



# Argument by Association: On the Transmissibility of Commitment in Public Political Arguments

Dima Mohammed<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this paper, I examine the question of commitment transmissibility in public political arguments. I explore the idea that under certain conditions, arguers become accountable for the commitments of their “argumentative associates” (Mohammed 2019a). I present cases where arguers make discursive effort to distance themselves from an undesirable associate in order to avoid acquiring the associate’s commitments, as well as cases where arguers fail to do so and face the consequences. I discuss the concept of commitment in argumentation (e.g. Hamblin 1970, Walton & Krabbe 1995), and I build on the scheme of guilt and honour by association (Groarke and Tindale 2004). The result is a nuanced normative view of arguments by association: the transmissibility of commitments between argumentative associates is a way to hold arguers accountable for the argumentative potential (Mohammed 2019b; see also Kjeldsen 2017; Serafis 2022) of their discourse, and yet, commitment transmissibility remains defeasible to avoid the over-attribution of commitment by association.

**Keywords** Ad hominem · Argumentative associate · Argumentative potential · Commitment · Commitment transmissibility · Guilt by association · Inference · Implicit meaning · Standing standpoint · Political argument

## 1 Introduction: What’s in a Disclaimer?

In February 2018, Irish artist Jim Fitzpatrick released an image in which a girl looks at us as she holds a Palestinian flag. Next to the girl, there is a slogan reading “There is a real wonder woman” with the logo of *Wonder Woman*, the 2017 Hollywood film, on it. At the left bottom corner of the image, the artist included copyright information, credits to the photographer who inspired his drawing, and added an unusual disclaimer: “This image ... may not be used by anti-semitic individuals or organisations”.<sup>1</sup>

The girl in the image is Ahd Tamimi, a Palestinian young activist who had at the time been detained in an Israeli military prison. Tamimi was arrested a couple of months earlier after a video of her had gone viral. In the video, she is filmed

confronting, slapping and kicking Israeli soldiers who had invaded her home in the Palestinian village of Nabi Saleh. The 17-year-old was on trial at an Israeli military court, where she was charged with 12 counts of assault, including incitement to violence and assaulting Israeli security forces. Tamimi’s arrest and subsequent trial brought to the spotlight the unfair military legal system that Israel imposes on millions of Palestinians and the subsequent rights abuses that the system inflicts on them. Her case attracted international attention and provoked both outcry and solidarity. Fitzpatrick’s image came in this context. The artist, famous for having created the iconic black-and-red poster print of Che Guevara in the late 1960s, told Newsweek that he had been closely following Tamimi’s plight and felt compelled to lend his support, in his own way, just as he galvanized an artistic opposition of injustice with *Viva Che 1968*. In an AJ+ video in which he released the image, he explained “We need a world movement to stop the prosecution of all Palestinian children not just Ahd. But she to me is almost a spiritual figurehead for it”.

One might wonder what makes an artist who is expressing solidarity with a Palestinian teenager feel the need to include a disclaimer about his work of art not being used by antisemitic individuals or organisations. Yet, because a

<sup>1</sup> The image may be viewed at the artist’s page: <https://jimfitzpatrick.com/product/ahed-tamimi-free-print-download/>.

✉ Dima Mohammed  
dmohammed@fcsh.unl.pt

<sup>1</sup> IFILNOVA – FCSH, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Avenida de Berna 26C, Lisboa 1069-061, Portugal

certain association between solidarity with Palestine and antisemitism has been repeatedly made, the disclaimer makes sense. In view of the association, which is familiar albeit problematic, Fitzpatrick's outcry about the case of Ahd Tamimi risks indeed being misinterpreted as antisemitism, and the disclaimer is the artist's effort to prevent that. But is such an explicit disclaimer the best way to prevent the undesired association with antisemitic voices? Isn't it counterproductive to make an undesirable association present as one attempts to distance himself from it? If you are familiar with the Palestine-Israel question, especially with how hard it is to express solidarity with the Palestinian cause without getting the antisemitism charge thrown at you, then you're surely aware that the problematic association has already acquired a strong presence in the public sphere. In the highly polarised public discussions about Palestine and Israel, solidarity with Palestine has too often been met with a certain slippery slope fallacy: expressing solidarity with Palestine is construed as a criticism of the state of Israel, a criticism which gets preposterously interpreted as an instance of revolting Jew-hating discourse. The association is obviously fallacious. Solidarity with Palestine might reasonably function as part of an argument critical of Israeli policies and actions that subject Palestinians to the horrors of military occupation. Yet, solidarity does not necessarily entail the criticism, for one might well choose to express solidarity without going as far as assuming any position about the state of Israel. Furthermore, even if solidarity is taken to entail criticism, a grave mistake is made when the criticism of the state of Israel is misinterpreted as an instance of antisemitism.<sup>2</sup> Criticising policies or actions of Israel, or of any other state for that matter, is a legitimate critical political act that does in no means imply the sordid hatred of the Jews. Nevertheless, in spite of its fallaciousness, the public association between solidarity with Palestine and antisemitism exists. Sadly, the association is too often used, by some to take advantage of the Palestinian plight as a pretext for feeding repugnant hostility and hatred against Jews, and by others to take advantage of the abhorrent history of antisemitism to silence solidarity with Palestine and the criticism of Israel.

