theories and methodologies

Generous Argument

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SOMETIME AROUND THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, IN THE MIDST OF TEACHING A SESSION OF MY INTRODUCTION-TO-MEDIA-STUDIES course, I found myself suddenly and unaccountably worried that everything I was doing to help my students become more critical, skeptical readers of corporate media structures and the messages they disseminate was actually helping them become more sophisticated *producers* of those forms, able to overcome viewers' defenses and feed the machine more convincing advertisements and more subtly misleading news broadcasts. I tried to put the thought aside, as much as I could, but it left a lingering doubt about the work I was doing, its intended purposes and its actual effects. To what extent were the methods and processes I'd cultivated since graduate school undermining the goals I had for my classes?

Cut to 2020, and my no longer even remotely subtle sense that the entire enterprise of teaching critical thinking has somehow gone terribly, terribly wrong. Even more disturbing, many well-meaning attempts to open up the platforms on which such thinking might be done have backfired, and several not-so-well-meaning attempts to capitalize on these platforms have succeeded beyond our wildest expectations. As a result, new media forms that were imagined to have the potential to produce richer spaces for informed debate have instead provided more personalized channels for propaganda. And through a process that looks alarmingly like critical thinking filtered through an educational system governed by standardized testing, carefully developed forms of expertise have been relegated to one side of a shouting match—a match in which the spectacle of presenting both sides is far more important than exercising careful judgment with regard to what's being said.

So what are the prospects for critical thinking and its most important methods of argumentation in the age of Trump? Is it possible today to develop and communicate an argument that has any potential whatsoever for affecting the ways its readers think or—radical thought, this—for changing the world? Is there any hope

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remaining for, or in, argument as a mode of scholarly communication, or as a means of effecting social transformation?

Many of the concerns that have recently been raised about contemporary academic modes of argumentation focus on argument's basis in critique, its suspicions and misappropriations, which are worthy of examination. After all, as we learn from Bruno Latour, if critique has run out of steam, it is perhaps because its weapons have been turned against us "by the worst possible fellows as an argument against the things we cherish" (227). Its methods certainly have; as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus suggest in their call to produce "accurate accounts of surfaces," critical focus on what lies beneath has resulted in "an excessive emphasis on ideological demystification" (18), a process all too easily enlisted into conspiracy theories. At the same time, however, there is every possibility that the problem is not critique or its methods but the negativity with which we've deployed them. As Rita Felski has noted, "the combative idiom of scholarship" has resulted in "an overall tonal atmosphere" with extraordinary staying power (33), one capable of permeating not just our professional arguments but also the ways we engage with the world. And that too has been turned against us: just as I worried that my classes in critical media studies were ultimately serving to train more subtle producers of advertising, it seems that ideas emerging from our most rigorous, theoretically informed modes of argumentation are now being deployed as means of undermining the possibilities for argument itself. Argument seems no longer to present an opportunity for illumination, persuasion, or engagement but rather to have become a tool for shouting opposition down.

My argument about the problems with argument is still argument, the same way that the critique of critique is still critique, benefiting from critique's negativity while seeking to negate it. But my hope in this essay is not to negate our ideas about argument but rather to think creatively about an alternative path.

That said, it's worth backing up to figure out what we've learned about argumentation, and where we learned it, to see whether we can chart another course. Let us begin with Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say / I Say*—not to contest what they argue but rather to reconsider the ways their argument has been deployed. We, and our students, have learned all too well one of their lessons: that the key move in academic argumentation is from what others have previously said to one's own almost always contrasting ideas. We have internalized and popularized this move, however, to such an extent that the primary goal of too much argumentation today, both in scholarship and in the media, seems to be exposing the flawed arguments of others in order to demonstrate the inherent rightness of one's own. In fact, by the publication of the fourth edition of their book, in 2018, Graff and Birkenstein found themselves concerned that "the increasingly polarized state of our society is making it harder to listen to those who see things differently than we do," thus leading them to "double down" on "listening carefully to what others say (what 'they say') and summarizing it in a way that does it justice, treating our own ideas (what 'I say') not as uncontestable givens but as entries in a conversation or a debate" (ix–x).

This larger point of *They Say / I Say* remains crucial: scholarship proceeds through conversation, and thus one should initiate a scholarly argument by engaging with what others have said and then develop it through one's own individual contribution to the discussion. But the ways we have read *They Say / I Say* too often set us up to consider our ideas in opposition to those around us rather than to produce the dialogue that Graff and Birkenstein sought. And the reasons for this, I'd suggest, are twofold. The first is that we (and in that pronoun I mean to embrace not just scholars but all human beings at this

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hour of the world) are by and large terrible at conversation. The evidence is all around us: our Thanksgiving dinner tables, our talking-head news programs, our department meetings. More often than not, we spend the time when other people are talking anticipating our turn to speak, and we take what's being said to us mostly as fodder for our own response. We do not genuinely listen, but instead react. And the same is too often true of scholarly conversation: the primary purpose of engaging with what "they" have said is to get to the important bit—what I am saying.

