The Never-ending 'Paradigm Debate' in Organisation Studies: Rhetorical Practices that Sustain Scientific Controversies

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Paper presented at the 2nd conference on Rhetoric and Narratives in Management Research.
Barcelona, May 31st - June 2nd, 2007

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Abstract

Many commentators within organisation studies have noted how difficult it is in this field to bring closure to controversies. This paper uses a rhetorical perspective to reflect on the character of one of the most important debate within the field, what is known as the 'Paradigm debate'. By analysing some of the rhetorical choices made in the landmark controversy between Jeffrey Pfeffer and John van Maanen, I bring attention to some of the dysfunctions that can characterise debates where dissension prevails. Three rhetorical practices that contribute preventing the good conduct and the closure of this controversy are identified: 1) discrediting and distancing the opponent by questioning his ethos; 2) avoiding points of commensurability; and 3) shifting the ground of the debate. Rather than seeing the respective perspectives of Pfeffer and Van Maanen as *incommensurable*, I argue that their positions are purposefully rendered *incommensurate* in the course of the controversy.

Introduction

One of the things that seem to characterise the field of organisation studies is the difficulty its members have to bring closure to controversies: debates take much time to settle, anomalies are tolerated for long, and the same arguments are repeated continuously. Many organisation researchers put this down to some presumed incommensurability that would prevent communication between perspectives. The best example may be the debate about incommensurability itself – known as the 'Paradigm debate' – which seems to be characterised by some sort of incommensurability. This paper mobilises rhetoric in order to reflect on this situation. Relying on insights from two rhetoricians of science, Lawrence Prelli and Randy Harris, I propose a recasting of the debate, from a philosophical problem to a rhetorical one. Rather than asking why different perspectives are *incommensurable*, I ask: How are they rhetorically made *incommensurate*?

What Factors Prevent the Closure of the 'Paradigm Debate'?

What are the factors that prevent the closure of a debate such as the 'Paradigm debate'? The answer may be found within the debate itself, as the debate is precisely about understanding why advances in knowledge are difficult to make. One line of answer comes from the many authors who, at different stages of the debate, have raised attention to the role of values and interests in the knowledge-making process (e.g. Clegg and Dunkerley, 1977; Connell and Nord, 1996; Rao and Pasmore, 1989; Silverman, 1970). From the standpoint of those authors,

debating in organisation studies is often made difficult by the fact that the debaters can hold different values (or have different interests) which are potentially irreconcilable. More often than not, debaters are bound to argue at cross-purposes. It is a similar deterministic argument that was put forward by Burrell and Morgan (1979), when they claimed that certain values and interest translate into distinct and incompatible philosophical assumptions. Within Burrell and Morgan's perspective, debates across 'paradigms' are not really thinkable. Such view has been widely criticised and few people argue nowadays that paradigms are or should be absolutely incommensurable (a notable exception being: Jackson and Carter, 1991). Nonetheless, most organisation researchers will still imply a view of the field as being delineated by different entities (called diverse names such 'paradigms', 'discourses' or 'perspectives') which are difficult to relate to each other. In an analogous way, a difficulty for the protagonists of the 'Paradigm debate' could be to communicate with each other when they may be arguing from radically different standpoints.

A second line of answer comes from authors who paid attention to the social setting in which research and other scholarly activity take place. In this way, Whitley (1984a; 1984b; 1984c; 1988) has described the larger field of management studies as a *fragmented adhocracy*: a loosely organised scientific field characterised by its intellectual variety and fluidity, with few co-ordinating mechanisms. Within Whitley's perspective, debates rarely get settled simply because they are allowed to carry-on. This is also the substance of the argument Pfeffer (1993) will later make, when he will claim that organisation studies, if it is to progress, needs the establishment of a scientific elite that would enforce a scientific consensus.