<sup>2</sup> Equating the criticism of the state of Israel with antisemitism is a mistake that has become mainstream, especially after the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) proposed a new working definition of antisemitism in 2016. A detailed examination of how the definition of antisemitism changed over time might be found in the work of Antony Lerman from the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research. In his latest book, Lerman (2022) argues that the most recent change, reflected in the IHRA working definition, is problematic not just because it serves as a battering ram against Palestinian activists, but also because it creates confusion in the fight against existing antisemitism.

Unfortunately, the public association between solidarity with Palestine and antisemitism is too strong to ignore. Aware of that, Fitzpatrick uses the disclaimer to prevent that his reference to the plight of Palestinians gets him associated with antisemitic voices. In that pursuit, the disclaimer is very well-crafted: by using the antisemitic label, it reflects the artist's disapproval of any repugnant Jew-hating reading of his work, and it does so without giving presence to sordid antisemitic discourse he aims to dissociate from. Of course, the disclaimer does not have the power to prevent antisemitic individuals and organisations from using the image, but in view of it, Fitzpatrick may not be held accountable for such a use if it would occur.

But what if no disclaimer had been made to take distance from the undesirable association? Would Fitzpatrick be held accountable for antisemitic uses of his image?

## 2 Argumentative Associates: When they Bring Arguers to Apologise

That our positions are interpreted in view of the positions of those we may be associated with is not unusual, especially when considering arguments made publicly, or by public figures. For example, it is rather common that the positions expressed by the Prime Minister are considered when interpreting comments made by ministers in her government. Similarly, one might only understand the message of an activist speaking at a protest after considering other messages conveyed by fellow activists of the same movement. Considering the views of one's argumentative associates<sup>3</sup> is crucial for understanding and explaining discursive behaviour (Mohammed 2019a, b).

Take for example, the case of the anti-#MeToo manifesto published in the French newspaper *Le Monde* in early January 2018. The manifesto, published as an open letter signed by 100 high profile women, was presented as a statement in favour of the agency of women against "enslaving them to a status of eternal victim" and "reducing them to defenseless preys of male chauvinist demons" (*Le Monde* 2018). In it, the signatories rejected the #MeToo movement's 'naming and shaming' of men, defended the 'freedom to pester' and urged women to respond to it in "ways other than closing off in the role of the prey" (*ibid.*). The manifesto provoked

<sup>3</sup> Roughly speaking, argumentative associates are arguers who might be assumed to share general positions in relation to a particular domain or controversy. The association may be imposed based on shared institutional affiliations (e.g. Governments) but it may be also voluntary as a result of collective action (e.g. protest) or even just on the basis of the convergence of positions expressed by arguers, i.e. between arguers who align together in public controversies, without necessarily having a clearly defined frame of association beyond the positions taken voluntarily (see examples in Mohammed 2019a, b).

outrage and was described as a clumsy and shocking rape apology. As criticism and counter-criticism were exchanged, it became clear that the rape apology charge, though obviously rejected by the signatories, could not be laid off as baseless. The resonance between parts of the manifesto and arguments that undermine the seriousness of sexual assault could not be dismissed. As a result, a few of the signatories, including actress Catherine Deneuve, felt compelled to clarify and apologise. In a new letter, published in *Liberation* a week after the manifesto appeared in *Le Monde*, Deneuve eventually apologised to rape victims who might have been offended by the manifesto (*Liberation* 2018). In her clarification and apology, Deneuve reaffirmed commitments to “the spirit of the manifesto” but insisted that she does believe sexual harassment and assault are real problems and apologises to “all victims of unpleasant sexual acts who read the letter and felt hurt by it” (*ibid.*).

In one of the main passages of the apology, Deneuve writes:

Yes, I signed the petition. *Yet I feel strongly compelled* to voice my disagreement today with the way some signatories have appointed themselves media spokespersons, twisting the essential meaning of the text in the process. To state on national television that a woman can climax during rape is worse than spitting in the faces of all women who have had to endure such a crime. [...] Of course, nowhere in the petition does it say that there is anything good about harassment, or I would not have signed it.

