situation is obvious in the following excerpt by the company's president:

(8) CMO's PST: The important thing is to meet the Guyanese and explain. It is logical that there will be questions. This debate is an opportunity for our company, it allows us to explain. (workshop "Employment, training and socio-economical effects", 16 June, 2018, Cayenne)

According to this view, any resistance from opponents is interpreted as a sign of bad faith, lack of attention, or even lack of intelligence on the part of the audience. Thus, the Montagne d'Or Company sets up a relationship of master to pupil and, what is more, a relationship of master to *bad* pupil.

(9) CMO's PST, to someone in the public: I'm going to explain it to you one last time, because we've already explained it ten times. It doesn't matter, we'll repeat it. [...] You talk about acid drainage. So you are mixing everything up. (workshop "Employment, training and socio-economical effects," 16 June, 2018, Cayenne)

The presentation of the Company's position as purely informative, factual, and free of any preference, is perceived by the opponents as an unacceptable denial of the conflictual nature attached to the situation. The fact that the Company's objective is to present the Montagne d'Or project in a favorable light in order to promote it is not in itself surprising or shameful. What is surprising -- and what compromises the relationship of trust with the public -- is that this objective is not assumed, and that

the Company, which is objectively a stakeholder, tries to position itself as an impartial and unquestionable expert.

The Commission is not clear either. Its twofold objective (information, argumentative participation) is legitimate indeed. But the implementation of this dual objective poses problems. Firstly, the main suppliers of information, in the system planned by the Commission, are the project owner and the experts appointed by the project owner. The objective of the project owner is to have his project accepted. Thus, the factual elements and the technical sheets brought into the debate by the Company raise suspicion. What is more, the role of the Company as information provider (and not as participant to an argumentative discussion) is reinforced by the fact that the Commission puts strong pressure on the public to participate by asking questions rather than expressing their position. It results in the disqualification by the Commission of interventions that are not questions, as in example 10, after someone in the audience has taken a position on the project. PST's reaction runs as follows:

(10) PST: It was not a question. It was a statement of position. Any other questions? (General meeting, 5 April, 2018, Cayenne)

The fiction that the Company's role is above all to provide "pure" information, disinterested explanations, is to some extent encouraged by the Commission itself. Therefore, the Commission is often seen as an ally of the Company, to whom it seeks to spare confrontation by favoring the question/answer format. Opponents in the public implement strategies of resistance to such an injunction. For example, when opponents choose the radical option of not asking questions at all, because they perceive asking questions as a form of surrender, they still ask for the floor as if they wanted to. But they use it as a platform to consolidate the opposition to the project among the audience. They produce an argumentative discourse that addresses not the project owner, but the potential or actual allies against the mine.

Such a design is made manifest through a renegotiated spatial arrangement. During one of the workshops, OPP decides not to take the floor from the public zone, as does the speaker in picture 1. He rather speaks from a lateral position which enables him to address alternatively the audience, which sits on his left (pictures 2a & 2b) and the Company or the Commission, who sit on his right (pictures 3a & 3b). Whereas he turns to the latter when he quotes their words or challenges them directly, most of the time he addresses the public since he wants to convince it of the inanity of the project.

FIG\_4

FIG\_5

Fig. 4 et 5. Spatial positioning of the opponents as they speak, workshop “Employment, training and socio-economical effects”, 16 June, 2018, Cayenne

## **6. Reported argumentation**

As for the summary report, which is expected to relate the arguments of the participants in the debate, it appears that it pursues its own argumentative objectives. Indeed, it advocates a positive presentation of the Commission's activity, based on a strong, even inflated, mention of the figures for participation in the debate. This objective is not illegitimate in itself. However, one can hardly consider that it contributes to the official objective of the summary report, which is to inform the project owner in his subsequent decisions.

In the final report, the many shortcomings of the debate are perceived with more or less acuity. In the end, the assessment of the debate by its very organizers is quite severe:

(11) However, this debate does not seem to have moved the lines. It even seems to have radicalized them. [...] The first impression that dominates is that of a misunderstanding about what a debate is,

that is, a process which permits progress in the knowledge of a project and in argumentation. For none of the protagonists, the debate could be a process through which things could evolve. The only objective of the majority of the opponents was to make their theses heard wherever meetings were held. They did not come to debate but to demonstrate. On the other hand, the project owner presented a monolithic project, without any proposal for change except on marginal issues, and thus appeared to be a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. (Final assessment of the public debate by the NCPD's President)

This is a harsh judgment on what happened, since it states that there is an incompatibility between what the public debate should have been and what it actually was. However, the Montagne d'Or public debate is often presented by the NCPD as a success; why is it so?

## ***7. Conclusions***

The analysis of actual argumentation in the Montagne d'Or public debate shows two results. One, there is a tendency of the local Commission to confuse information with participation and to consider information as devoid of any argumentative dimension. This confusion is very detrimental to the establishment of a relationship of trust between the participants in the debate. Second, there is a questionable application of the other principles of the NCPD, in particular those of equivalence of treatment and inclusion.