Both approaches are insightful in many ways, but their respective forms of determinism prevent us understanding how the field could become different. The first approach, with its determinism of values and interests prevents us seeing how, for example, values are interpreted in flexible ways, according to aims and contexts. Values are not independent of their enactment; they are often symbolic resources – in the form of rhetorical *topoï* – mobilised by social actors. Similarly, taking 'incommensurability' as a given rather than an outcome prevent us seeing how it can be the result of researchers' interaction rather than being an inevitable fate.[1] In the second approach, we are faced with a similar limit: a perspective like Whitley's does not allow us to see how the conduct of debates is influenced

[1] That is in essence, the comment Connell and Nord (1996) make when they argue that the idea of incommensurability of philosophical assumptions is a useful rhetorical resource for those who precisely want to erect or maintain intellectual boundaries.

by the concrete practices of actors involved in scientific struggles. It is through the lens of rhetorical theory that I suggest examining some of those concrete practices. For rhetoricians, that debaters can argue from radically different standpoints is not an exceptional event, but a fundamental fact of life. Speaking from different standpoint is not in itself an obstacle to the advancement of knowledge; it all depends how the debate proceeds.

Incommensurability as a Rhetorical Problem

In the growing literature on the rhetoric of science (also called 'rhetoric of inquiry'), many authors display a general scepticism toward claims of incommensurability. This is exemplified in particular in a recent edited book examining the relations between rhetoric and the notion of incommensurability (Harris, 2005a). Many authors within the rhetoric of science movement work with the belief and the assumption that boundaries across and within scientific fields are largely artificial. As Prelli (1989a) points out, analysing the rhetoric of science "is itself a rhetorical effort at heralding a demarcation crisis in the human sciences; it seeks to indict the present 'boundaries' among substantive fields of inquiry as largely artificial and points to the need to redraw or traverse those boundaries in fruitful ways" (62). Prelli (2005) posits that in many cases where the term 'incommensurable' is used, it is difficult to justify. He suggests it could be useful to replace the notion of 'incommensurable perspectives' by another one: 'incommensurate communication'. It is a re-framing in two respects. Visibly, it substitutes the term 'incommensurable' for 'incommensurate', about which Prelli says:

> This term has the benefit – morphologically speaking – of licensing concord, of leaving the door open to resolution. Incommensurate is used when things are askew: when someone's salary is incommensurate with her responsibilities, when a treatment is incommensurate with an illness, an appeal with its audience. When X and Y are incommensurable, there is no recourse. When they are incommensurate, something can be done. (298-299)

Then, it focuses what can be a complex philosophical problem on one specific dimension: communication. Within such frame, Prelli (2005) says, "Incommensurate communication does not result from the presence of different perspectives *per se*, but because those who hold them are at cross purposes about situated problems and ambiguities" (299).

Rhetoricians in general legitimise such re-framing by claiming that situations of total incommensurability either do not really exist, or are irrelevant to look at. Harris (2005b) argues along this line, distinguishing different meanings to the notion of incommensurability, and showing how each of them imply a different realm of solution. For Harris, the different conceptions of 'incommensurability' vary in respect to the nature of the boundary that

separate the 'incommensurable' perspectives, and they also vary in respect to the degree of permeability of that boundary. That is why Harris argues that some forms of incommensurability are more incommensurable than others. There is the case of what he calls 'brick-wall incommensurability', where there is not much that can be done about it. This is a case, he says, "where two programs are so mutually impenetrable that the participants of each see their rivals to be spouting gibberish" (25-26). Harris gives a few examples: "They are not theory pairs like, say, Newtonian and Einsteinian physics, or phlogiston and oxygen chemistry. They are pairs like (…) genetics and astronomy, or (…) Pasteur's germ theory and Aristotelian mechanics…" (26). Harris says that this sort of incommensurability is of no interest for the analyst as there is little point in trying to conciliate the views of those theories. In that way, Harris follows Laudan who suggests that "[*if two theories are*] totally incommensurable, we don't even know whether they are rivals, for rival points of view must be shown to disagree somewhere" (Laudan, 1990: 123). In other words, brick-wall incommensurability does not matter much. But the incommensurability that is featured in organisation studies is of another kind – namely, what he calls 'pragmatic incommensurability' and 'value incommensurability'.