In this passage, Deneuve denies a position that has been attributed to the manifesto, namely that *women can get something good out of harassment*. The position had been attributed based on discursive choices made in the manifesto as well as on some opinions expressed by other signatories of the manifesto on later occasions. Beyond the clumsy discursive craft of the manifesto,<sup>4</sup> one particular statement became important for the attribution of such a claim: in a TV debate a few days after the manifesto was published, radio talk show host and film actress Brigitte Lahaie stated that “One can have pleasure during a rape”. Deneuve’s apology makes direct reference to this statement: “To state on national television that a woman can climax during rape is worse than spitting in the faces of all women who have had to endure such a crime”. Having signed the manifesto together, Deneuve felt associated with Lahaie in a sense that compelled her to express her disagreement with the opinions of Lahaie about sexual harassment, rape and pleasure. On the basis of the manifesto they signed together, Deneuve

and Lahaie may be considered argumentative associates, at least when it comes to issues related to sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement. The argumentative association was the basis of a certain transmissibility of commitments between Lahaie and the other signatories. Deneuve et al. were attributed Lahaie’s position, which strengthened the potential of the manifesto to express the problematic claim that *women can get something good out of harassment*. In the apology, Deneuve made the effort to dissociate herself from Lahaie hoping to block the transmissibility of commitments from her fellow manifesto signatory who had become her argumentative associate.

But is the transmission of commitment between Lahaie and Deneuve justifiable?

### 3 Transmissibility of Commitments: A Normative Account

The idea of commitment transmissibility is a tricky one. Some of the important risks that come with it have been well detected with the long-studied fallacy of guilt by association (e.g., Groarke & Tindale 2004; Tindale 2007; Walton 2010). Walton (2010) classifies guilt by association as a sub-type of the ad hominem fallacy: an arguer is attacked based on some questionable association he is said to have. In other words, an arguer is attributed problematic commitments because of his association with other agents who have such commitments. Notwithstanding the risks of unjustly discrediting an arguer based on her association with a person or group of dubious beliefs or behaviour, the attribution of guilt by association is not necessarily always fallacious (Groarke and Tindale 2004). Groarke and Tindale suggest that guilt by association is considered an argument scheme that can have both reasonable and fallacious instantiations. Reasonable instances may be distinguished from the fallacious ones by means of a set of critical questions. The questions relate to (a) whether or not the alleged association with a guilty party really exists; (b) whether attention was being diverted away from the position advanced by the arguer; and to (c) the relevance of the association to the position the arguer is now advancing (2004, p. 97).

In principle, association is a legitimate source of commitment attribution in argumentative exchanges. This is the gist of the idea of considering guilt by association a type of argument that is in principle reasonable. Earlier discussion of commitment by association may be found in Walton and Krabbe’s seminal work *Commitment in Dialogue* (1995). In it, the authors start from Hamblin’s idea of a commitment-store (1970) and offer an elaborate account of how commitments are dialectically incurred and lost. Walton and Krabbe follow Hamblin in considering that a dialectical

<sup>4</sup> See a detailed analysis of the manifesto in Mohammed (2019a).

commitment “needs not correspond with real beliefs, but it will operate, in general, approximately as if it did” (p. 257). Of the different ways to incur commitments, they identify a few beyond the speaker’s own (direct or indirect) speech acts, being typically the most obvious way to incur a commitment. In addition to commitments incurred based on a speaker’s own actions, they speak of commitments incurred through relationships and affiliations as well as commitments that follow from speech acts and actions of others (p. 35). Relationships and affiliations as well as speech acts and actions of others are ways to form the argumentative association on the basis of which commitments may be transmissible between argumentative associates.<sup>5</sup>

Guilt by association arguments involve a special way of commitment transmissibility. Firstly, the commitment is problematic, in the sense that it is a commitment to what is reproachable and may warrant the attribution of guilt. Secondly, as an argumentative move, the attribution of guilt is an attack that is meant to discredit the arguer attacked. But the commitments transmitted between arguers may not be only ones which are reprehensible and guilt-warranting. Just as guilt, also praise and credit may be acquired on the basis of some association that is known or thought to exist between a person or a group and some other person or group of praise-worthy beliefs or behaviour (Groarke and Tindale 2004). To represent arguments that attribute positive commitments by association, Groarke and Tindale propose the new scheme of honour by association. The new scheme mirrors the one where guilt is attributed:

#### **GUILT AND HONOUR BY ASSOCIATION.**

An argument form that attributes guilt (or credit) to a person or group, X, on the basis of some association that is known or thought to exist between that person or group and some other person or group, Y. In a good guilt-by-association argument,

- (1) there is good reason to believe that the alleged association between X and Y really does exist;
- (2) there is good reason to question the beliefs or the behaviour of Y; and.
- (3) there is no good reason to differentiate X from Y.

In a good honour-by-association argument, conditions 1 and 3 remain, and the second condition becomes (2) there is good reason to credit the beliefs or the behaviour of Y.

(Groarke and Tindale 2004: p 377)

<sup>5</sup> Interest in the question of commitment has been increasing since Hamblin’s idea of commitment-stores (1970). See Oswald (2015) for a discussion of the study of arguers’ commitments as a way to account for how argumentation is conducted. Also, important work on commitment attribution by conversational participants may be found in the work of Morency et al. (2008), as well as in the work of Boogaart, Jansen and Van Leeuwen (2021) who focus on commitment to implicated meaning.