Given this very reserved assessment of the implementation of the initial standards within the actual debate process, one may wonder if the debate on Montagne d'Or, and the argumentation requirement, produced any effect at all. To answer this question, one must first examine the criteria for a successful and impactful debate. A successful debate has three characteristics (Casillo, 2018; 2020): it favours the activation of social criticism, it allows to make effective the right to information and to participation, and it produces a "citizen instruction" of the decision.

In this regard, it can be said that despite its flaws, the Montagne d'Or debate (and in particular the formal importance given to the principle of argumentation) had an effect on the participants and on the decision.

Concerning the effects on participants, the argumentation requirement encouraged participants to enlarge their repertoire of action (going beyond protests, petitions, street demonstrations) and to comply with the rule, that is, to play the argumentation game. This was seen when certain groups of opponents, beyond the demonstrations and sit-ins, elaborated an array of campaigning resources aimed at making available to the public short arguments related to Montagne d'Or. Brief video clips were shot and broadcasted on youtube, some of which feature a naïve citizen, potentially seduced by the Montagne d'Or project, discussing with an opponent of the project who opens his eyes, dismantling one after the other the arguments of the project owner defending the mine:<sup>9</sup>

(12) Title: Against the gold mountain, to preserve existing jobs (D = Denis; L = Laetitia)

D: yes Laetitia, uh... so they promise 750 jobs, we don't even know what they are, indirect jobs, we don't know either, socially... what does that represent, socially?

L: you know what? They say that there are jobs; because when you say that there are jobs, everyone is like, ah, there are jobs! but well, we have to be clear; there is nothing in the French law that obliges them to give these jobs to Guianese people. And on top of that, they don't see all the other jobs that they will destroy. [...]. So they see jobs; but they have their eyes like this [she puts her hand in front of her eyes like a pair of blinkers] on those that already exist.

D: and concerning the university, you know, because they are going to make a University specialized in mining, so, how, what are we going to do, what is planned, what... what about that?

L: that's it, that's it, but what they really want is that they want us to pay for the training of their employees!

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KY1cfhZLonQ>

D: ah ok, well done, then!

L: no, but look... that's enough, that's enough.

D: Okay.

The tone of this video, soothing and smiling, sheds light, by contrast, on the Commission's difficulty in setting up serene argumentative exchanges -- hence the recourse by some participants to other scenes of expression. In any case, this militant material validates the demand for argumentation as a desirable means of action. More generally, the analysis of the recordings of the debates indicates that the argumentation principle and its practice by the opponents increased their feeling of supporting a legitimate position.

Concerning the effects on the decision-making process, the debate on Montagne d'Or made it possible to bring different points of view, disagreements and arguments into the public sphere. It created, within the public sphere, a broader discursive dynamic beyond the clash of pros and cons, for example the sub-debate concerning the economic basis of Guiana development. Notably, numerous national radio programs have covered the public debate on the gold mine. The debate clarified oppositions and created a "public problem" (Dewey, 2010) that the decision-maker could no longer ignore. In May 2019, at the end of the first "Ecological Defence Council," the French Prime Minister confirmed the abandonment of the project because it was deemed incompatible with the requirements of environmental protection.

Finally, the debate on the Montagne d'Or project has become a space, an arena for "responding to discontent." We refer here to the work of the economist Albert Hirschman (1970) who studied the social and political behaviour of individuals in the face of discontent. He identifies two types of reactions to discontent (Hirschman, 1970:4-7). One can *exit* (withdraw from the relationship); or one can *voice* (attempt to repair or improve the relationship through communication of the complaint, proposal for change). The public debate on the gold mine, despite its many shortcomings and despite the fact that everything seemed to be played out in advance, succeeded in giving voice to audiences

and to arguments that had previously been ignored by decision makers. This case study shows that the procedures that govern public debate, and in particular, the requirement of argumentation, point the way to an ideal of argumentative discussion. Even if these requirements are not fully at work in the actual argumentative exchanges, the very fact that they have been initially posed and recalled throughout the process is likely to have effects that, combined with other dynamics, can contribute to the efficiency of the consultation process as a whole.

Finally, one of the central stakes of this study was to show that political argumentation is multi-situated within society, and that it is not the prerogative of elected officials or public decision-makers. The processes of participatory democracy are privileged places where another type of political argumentation, that carried by citizens, can be observed and analyzed.

A public debate procedure is a moment of confrontation of ideas and arguments in view of a political decision. In this sense, it is also a democratic and political exercise within which several private, economic and institutional actors are called upon to exchange and argue. However, if we consider citizens as actors who help build decisions and not as simple targets of these decisions, they can be apprehended as political actors in their own right. As such, their argumentative practices are of major interest, especially when they are put in resonance with those of other political actors (such as elected officials or public decision makers, for example). Thus, to undertake an argumentative analysis of the words of citizens participating in a participation procedure amounts to working on the argumentative analysis of a particular type of "political" discourse: that of citizens involved in the life of the city who seek to influence the decisions that concern them.

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