Pragmatic incommensurability, Harris (2005b) says, is a phenomenon of misaligned meanings. He gives the example of the sentence "Mercury is a planet", which was true for both the Ptolemaists and the Copernicans, but which meanings were different (although overlapping). In this particular case, both groups were aware that they attributed different meanings to the word 'planet'. Trouble arises, Harris argues, when those semantic differences or incompatibilities are less obvious to see. A second important form of incommensurability – *value incommensurability* – comes from the difficulty of agreeing on the values that should guide interpretation and action. Different values can lead two different researchers to make radically different interpretations from the same observation. But even if two debaters would make clear what values underpin their judgement, they would still struggle to establish a hierarchy raking those values. Arguably, those two forms of incommensurability potentially cover most of the relevant meanings Burrell and Morgan attributed to the notion. What is also important to see is that those two forms of 'incommensurability' imply a boundary which is relatively permeable.

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Agreeing with Harris' analysis, Prelli (2005) suggests that "'incommensurable problems' can be remedied when incommensurability is understood as a rhetorical problem of practical

communication rather than as a mathematical or logical problem of formal translation" (294). In organisation studies, the generally fluid character of the boundaries drawn by researchers should encourage us to see incommensurability in a similar way: as a problem of incommensurate communication among researchers. We should ask ourselves: *Can the rhetorical practices of organisation researchers contribute producing or maintaining incommensurate communication within scientific debates?*

The Role of Rhetoric in the Conduct of Scientific Debates

Through his works, Prelli provides a sophisticated framework and method for the analysis and the criticism of how debates and controversies are conducted. Rooted in Cicero's conception of rhetoric, it focuses on how issues are framed and addressed. For the aim of the analysis conducted here, I will present only one specific element of it. But before that, I will explain how Prelli articulates some of the relations between rhetoric and scientific activities. The idea that science is a rhetorical activity is not as controversial as it used to be, and many researchers are likely to recognise that rhetoric plays a central role in science. But we may still wonder what is exactly that role? After all, both 'science' and 'rhetoric' can be defined broadly enough to encompass any relation between the two. There are three dimensions pointed out by Prelli on which I want to put emphasis on. Those three ideas provide some of the foundations of Prelli's method of analysis.

Scientific discourse involves choices. Prelli (1989a) suggests that any scientific discourse "is rhetorical insofar as it involves selective use of symbol to induce cooperative actions and attitudes regarding particular orientations for attaching meaning to situations" (87). Among the many disciplines that contribute to the understanding of symbolic activity, rhetoric has a specific place: "Rhetoric explains the *selective* functions involved when we make, apply, and judge symbols" (16). This selective function also characterises the conduct of science. Aiming at "altering attitudes in the service of propositions" (89) necessarily involve choices; the rhetor will focus on some of these propositions at the expense of some others.

Scientific discourse is a reasonable discourse. In line with Kuhn, Prelli (1989a) thinks that the idea of formal logic fails to capture how scientific argument proceeds. For instance, one can disagree with arguments for reasons other than those that arise from stipulating and applying formally logical criteria. Criteria of formal validity do not function like neutral algorithms; they embed particular values. As Prelli puts it, "A scientific community can share many values and still argue legitimately about their comparative importance and applications

to particular cases" (114). A further problem with the concept of validity is that it does not allow the recognition of the fact that "a favorable judgment about a claim may, but need not, involve commitment" (26). Hence, the concept of *reasonableness* is preferred. For instance, publication in a journal is not a matter of "correctness" (it could hardly be without waiting for refutations and counter-arguments), but "an acknowledgment that the rhetor has developed arguments that are plausible enough to deserve a hearing by a professional audience" (26). Reviewers need not entirely agree with the ideas contained in a text to approve it for publication. For a claim to be seen as reasonable, it must only – but also minimally – connect with the shared beliefs, values and attitudes of the audience.

Scientific discourse is an invented discourse. Scientific discourse may not necessarily follow the rules of formal logic, but still it proceeds in a systematic way which is far from being illogical. Classical rhetorical theory suggests three steps to design arguments. First, a rhetorical goal must be identified and the discourse must be organised having this goal in mind. Second, the rhetor must identify what is at issue within a rhetorical situation. Only then it is possible to think about any potentially relevant content. Third, the rhetor must choose what to say about what is at issue. From all the relevant content, some specific topics of argument will be more likely than others to succeed in inducing acts or attitudes. Classical rhetoricians suggested such topics as an aid for finding appropriate sayables about points at issue. Prelli (1989a) argues that scientific rhetors, in order to design situationally reasonable claims, follow a similar procedure: with an aim in mind, they locate points of issues, and then choose relevant topics of argument accordingly.