The new scheme is important. Considering credit conferring commitments is an important step towards a broader view of the argumentative implications of association. Following Groarke and Tindale, I suggest taking another step towards a more encompassing account of arguments by association by considering the transmissibility of commitments beyond the honour or guilt conferring types, i.e. by considering the commitment transmissibility for purposes other than crediting and discrediting.

Thinking about the transmissibility of commitments as part of an argument by association in general, it becomes yet more important to reconsider whether association is by itself sufficient as a basis for attributing commitments to an arguer. Apart from associations that arise because of membership in highly formal bodies,<sup>6</sup> it seems rather hasty to attribute a commitment to an arguer only based on an association between the arguer and other persons or groups who have the same commitment. That is the case at least because association is hardly ever absolute, and agents are entitled to disagree with the beliefs and actions of their associates. In the scheme proposed by Groarke and Tindale, condition (3) is meant to safeguard the right to disagree and distance oneself from a certain association as it stipulates that there should be no good reason to differentiate the arguer from the group she is associated with. This is surely necessary, but a justified transmissibility of commitment should require more than just having a valid association with other persons or groups who have the same commitment. In order for the transmissibility of commitment to be justifiable, the arguer must also act in a way that makes the association relevant for the specific commitment attribution at stake. In other words, for an arguer to acquire a certain commitment of an associate, it is necessary that the arguer has done or said what *has the potential to incur* on her that commitment of the associate.

Looking at arguments by association from the lens of the argumentative potential (Mohammed 2019a, b; Mohammed 2022; Mohammed & Rossi 2022; see also Kjeldsen 2017; Serafis 2022) is crucial for strengthening the justification of commitment transmissibility between argumentative agents. Generally speaking, the argumentative potential refers to the implicit argumentative meaning that may be communicated by a certain discourse or parts of it. The potential meaning is generated in function of some argumentativity that is inherent in language (Anscombe and Ducrot 1983) or in the context of its use (see for example Amossy 2009; Serafis et al., 2020). Think for example of the word-choice brave and the inference of a positive assessment that it communicates when brave is used to describe acts or individuals. Or think of the assertion that *Israel has the right to defend itself*; if

<sup>6</sup> Walton and Krabbe give the medical profession as an example where commitments incurred by association are codified.

used by a government official following Israeli airstrikes on a Palestinian refugee camp, the assertion would probably communicate a position that considers the airstrikes justifiable. In both cases, there is an argumentative potential being activated: some discursive choices trigger an implicit inference through which an implicit argumentative meaning is communicated. Indeed, in public arguments, an important source of argumentative potential lies in the public recognisability of some inferences, that is of some premise-conclusion pairs that have become recognisable and which may be triggered by a certain discourse or parts of it (Mohammed 2019b). For example, mention of the second amendment in a discussion about mass shooting in the USA has the argumentative potential to defend a position against gun control. That is mainly because invoking the second amendment is a premise that has been publicly associated with the pro-gun claim. The two have formed a publicly recognisable premise-conclusion pair based on which an arguer who advances the premise may be attributed a defeasible commitment to the pro-gun conclusion. The defeasibility of the commitment is crucial. While a certain argumentative choice may activate the argumentative potential involved in the premise-conclusion pair, the potential remains cancellable. The publicly recognisable inference may be blocked by the discursive effort of arguers as well as by contextual information that is available to the speakers.<sup>7</sup>

An important dimension of the argumentative potential is indeed that the implicit argumentative meaning that the inferences generate is not incontestable. The implicit meaning is “potential” in the sense that it is defeasible: it holds as long as there is no evidence to the opposite. So, for example, if someone described her friend as *brave but impulsive*, the positive argumentative potential that is typically evoked by the word *brave* would get curbed by the word *impulsive*. In a similar way, the approving argumentative potential of the statement *Israel has the right to defend itself* may be curbed, for example, if the government official adds that *nevertheless, airstrikes on civilians are inexcusable*. Paying attention to the argumentative potential is necessary for understanding the implicit argumentative dimension of the discourse when such a dimension is not undisputable. Accounting for the implicit argumentative meaning is important, particularly when the potential implicit meaning carries harm, for example such as in political dog whistling (Saul 2018), or when plausible deniability is exploited by political agents who would want to communicate messages but not assume responsibility for them.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding

that, insisting that the implicit meaning is “potential”, and therefore defeasible, is also important, in order to minimise the risk of over-attribution that might make the pursuit of accountability harmful.

The defeasibility of the commitment attribution as part of the argumentative potential is particularly crucial when assessing arguments by association. Even though argumentative association might support the transmissibility of commitment between the associates, for that to be justified, a certain argumentative potential that warrants the attribution of commitment needs to be activated by the discourse or parts of it. That is to say, in addition to the association, the arguer must make a discursive choice that has an argumentative potential to incur on her the commitment she is assumed to share. Finally, the transmissibility of commitment may be justified only in cases where there is no evidence that curb the argumentative potential activated by the discourse or parts of it.