That's the first reason that our attempts at scholarly argument too often collapse into negation. The second is the assumption that what I am saying, my own individual contribution to the discussion, is genuinely individual, that it is my own. In no small part this stems from the hyperindividualistic orientation of the contemporary university—an orientation inseparable from the individualism of the surrounding culture—in which the entire institutional reward structure, including grades, credits, honors, degrees, rank, status, and every other form of merit, is determined by what I individually have done. Every tub sits on its own bottom, in other words, and if I am to succeed it must be based on my own distinctive accomplishments.

Add to that the situation of most institutions of higher education today, in which austerity-based thinking leads us to understand that merit is always limited, and thus your success, your distinction, your accomplishments can only come at my expense. We all find ourselves in an environment in which we have to compete with one another: for attention, for acclaim, for resources, for time.

As a result, the mode of conversation promoted by *They Say / I Say* has become less about the most important forms of critical thinking on which our work focuses—engaging with what has been said before and adding to the collective discussion—than about competitive thinking. Competitive thinking is a hyperindividualistic mode of debate that suggests that we are in an endless struggle with one another, in which there is only room for so much success, for so much attention. In competitive thinking, the quest for academic and professional success requires us to defend our own positions and attack others. We're trapped on a quest for what Thorstein Veblen described as "invidious comparison," distinguishing ourselves by climbing over one another (16).

This situation applies as much to institutions as to the individuals who work in them. Insofar as the institutional reward structures in which we operate privilege achievement through competition, it's because our institutions are similarly under a mandate, as Christopher Newfield has said, to "compete all the time" (144). And perhaps it will only be when our institutions separate themselves from quantified metrics for excellence that pit them against one another, and that govern all their systems of internal reward, that we'll likewise be able to move fully away from competitive thinking and into a mode that's more collective, more communal, more generous.

In the meantime, however, there are some alternative paths that we might consider, different models for argumentation that might hold potential for us not just in our own writing but also in the ways that we teach, and thus the ways that we contribute to the development of a different kind of culture.

This is not to say that any such transformation in our methods, in particular our teaching, would be easy. Students arrive in college classrooms having, for the most part, spent their elementary and secondary school years being ruthlessly tracked and assessed based on criteria designed, as John Warner has recently explored, to produce quantifiable proficiency rather than thought. Worse, these forms of metric-based achievement are tied to relentless forms of competition—increase your score on the standardized test, get into a better school, get a higher-paying job—

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whose rewards are increasingly elusive and whose outcomes mostly manifest themselves in "steadily increasing rates of depression and anxiety among students," such that "even the 'winners' of our education competitions are more accurately described as 'casualties'" (129). These casualties are the result not least of the horrific collision in our educational system between the belief that achievement is wholly an individual responsibility and the proficiency-driven sense that there is An Answer to any question, and thus that one's own response is either right or wrong.

The fear that this instills—particularly the fear of being wrong—has some deeply damaging effects both on our students and on us. It's not just that worrying about being wrong makes us risk-averse but that our methods for avoiding being wrong make us confrontational. One key method by which we deflect the possibility of wrongness is by casting it back on others: if I can demonstrate what's wrong with your ideas, it must mean that my ideas are better.

This is the upshot of our misapplication of *They Say / I Say*, leading both to the combative atmosphere Felski points to in contemporary critique and to our utterly broken public political discourse. We are all armed, culture-wide, with the fiercest weapons of argumentation, ready to interrogate and dismantle. We are engaged in an endless round of what Peter Elbow called the doubting game, focusing on the ways in which any idea presented to us might be wrong and expounding on the significance of these ostensible errors; "you must assume it is untrue," Elbow notes, "if you want to find its weakness" (148). And not only are we good at finding weaknesses, the culture we live in has become good at it, too: our public commentators are expostulators of the first order, detailing the flaws in this candidate, the failures of that proposal, the holes in that idea.

In the meantime we've forgotten, or dismissed, Elbow's concern that the doubting game "has gained a monopoly on legitimacy in our culture" (150), and that it must be paired with—in fact, preceded by—the other move in Elbow's method of engagement: the believing game. This move calls on us to focus first, before we bring doubt into play, on the possibility that the argument or idea or suggestion in front of us could be right. What would it mean if it were right? How should we respond? How could this possibility help us create something good?

In similar ways, our reading of *They Say / I Say* and the lessons we have internalized from it encourage us to minimize what "they say," dismissing those contributions as quickly as possible in order to get on to the far more important "I say" parts, the parts for which we—or our students—will actually get credit. And very often what "I say" pushes back against, contradicts, or negates what "they say."

Don't misunderstand: there is a *lot* of what "they say" that ought to be pushed back against, and a lot in the world around us that could bear some serious doubt, or even outright refusal. I'm not asking us not to disagree, not to push new ideas forward, not to think critically. I am, however, hoping that we might find ways to remember the deep understanding and even generosity that are critical thinking's prerequisites—and, perhaps most important, that we might find ways to help the world around us remember, too. This might begin with our approaching one another's work a little less prepared to disagree, a little less ready to demonstrate the greater value of our own perspective, instead turning our focus to the opportunities we have for sustaining a dialogue, for building a community, and for creating the conditions of possibility for a culture that can survive the political, economic, and environmental depredations it currently faces. The crises that confront us, it is clear, cannot be overcome with the most devastating argument; they require us all to work together, and working

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together requires forms of argumentation that build rather than dismantle.