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Prelli's approach draws essentially on Cicero's *stasis* theory, which was designed to direct speakers toward what could be said to influence an audience's judgement in legal settings. A controversy, Prelli (1989a: 46-50) explains, implies that there is something at issue, a point of clash between conflicting arguments. A debate cannot proceed any further until this point has been clarified, if not resolved. A *stasis* analysis is a procedure that consists in locating the point of issue (*stasis*) in order to identify relevant arguments.

In Cicero's rhetoric, there are four general categories of *stases*: about conjecture, definition, quality and procedure. Disputes over questions of *conjecture* imply that the facts themselves are controversial (e.g. has a murder been committed?). When the dispute is over *definition*, it involves differences about names attributed to non-controversial facts (e.g. was the killing a murder or an act of euthanasia?). In disputes about a *quality*, there is an agreement on the fact

and its definition or description, but not on its value (e.g. is euthanasia acceptable?). Finally, the dispute can be about the *procedure* or the legitimacy of the tribunal itself. Clarifying what is at issue in a debate is a crucial task for the rhetor; "Only with that settled can the rhetor sort out the logical acceptability and relevance of any possible materials that concern the subject at large" (Prelli, 1989a: 46).

Although Cicero focused mostly on legal pleading, his theory, Prelli (1989a) argues, remains at least "an excellent illustration of the general usefulness of guided inquiry into what should be said about any controversial, uncertain matter" (46-47). Prelli contends that science is much like legal pleading, and that in any scientific inquiry, we are likely to encounter similar categories of ambiguities:

> 1) ambiguities about what does or does not exist in a field of natural phenomena; 2) ambiguities about the theoretical meanings of constructs and phenomena; 3) ambiguities about the value or significance of claims advanced; 4) ambiguities about scientific actions required to understand a field of natural phenomena systematically. (123)

In Prelli's (1989a) view, the major difference between a scientific forum and a tribunal is that the scientific audience is potentially wider and more heterogeneous. Following McKeon (1957), Prelli suggests that the contemporary world, we cannot easily assume common standards for thoughts, language, and action. Attempts to communicate effectively, "require parties holding basically different outlooks to forge mutually acceptable normative principles" (39). If we see this task as falling under the realm of rhetoric, we are led to conclude with Prelli that "Under conditions of heterogeneity, normative standards have to be created rhetorically before other rhetorical purposing can be undertaken. Once shared norms have been established, then they can become the targets of further rhetoric" (39). In an 'heterogeneous' context, "a rhetor's first task is to *create* an exigence for which the rhetor's ultimate purpose can be a solution" (39).

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Prelli's method of analysis is a *productive* tool meant to help practitioners of science crafting their arguments and overcoming blockages in controversies. The procedure that consist in identifying a goal, locating issues and choosing relevant arguments is meant to help debaters to resolve controversies. But we can reverse the logic of his apparatus in order to *analyse* why blockages remain, and to understand why controversies fail to achieve closure. After all, debaters can have good reasons for wanting controversies to remain open, and they can work actively toward that goal. Our main question becomes: c*an the selection of issues*

debated by organisation researchers contribute producing or maintaining some forms of incommensurate communication within scientific debates? I suggest trying to answer this question by looking at some of the rhetorical practices featured in the landmark controversy that opposed Jeffrey Pfeffer to John van Maanen.

The Pfeffer/Van Maanen Controversy and its Significance

There are at least two good reasons for revisiting the controversy that opposed Pfeffer to Van Maanen. It was a defining event for the field, as its future was debated within one of its most important forum. And as I will also argue by the end of this section, it represents a critical research site for an analyst of rhetoric.