The conditions for a justified transmissibility of commitments between associates, i.e. for a reasonable argument by association may be formulated as follows:

#### **Argument by Association.**

A *presumptive* attribution of a commitment *c* to an argumentative agent *X*, on the basis of some association that is known or thought to exist between that agent and another agent *Y* who has the commitment *c*. When the attribution of commitment *c* to agent *X* is justified,

- (1) there is good reason to believe that the alleged association between *X* and *Y* really does exist;
- (2) *X* has activated a certain argumentative potential that could warrant the attribution of commitment *c*;
- (3) *X* has not curbed the argumentative potential that can incur commitment *c*.

To sum up, a justified *transmissibility* of commitment between argumentative associates requires the activation of a certain argumentative potential and remains presumptive!

In the next section, I put the account sketched above to use in the examination of the transmissibility of commitment in the public controversy that arouse around the position of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) in relation to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The case is a great example to reflect on the importance as well as the complexity of the transmissibility of commitments in public political arguments.

<sup>7</sup> See Mohammed (2019a, b) for examples of how the inferences in certain publicly recognisable premise-conclusion pairs are being activated or blocked.

<sup>8</sup> See Walton (1996) for a discussion of plausible deniability and the evasion of the burden of proof; also Oswald (2022) for an elaborate

discussion of plausible deniability and insinuations.

## 4 The Case of the PCP on Ukraine

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine provoked a widespread world condemnation, especially in Europe where the attack on Ukraine was seen as an attack on the whole continent. In Portugal, just like almost everywhere in the West, the general mood and the official stance were rather straightforward, aligning unequivocally with Ukraine and against Russia. Even political parties that are typically defined by opposition one to the other seemed extraordinarily in agreement. There was probably just one exception: the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), which expressed a rather complex position and became the object of an importunate public controversy.

The public controversy about the position of the PCP on Ukraine was somehow not unexpected. Even before any official statement had been made, the PCP's position was being projected based on the history of ties and affinities that had existed between communist parties and the former USSR and which have continued albeit differently with Russia. Also feeding the projected position was the history of antagonism and hostility between communist parties and the USA, which is crucial given the role of the USA, especially its support of Ukraine to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In a certain sense, the PCP had been expected to stand with Russia and against the role that the USA is playing in Ukraine. As a result, a position in support of Russia was projected on the PCP even before any statements by the party were made. That position changed very little over time, even after contrary statements were made by different party officials. On the one hand, this was partly because the PCP's position didn't come out sufficiently straight-forward in its support of Ukraine and opposition to Russia. On the other hand, this was also a result of some serious media manipulation that made it hard to change the public perception of the PCP's position even after some unequivocal positions had been assumed by party officials. In what follows, I analyse the controversy around the position of the PCP on Ukraine by looking at five important moments in which the PCP expressed a position about the situation in Ukraine. The analysis examines the argumentative potential of the different discursive choices made in order to shed light on the dynamics that sustained the controversy, and in doing so, reflect on some complexities that need to be taken into account when considering the transmissibility of commitments between the different argumentative associates in politics.

The starting point of the analysis is an understanding that the PCP and Russia may be presumed to be argumentative associates when it comes to the crisis in Ukraine. That is fairly justifiable in view of historical considerations, especially the affinity between the PCP and Russia and the

concomitant hostility between the PCP and the USA. Nevertheless, following the proposal made above for the justifiability of argument by association, the association by itself provides no sufficient ground for attributing to the PCP a position in favour of Russia. Attributing such a position without the PCP acting in a way that can potentially commit the party to such a position would be a case of a fallacious argument by association. May we say that the PCP has acted in a way that justifies a reasonable argument by association or has the PCP been subject to a fallacious attribution of a position on the basis of the association? Let us look at five key moments in which the PCP expressed a position on Ukraine.

One of the first explicit public expressions of position by the PCP came in a vote at the European Parliament (EP). On the 1st of March 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky spoke at the EP, followed by a debate and a vote on a resolution that condemned Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. The resolution demanded that the Kremlin end all military activities in Ukraine and called for the European Union (EU) to increase the support of NATO and impose sanctions on Russia. The resolution was approved with a majority of 637 votes in favour, 26 abstentions and only 13 against. Of these 13 votes against, two were votes of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from the PCP, João Pimenta Lopes and Sandra Pereira. The MEPs from the PCP said they rejected the resolution for it instigates an escalation of tensions in a situation already of great tension, for example by "deepening the militarization of the EU and the mobilization of NATO military forces". Following the vote, the PCP was immediately accused of considering the Russian invasion of Ukraine justified. For example, in a declaration widely quoted by the Portuguese media, Pedro da Silva Pereira, Portuguese MEP from the Socialist Party claimed the "communists refuse to condemn the brutal Russian aggression in Ukraine because they think it is justifiable".