So perhaps we might look for some other exemplars that can enrich our attachment to the *They Say / I Say* approach to argument. We might start, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest, by finding new metaphors to argue by; rather than approach each argument as if it were a scene of combat, perhaps we might join them in attempting to conceive of "a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way" (5). They note, of course, that our immediate impression, being rooted in our current culture, would be that this isn't an argument at all but a discussion, a conversation, a form of collaborative creation. But collaboration, if allowed to flourish, could lead us somewhere entirely new. This is how Lisa Rhody understands the value that improvisational comedy's rule of agreement presents for scholarly communities and their shared work: it is not that we never disagree but rather that we should acknowledge that if we "begin our discourse from points of agreement" and then move "toward a conversation about where ideas, methodologies, and convictions diverge," we can create a more vibrant community precisely because "it is an environment in which those who take risks are most likely to thrive." And we desperately need to be able to take those risks—and even risk being wrong—because without the possibility of being wrong, we can't hypothesize, we can't experiment, we can't create. We can't dream.

Developing new forms of scholarly writing that approach argument in a creative rather than combative mode will likely require us to consider new models for what thoughtful, productive academic writing—and, perhaps most important, the teaching thereof—might look like. As Warner notes, becoming a productive writer entails developing writerly habits of mind. In exploring those habits of mind, he draws on the framework developed collectively by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, who identify eight crucial modes of approach to the work and the world around us:

1. Curiosity—the desire to know more about the world.
2. Openness—the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
3. Engagement—a sense of investment and involvement in learning.
4. Creativity—the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
5. Persistence—the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.
6. Responsibility—the ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.
7. Flexibility—the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
8. Metacognition—the ability to reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge. (qtd. in Warner 25)

What is most immediately notable in these habits of mind is how positive they are, how willing to begin an engagement with a project, or with the world, from the assumption that there is something productive to be learned. These are creative habits, ways of approaching our work that might enable us, and our students, to find more joy in what we do.

And that joy may well be the crucial bit that was missing in my introduction-to-media-studies course so long ago. Our students love many of the materials of our culture, and they want to contribute to that culture. If we'd like to see them contribute to building a better culture, perhaps we can start by thinking about ways to focus their creative desire in critically informed ways, develop-

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ing a praxis that helps transform, not simply participate in, the status quo. The feeling our students often share with us—that our critical reading practices take the fun out of everything—may well be driven precisely by this desire to make rather than break. The sentiment means our students fail to understand the fun of critique, but it also means they understand perfectly well the at times overwhelming negativity of our critical approach.

I want to be clear: I am not calling here for a positive embrace of the status quo, for creativity in the service of today's culture industry. I am, rather, asking us to consider how more-creative engagements with our students, with one another, and with the world might help produce a more curious, more engaged, more generous outlook, one that can enable new paths past the both-sidesism of today's increasingly shouty media culture. I'm asking us to imagine what we and our students might gain from emphasizing the believing game before leaping to the doubting game, from lingering a bit longer in the "they say." We might, just as a start, find that we all become better listeners. We might open up new ground for mutual understanding, even with those with whom we most disagree.

And rather than leap from "they say" to "I say," we might find ourselves drawn to "we say," thinking additively and collaboratively instead of assuming that our own ideas must vanquish everyone else's. A more generous model of creative argument might emerge, one based on building something collective rather than contributing further to the culture of negation by which we are surrounded. Such a model for creative argument might, as Latour suggests, provide "another powerful descriptive tool" for engaging with "matters of concern" and not matters of fact, "whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care" (232). Generous argument might help us frame ways of thinking that focus on higher education as a means of fostering community instead of providing individual benefit.

Of course, if we are really going to effect this transformation in our teaching—what amounts to a paradigm shift in thinking about the values that underwrite higher education—we're going to have to think differently about how we measure our success as well. And about what success means in the first place. If we're going to move away from the every-tub-on-its-own-bottom, hyperindividualistic, competitive mode of education, in which all outcomes are understood to be individual and are therefore assessed at that level, and instead foster more-collective goals, we're going to need to think carefully about what we're assessing and why. Might we develop new modes of assessment, and new rewards, that focus on collaboration, on process? Might we, as Warner suggests, "spend much less time worrying about the writing as demonstrated through largely meaningless assessments and instead pay [attention] to the writers themselves" (131–32)? Might our processes of instruction and assessment become another creative means through which we care not just for our ideas but also for those who create them with us?

Beyond that, however, if we're going to bring this mode of generous thinking, of generous argument, of generous assessment into our classrooms, we'd be well served by bringing it to bear on our work together first. We need to think seriously about how all the processes that structure our professional lives—not least our processes of hiring, of retention, of tenure and promotion—might help to instantiate the values we want to bring to the work we do instead of fostering the culture of competition, of invidious distinction, that colors all the ways that we work today, and the environment in which our students learn.

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