In August 1992, at the annual conference of the US Academy of Management, Pfeffer was invited to give the Distinguished Scholar address to his peers of the *Organization and Management Theory* division, an honour recognising his career achievements (published with revisions as Pfeffer, 1993). In his address, Pfeffer took issue with what he saw to be the increasing fragmentation of the field of organisation studies. This was not the first time Pfeffer addressed that issue. A decade before, he had suggested that organisation studies looks more like a weed-patch than a well-tended garden (Pfeffer, 1982). This time, what seems to have triggered his efforts is the publication, a month earlier, of a special issue of the *Academy of Management Review* (AMR) on new intellectual currents (Smircich *et al.*, 1992).[2] Singling out the special issue as "an extreme example of the proliferation of theoretical perspectives" (615), Pfeffer suggested that such eclecticism could be detrimental to organisation studies because when a field is too fragmented, there can never be any consensus on core issues such as who should be hired and promoted, what research should be funded and published, etc. A lack of consensus is even dangerous as it weakens the position of organisation studies in regard to other academic fields. In Pfeffer's view, organisation researchers have little power and intellectual authority in the universities, and the theoretical body of works they rely on is so fragmented, and there is so much borrowing from other disciplines that, carried to the extreme, the field risks disappearing. Worst, he said, organisation studies could be the victim of a hostile take-over, possibly by the economists, whose concepts have been imported into many areas of social inquiry. For these reasons, he suggested that the survival and development of organisation studies require the establishment and enforcement of a consensus

[2] The special issue featured perspectives such as neo-Marxism, postructuralist feminist theory, Afro-American history and literary criticism, Foucauldian genealogy, cultural studies, postmodern aesthetic analyses and intersections of Critical Theory, Poststructuralism and neo-Pragmatism.

on what to study and how to study it. Reading Pfeffer, it is not clear which approach should be favoured within that consensus, but readers inferred that Pfeffer was implicitly promoting a rational choice approach (which he later denied) or his own brand of resource-dependency theory.

The diagnostic Pfeffer gave, and the remedy he proposed generated mixed reactions: some agreed as much as to give Pfeffer the AMR 1993 'best article award', some approved with reserve (Jaros, 1994), some were disapprovingly amused (Perrow, 1994), some disapproved more strongly (Cannella and Paetzold, 1994; DeTienne, 1994) and some, went furious. Van Maanen, who falls in the last category, delivered his reply through the same forum than Pfeffer when, the next year, he was the one giving the Distinguished Scholar (published with revisions as Van Maanen, 1995a). Van Maanen thought there was no better place to "extinguish the blaze' started by an "intellectual incendiary".

Van Maanen (1995a) argued that Pfeffer's whole enterprise is misguided since it rests upon a problematic conception of science. The view of the future of organisation studies Pfeffer has laid-out, Van Maanen wrote unequivocally,

> is – to be gentle – insufferably smug; pious and orthodox; philosophically indefensible; extraordinary naive as to how science actually works; theoretically foolish, vain and autocratic; and – still being gentle – reflective of a most out-of-date and discredited father-knows-best version of knowledge, rhetoric and the role theory plays in the life of any intellectual community. (133)

Van Maanen provided a complex reply which can seems *a priori* to be largely off Pfeffer's point. But it is centred on one basic fundamental idea: that language contributes constituting reality rather than simply describing it. For Van Maanen, Pfeffer has been mistaken in ignoring the turn toward language in the social sciences, which he says, "reverses the relationship typically thought to obtain between a description and the object of description" (133-134). As Van Mannen suggests, Pfeffer would want us to believe that the facts and data he presents to make his case speak for themselves, and that his conclusion follows a strict and indisputable logic. The bland neutral tone of Pfeffer's writing should suggest he is a dispassionate and disinterested observer, who is merely conveying the message. Van Maanen believes this is not the case, and suggests that Pfeffer is blind to the rhetorical elements that underpin – and ultimately undermine – his effort. Van Maanen claims that no science can transcend textuality and that, "As much as we might like to believe that hard fact and cold logic will support our claims and carry the day, there is no escape from rhetoric" (134). In other words, Van Maanen thinks that Pfeffer, through his rhetoric, has contributed to construct a peculiar representation of the world, which suits his own particular agenda.

The controversy will go through another round, with a counter-reply from Pfeffer (1995) and a final counter-reply from Van Maanen (1995b). But I will leave aside the details of those two counter-replies, as for now the main point to be underlined is how peculiar and important this controversy is. Its importance for organisation researchers makes no doubt. Two 'heavyweights' researchers debated the future of organisation studies, initially from the platform of the Distinguished Scholar address, then within two major journals, the AMR and *Organization Science*. But the importance of this controversy for an analyst of rhetoric needs also to be underlined.