Strictly speaking, the vote against the EP resolution is not necessarily a position that justifies the Russian invasion. Yet, in the highly *polarised* public argument about Ukraine, the vote against the resolution acquires the argumentative potential of condoning the invasion. The potential is based on a false dilemma that has unfortunately become rather acceptable in the public controversy about Ukraine: either express support for NATO and the Ukrainian military or you condone the Russian aggression. Despite its fallaciousness, the false dilemma had been predominantly acceptable in the public sphere. As a result, an inference that links the refusal of military support to Ukraine with a position that condones the Russian invasion seemed to have become acceptable in the dominant public reasoning about Ukraine. As a result of the inference, the negative vote of the PCP acquires an argumentative potential to support a claim that justifies the

Russian invasion. The argumentative potential exists in virtue of the public acceptability of the inference despite its fallaciousness. In view of that, one may say that the second condition for a reasonable argument by association is fulfilled: The vote of MEPs from the PCP has activated the argumentative potential on the basis of which the transmissibility of commitments may be done. The PCP may be attributed the Russian position that *The PCP considers the Russian invasion of Ukraine justified*. The position is attributed as a standing standpoint (Mohammed 2019b), i.e., as a standpoint that is cancellable if evidence to the opposite emerges.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the attribution is defeasible and holds as long as there is no evidence to the opposite, i.e. as long as condition 3 of the argument by association scheme above is fulfilled.

Efforts to distance the PCP from the position in favour of the Russian invasion came in the second moment to analyse: a communiqué released by the PCP on the same day of the vote. In it, the party reaffirmed “its consistent position against war and in favour of peace”. The communiqué argued that it was necessary to “defend dialogue and peace, not the increase in policy and measures that are at the origin of the escalation of the conflict in Europe”. Furthermore, it expressed an explicit condemnation of “the path of interference, violence and confrontation resulting from the 2014 coup d’état promoted by the US in Ukraine, which was followed by the recent Russian military intervention, and added to the intensification of the US warmongering escalation by NATO and the EU”. Beyond persistence in holding the USA and NATO also responsible for the situation in Ukraine, the communiqué involves a considerable effort to cancel the standing standpoint that *The PCP considers the Russian invasion justified*. In it, the vote against the resolution is presented as a position against the militarization of the EU, thus making salient another argumentative potential that the EP vote has. Despite the effort, offering that *alternative* argumentative potential for the vote against the resolution did not seem adequate to curb the argumentative potential of the vote to condone the Russian invasion. In the highly polarized situation, something more explicit was probably needed.

An explicit message condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine came in the third moment to analyse: a statement made by João Ferreira, member of the PCP Central

Committee and the Party’s candidate to the Portuguese presidential elections a year earlier. On the same day the vote in the EP was conducted and the communiqué was released, Ferreira was interviewed on CNN Portugal. In the interview, he described the vote of PCP MEPs as an act of “courage” and “lucidity”. He criticised the resolution for having measures that “will not affect any Russian oligarch ... only the people of Russia, Ukraine and even Europe”. In min 1:30 of the interview clip posted on the website of CNN Portugal, Ferreira says explicitly that “The Russian actions, the invasion of Ukraine, must be condemned”. Ferreira, as an argumentative associate of the two PCP MEPs, feels the need to *explain* the vote and correct the position attributed to the PCP in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Reenforcing the message of the communiqué, Ferreira reiterates the *alternative* argumentative potential for the vote against the resolution, but he does not stop there. Ferreira is also explicit in condemning the invasion: *The PCP condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine*. Ideally, such an explicit standpoint should be understood to curb any contradictory argumentative potential. However, the argumentative potential does not get curbed. Firstly, the explicit condemnation does not make its way to the public sphere because the media does not mention it when reporting the position of the PCP. On the CNN Portugal site, the condemnation is not even part of the text that accompanies the video of the interview. Secondly, and equally important, the public perception of the association between the PCP and Russia seems too strong to be altered by the statement of a young party official. This is obviously only reinforced by the common mistrust in political discourse that renders any statements almost without effect.