The controversy had many conditions for succeeding in advancing knowledge: an adequate forum, two debaters who could generate lots of attention, and opportunities for them to make lengthy arguments, lengthy replies, and lengthy counter-replies. Moreover, in what is a relatively rare feature, the controversy is characterised by a high level of *meta-debate* – debate about the conditions of debating. Issues of power, values, rhetoric and writing are at the forefront of the controversy. For those reasons I suggest that this controversy can be seen as what Flyvbjerg (2001) calls a critical case. If a controversy happening under these conditions fails to be conducted in a rational way, more obscure low-profile controversies may be unlikely to be conducted differently.

Rhetorical Strategies in the Controversy (2038/2000)

In this section, I propose a rhetorical critique of the way Pfeffer and Van Maanen have conducted their exchange. This will not exhaust the inventory of rhetorical practices that contribute to a state of incommensurate communication, but it will help revealing some particular features of the debate that prevent its closure. Moving from the simple and obvious to the more complex and less visible, I will describe those rhetorical practices as follow: 1) discrediting and distancing the opponent by questioning his ethos; 2) avoiding points of commensurability; and 3) shifting the ground of the debate.

Rhetorical Practice #1: Discrediting and distancing the opponent by questioning his ethos

One way of refuting an argument is by discrediting the person who is saying it, by saying that the person has no legitimacy to speak within that forum. Most of the time, this is done by suggesting (explicitly or not) that there is a discrepancy between an individual's character (what we will call 'individual *ethos*') and the norms held by the collective. Prelli (1989b) draws on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to stress that a rhetor's perceived character or *ethos* is a central mean of persuasion. Prelli says, "To inspire confidence in claims advanced discursively, a

rhetor must display the qualities of intelligence, moral character, and good will that are held in esteem by an intended audience" (48). The notion of *ethos* refers to the representation of a rhetor's qualities, but also to the representation of the norms that are held by a collective. Thus, we can distinguish the 'individual *ethos*' from the 'collective *ethos*'. In most rhetorical situations, including in science, a rhetor needs to project an individual *ethos* that is congruent with the collective *ethos*. But an opponent can strategically try to suggest it is not the case, and that there is a discrepancy between the two.

Prelli (1989b) suggests that the strategy that consist in suggesting that there is such a discrepancy is a rhetorical choice made frequently when the boundaries of science are at stake. For example, when biologists try to demarcate evolutionary biology from the knowledge produced by creationists, they do so primarily by questioning the competence of creationist scientists, not, for instance, by considering their factual. In such case (and in most cases of scientific demarcation) both the individual *ethos* and the collective *ethos* and important targets for rhetorical efforts. If biologists want to question the competence of creationists scientists, they have two tasks at hands. First, they need to convince their audience that there is a specific set of norms which should be followed in science. Biologists then need to show that the creationists do not abide to those norms.

Both Pfeffer and Van Maanen do exactly this: they define (implicitly or explicitly) a set of norms that should be privileged and show that their opponent does not abide to those norms. For example, Pfeffer puts much emphasis on how limited the resources are for scientists, and then portrays Van Maanen as someone who is wasting the precious time of the research community with an "intellectual sideshow" that does not deserve so much attention. Reciprocally, Van Maanen calls attention to Pfeffer's vested interests by mobilising the Mertonian norm of *disinterestedness* (which can be interpreted like this: scientists should be impartial and have an interest only in the Truth).

One interesting thing to note here, is that the topics of arguments Pfeffer and Van Maanen each use are quite different. It could be simply because the two debaters are calling for the sympathy of two different factions of their audience. But I would suggest instead that they are strategically using every possible discursive resource, regardless of the internal consistency of their argumentation. Any plausible argument that will appeal to someone seems good enough. This is the case for example when Van Maanen appeals to the norm of *disinterestedness* to condemn Pfeffer, but at the same time, deflects one of Pfeffer's attack by acknowledging that research is done by human beings and hence, necessarily involves interests. The fluidity with

which the different rhetorical *topoi* are used suggests that one of the main purposes of the debate is to win at any price, or even to prevent a real discussion of the issues at stake.

The use of the 'discrepancy strategy' is not unusual in science, and it can often be an efficient way of proceeding. Researchers avoid wasting time and efforts by quickly dismissing those who lack the legitimacy to speak. For example, when members of the tobacco industry produce unpublished research evidence showing the absence of a link between the use of tobacco and cancer, their arguments can be quickly dismissed as biased, rather than being discussed in details. But the obvious drawback to that strategy is that, rightly or not, it undermines the possibility for the debaters to engage in any further dialogue.

If it is difficult to engage with someone after having discredited that person, it is even more difficult to do so after having used insults. And insults are very much featured in this controversy, often in a way which is subtle enough to be publishable, but that leaves no doubt about who is the target. Again, the use of insults is not particularly unusual in science, but their presence is revealing and meaningful. Science is normally characterised by politeness, however much insincere that politeness is. Myers (1993) sees the use of insults in science as a "high-risk strategy", a strategy that is generally used with great consideration only when some specific aims are targeted. One obvious aim is simply to further the distance between two points of views. Meyer (2004: 11), who sees rhetoric as the negotiation of the difference between individuals on a given problem, reminds us that the intention behind such 'negotiation' is not necessarily to reduce that difference. There are many reasons why debaters could want to further that difference, and they can make rhetorical statements with that purpose in mind. Insults are used to create an unbridgeable gap between debaters, and this is why, for instance, animal names are often used: they signify to the Other that the distance is now insurmountable, that there is nothing negotiable anymore.

Rhetorical Practice #2: Avoiding points of commensurability

To conduct the analysis that follows, I read the four main texts of the controversy (Pfeffer, 1993; 1995; Van Maanen, 1995a; 1995b) and followed the various thread of arguments through those texts. For any argument, I looked at how it was addressed in the subsequent texts: Was it directly answered? Was it ignored? Was it re-framed? This subsection and the next one present some of the rhetorical practices I have identified.

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Prelli uses the term 'points of commensurability' to designate specific issues on which the protagonists of a controversy can focus when they want to facilitate communication. Within

organisation studies, different authors have used a similar notion and developed procedures aimed at facilitating communication between paradigms (see for instance: Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Lewis and Grimes, 1999; Schultz and Hatch, 1996). Unsurprisingly, during the course of the controversy, neither Pfeffer nor Van Maanen spend much time seeking for any of those 'points of commensurability'. Their time is spent fighting over what are the relevant issues they should discuss, or emphasising how much their respective points of view are irreconcilable.

It is quite clear that the two debaters are reluctant to agree on what are the relevant issues. Let us look at one thread of arguments which provides a useful illustration. Pfeffer's main move in the controversy is to provide a 'barrage' of factual claims. In his first text, he makes several claims (I count 14) about the existence of some facts. He claims for instance, that in organisation studies, the publication process is longer than in other fields, and that journals have a higher rejection rate. From those 14 claims, he infers some judgements about the field. Van Maanen's response can be summarised in one claim: *The step between facts and evaluative judgements is not a mechanical one*. In other words, t*here is ambiguity in the process of interpretation*, and for Van Maanen, Pfeffer's conclusion is unwarranted. Pfeffer accepts Van Maanen's argument and suggests that the issue to be dealt with is precisely one about how to interpret the evidence. If Pfeffer were to use Prelli's framework, he would probably say that there are two questions that need to be answered: *Is there a scientifically meaningful construct for interpreting evidence?* (he would say yes: 'paradigm development') and *What does that construct mean?* Initially, Van Maanen rejects even the possibility of providing an answer to those ambiguities. As he argues, there will *always* be ambiguity that formal concepts cannot take into account.

A second noteworthy thing is that the most obvious 'points of commensurability' are avoided. Depending on the circumstances, some issues are easier to address than others, and they can constitute common ground on which a dialogue can be established. Here, it could have been fruitful to locate the debate at the level of *values*, as they are the ultimate point of stoppage. Questions that relate to values are not necessarily easy to deal with, but debating them is precisely what debating is about. In this specific controversy, the question of values is stepped aside as a non-issue. Pfeffer suggests, for instance, that there is no reason to privilege mathematical rigor over empirical richness. And that there is no reason why reproducibility, consensus and dogged perseverance should be privileged over insight, creativity and tolerance

for ideas that do not fit accepted paradigms. For him the issue lies elsewhere, in the politics of academia.