Despite the explicit condemnation by Ferreira, the attribution of a position that condones the Russian invasion to the PCP endured, placing the PCP under constant criticism and causing the party a great loss of popularity. Undoubtedly, media manipulation played an important role in the persistence of the public perception of such a position attributed to the PCP. Nevertheless, looking at how things evolved in the weeks that followed, it becomes clear that the discursive choices made by other senior party members is also responsible for the lingering commitment to the position in favour of Russia attributed to the PCP. On a few occasions, the language of the PCP came to convey the image of a party that is not independent from Russia. For example, PCP statements echoed the language used by Russia in referring to the invasion sometimes as an operation and other times as an intervention. The fourth moment analysed is a good example of that. On the 23rd of April 2022, Jerónimo de Sousa, PCP Secretary General at the time, speaks to journalists during a visit to a market in Alentejo. De Sousa tries to dissociate his party from Russia, which he describes as “capitalist

<sup>9</sup> One way of examining the argumentative potential is by means of reconstructing standing standpoints on the basis of the publicly recognisable inferences: In the absence of evidence to the opposite, an arguer who advances an argument  $x$  may be committed to a standpoint  $y$  if in the public discourse,  $x$  has been associated with the justification of  $y$  (Mohammed 2019b). The standpoint attributed to an arguer based on a publicly recognisable premise-conclusion pair is “standing” just as in a standing declaration (Searle 1995): it takes effect only once a certain context is in place.

... in which there are economic and financial groups from which the PCP clearly demarcates itself". Nevertheless, the explicit dissociation of the PCP from Russia is undermined when de Sousa responds to a journalist's question whether the PCP condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine: "There was a *military intervention* that we condemned", de Sousa answers. Here, the official position expressed by the PCP is that *The PCP condemns the Russian military intervention in Ukraine*. However, using the language of "military intervention" reinforces the argumentative association between the PCP and Russia and activates an inference that links the word intervention (or even operation) to a position that condones the action. The word choice activates the argumentative potential of condoning the invasion, and consequently undermines the sincerity of both the dissociation and the condemnation.

The final episode to look at, which occurs ironically on the same day, involves another senior PCP member: PCP Central Committee member António Filipe speaking on Portuguese news channel SIC TV. Unlike de Sousa, Filipe responds to a journalist's question whether the PCP condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine by using the word invasion: "You want me to say there was an invasion? There was. And the party has always condemned the invasion". By using the word "invasion", Filipe makes a stronger attempt to avoid the argumentative association between the PCP and Russia, and to curb the undesirable argumentative potential that had been strengthened by the reluctance to use the term invasion. From Filipe's answer, the PCP's position on Ukraine is rather similar to the one conveyed by Ferreira: *The PCP condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine*, expressed unequivocally in a way that cuts the argumentative potential to any contradictory position. In view of the explicit condemnation of the Russian invasion, by Filipe as well as by Ferreira earlier, we may say that the third condition for a reasonable argument by association is not met and the PCP may not be attributed a position that condones the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Considering the explicit discursive effort made to curb the argumentative potential to condone the invasion, we may say that the argument by association does not hold.

The argument by association does not hold if we take the explicit unequivocal condemnation expressed by João Ferreira and António Filipe; but, can we say that the statements by the two senior members are adequate to defeat the argument by association attributed to Jerónimo de Sousa? Or the one attributed to the two MEPs that voted against the resolution condemning the invasion? Can we say that the explicit condemnations defeat the argument by association attributed to the Portuguese Communist Party?

Looking at how the controversy developed, and considering the nature of political association and the way it may

affect argumentative association, we see a rather complex picture. What is at stake is the working of different argumentative associations that can warrant a multi-way transmissibility of commitments depending on the argumentative potentials activated by the discursive choices made. To start with, there is the argumentative association between Russia and the PCP which supports the attribution to the PCP of the Russian position of considering the invasion of Ukraine justifiable. There is also a two-way commitment transmissibility between the senior PCP members and the party: On the one hand, members acquire the commitments attributed to the party and feel compelled to explain and defend it, and on the other hand, the party position is constantly re-interpreted in terms of the commitments of its senior members. Leaving aside the complexity of establishing the commitments of a collective agent such a political party, it is rather obvious that the PCP's position in relation to Ukraine is particularly not uniform. As the analysis above shows, the adequacy of the argument by association varies for the different senior members. While the argument by association seems adequate for Jerónimo de Sousa, João Pimenta Lopes and Sandra Pereira; the argument is inadequate for João Ferreira and António Filipe. So, may we conclude that the PCP has acted in a way that justifies a reasonable argument by association or has the PCP been subject to a fallacious attribution of a position on the basis of the association?

The sound conclusion we can draw from the analysis is that it is not possible to determine what position may be justifiably attributed to the PCP in relation to the invasion of Ukraine. On the one hand, the argumentative association between Russia and the PCP is not adequate by itself to justifiably attribute to the party a position that condones the invasion. However, the argument by association that does so may be considered reasonable when considering other choices made by those speaking on behalf of the PCP. Indeed, actions of senior members, especially echoing the Russian language of "military intervention", "operation" and "conflict", have the argumentative potential to support a position that condones the invasion. And yet, the argument by association is problematic once we consider the explicit statements that condemn the invasion, which were made explicitly by other senior members of the party. The argumentative potential to condone the invasion is curbed by explicit condemnations that use the unequivocal terminology of describing the Russian action as invasion. As a result of the contradictory messages conveyed by different PCP members, and the different argumentative associations that can warrant a multi-way transmissibility of commitments, one might find grounds for accepting as well as for rejecting the argument by association which attributes to the PCP a position in favour of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In other words, the analysis shows a party divided in what



concerns its position on Ukraine, a division that has been expressed in a way that can explain why the public controversy about the party's position was eventually importunate.

## 5 Conclusions, Discussion, and Further Considerations

In this paper, I explored the question of commitment transmissibility in public political arguments. In particular, I focused on the idea that under certain conditions, arguers may become accountable for the commitments of their argumentative associates. The point of departure is a need to account for a certain transmissibility of commitments in order to improve our understanding of argumentative practice as well as to enhance the possibility for accountability in public political arguments. Building on the scheme of guilt and honour by association (Groarke and Tindale 2004) I proposed a normative account of arguments by association in general. The account enables a justifiable transmissibility of commitments between argumentative associates as a way to hold arguers accountable for the argumentative potential (Mohammed 2019b) of their discourse, i.e., for the implicit argumentative meaning their discursive choices may communicate. Considering the argumentative potential is crucial for avoiding the over-attribution of commitment if we would rely solely on association as a ground for commitment attribution.

It is important to remember that the argumentative potential is derived mainly from the public recognisability of certain inferences or premise-conclusion pairs. The recognisability allows for the unexpressed conclusion to be invoked when a certain word choice is made or a certain premise is expressed. Here, two points are worth emphasising. Firstly, the argumentative potential is not necessarily based on sound reasoning. Even fallacious inferences generate argumentative potentials as long as such inferences are publicly recognisable. By pure coincidence, two of the three cases examined in this paper feature fallacious argumentative potentials. But as these examples make clear, a careful arguer ought to make the effort of curbing the potential, nonetheless. This point is most probably controversial and would surely require further consideration and justification, but I leave it here for now, for I will surely come back to this question in future work. The second point that is worth underlining in relation to the argumentative potential is the distinction between the intention of the arguer and the contribution the argument can make. While both are obviously important and can overlap, the argumentative potential that an argument has is not meant to represent the argumentative meaning intended by the arguer (Mohammed 2019a; Mohammed and Rossi 2022). The argumentative

potential refers to the argumentative meaning implicitly communicated by the discourse or part of it, even when that is not the meaning intended by the arguer. Distinguishing between the two is important in order to account for the way public arguments work without the over-attribution of intentional states to arguers. This is obviously in line with the views of Hamblin (1970) and Walton and Krabbe (1995), who do not see the need for a dialectical commitment to “correspond with real beliefs” in order for the commitment to “operate, in general, approximately as if it did” (p. 257). Nonetheless, this point too deserves further consideration and elaboration, hopefully in future work, especially in order to justify the ethical responsibility over meanings communicated but not intended by speakers.

The proposal made in this paper builds on the argument scheme proposed by Groarke and Tindale and shares with it the acceptance of association as a legitimate source of commitment attribution. Nevertheless, in the account of argument by association proposed, association by itself is not an adequate ground for commitment attribution: An arguer must also activate a certain argumentative potential that could warrant the attribution of the commitment. As a result, because the commitment attributed is grounded in an argumentative potential that is by definition defeasible, commitment transmissibility remains defeasible, too.

To conclude, let us look back at the cases with which we started and answer, in view of the proposed account, the questions that were posed about them. Was the transmission of commitment between Lahaie and Deneuve justifiable? Yes, it was. The position of Lahaie that was transmitted to Deneuve, namely that *women can enjoy sexual harassment*, is a position that had come already as part of the argumentative potential of the manifesto signed by Deneuve. Once Lahaie expressed it clearly, what the argument by association did was to strengthen that argumentative potential, which ultimately made it more pressing for Catherine Deneuve to take responsibility and distance herself from it. Would Fitzpatrick be held accountable for antisemitic uses of his image had he not made his disclaimer? The answer here is less evident. On the one hand, Fitzpatrick is aware of the potential that solidarity with Palestine would be misinterpreted as part of an antisemitic argument. That awareness holds him accountable for avoiding that interpretation if it is truly undesirable. Yet, on the other hand, unlike in the case of Deneuve and Lahaie where the argumentative association is rather established through the anti-#Me-too manifesto, the association between Fitzpatrick and antisemitic voices and organisations is not at all established. There is actually nothing in the history of the artist, neither his actions, nor his words, that would make him an associate of antisemitic individuals or organisations; the only possible argumentative association is one that would emerge only based on seeing a convergence of positions, a

convergence that would only occur as a result of a misinterpretation of Fitzpatrick's position of solidarity with Palestine. In short, the argument by association would be fallacious as it is not based on a solid association that already exists. While it is surely strategically advantageous for Fitzpatrick to prevent that such an association emerges, it is less certain that his strategic failure might translate into responsibility for possible antisemitic misuses of his work. A delicate issue to be addressed in future works too.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** NA

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