Rhetorical Practice #3: Shifting the ground of the debate

One thing made visible by mapping the different threads of arguments is that Van Maanen chose to not address an important number of arguments laid in Pfeffer's initial text. We could interpret this as being due to the fact that Van Maanen is not the first to reply to Pfeffer. Other critics of Pfeffer have focused on different aspects of his text, and because of constraints of space, Van Maanen focused on the issues he believed were the most important. But it would also be reasonable to think that Van Maanen may have focused on the issues he was the most likely to successfully address, therefore 'winning' over his opponent. After all, within the logic of most debates, debaters can be expected to frame or re-frame issues in the way that is the most advantageous to them. Here, this has left many points unresolved and has antagonised the debate even more.

The most obvious example relates to Pfeffer's 'barrage' of 14 factual claims. Now if Van Maanen wants to 'win' the debate, he has little chance to do so if he is to unfold each of those 14 arguments. He recognises this himself when he admits that Pfeffer excels in making rigorous factual claims. Van Maanen initially ignores those 14 arguments, and it is only once summoned by Pfeffer to engage with that set of arguments that he does attempt to deal with them. On many other occasions, Van Maanen shifts the focus of the discussion and deprives the audience of a potentially useful examination of contentious claims. Pfeffer shows awareness of that and complains several times in his counter-reply that Van Maanen is not addressing 'the most pressing issues' – a rhetorical statement which is itself another attempt at re-framing the situation. Van Maanen's strategic intent becomes more obvious by the end of the controversy. By the last text, when Pfeffer is unlikely to provide another reply, Van Maanen raises some issues which would have been for Pfeffer the easiest to deal with: he questions and contests the meaning of terms such as 'consensus' and 'paradigm'. Arguably, by proceeding this way, Van Maanen can show his willingness to deal with Pfeffer's arguments without in fact taking any real risk.

Conclusion

Earlier on, I said that pragmatic incommensurability (which originates from misaligned meanings) and value incommensurability were the two forms of incommensurability most likely to be featured in organisation studies. This analysis of the Pfeffer/Van Maanen

controversy showed little evidence of the presence of the first one. It is only when Pfeffer uses the word 'rhetoric' that he uses it in a way that is radically different than how Van Maanen uses it, re-enacting the classic divide between rhetoric as an enemy and as a servant of Truth. Although Pfeffer's and Van Maanen's different conception of rhetoric reveal significantly different outlooks on the world, ultimately this remain a secondary event. What is more important to see in this controversy, and what was much less obvious to see, is how the two protagonists (and especially Van Maanen) strategically ordered their arguments in a way that makes the discussion of issues more difficult.

The controversy raises an issue about how assent and dissent mediate controversies. Harris (1990) argues that dissension can help the advancement of knowledge, as it forces debaters to flesh out their arguments and to submit them to public scrutiny. The Pfeffer/Van Maanen controversy gives us another picture. But arguably, it is a streetfight, and that is how streetfights look like. One way of pursuing this inquiry would be to look whether controversies characterised by accession are conducted in a different way. Does it help if the debaters are part of the same discursive/ideological/paradigmatic/epistemic community? Or are those controversies simply characterised by other forms of incommensurate communication, more subtle and hence more pervasive?

Finally comes the most difficult question: *what to do about it?* The unfolding of the controversy, in such an ideal setting, shows the limit of both propositions. Somehow, Pfeffer showed in an absurd manner that he is right: knowledge is difficult to cumulate. The controversy he generated forced his many opponents (of which Van Maanen is only one of them) to rehearse old arguments laid-out during the previous 20 years, arguments Pfeffer initially ignored. Is the solution to institutionalise a more 'rational' way of arguing? The way this controversy unfolded suggests it is an unattainable fantasy, and as Pfeffer seems well aware, where there is freedom there will always be dissension. What to make of Van Maanen's position? He wants to make us more aware of how rhetoric mediate knowledge, but that in itself, may not guarantee either that controversies will be conducted in any more rational way.

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