

Introduction: always in question

When the word ‘authority’ in its original Latin form was used as a form of self-description by Augustus, the Emperor of Rome, his aim was to communicate the possession of something far more important than mere military or political power. His self-conscious reference to his unique *auctoritas* sought to draw attention to a far more compelling attribute, which was a dignified moral authority. Augustus’s implied distinction between power and *auctoritas* spoke to a world that had begun to understand that something more than force was needed to maintain order and cohesion.

Since Augustus’s time there have been continual attempts to claim the possession of something more than power. Yet time and again, societies have found it difficult to find an adequate way of conceptualising this. In England at least, it was not until the seventeenth century that a new language was created to respond to the unsettled political realities sought to distinguish conceptually between authority and power. One pamphleteer in 1642 drew attention to the distinction between the two terms which, he claimed, were ‘commonly confounded and obscure the whole business’.¹ However, the absence of a language to contrast power and authority does not mean that the distinction itself was absent from Western political culture. The historian Leonard Krieger has argued that what was significant and distinct about ‘the Christian dimension of authority’ was its independence from political power: while ‘medieval men’ would use the terms ‘interchangeably in many contexts’, a ‘context was established for the separation of authority from power’.² And certainly, the distinction between authority and power has been an integral component to Western political theory for well over two millennia. ‘The most fundamental of all distinctions in political thought is the distinction between ‘force’ or ‘violence’ and ‘authority’; between *potential*, which is physical, and *potestas*

¹ William Robinson’s 1642 statement in *The People’s Plea* is cited by Tuck (1974) p. 42.

² Krieger (1968) pp. 146 and 147.

2 Introduction: always in question

or *auctoritas*, which is mental; between ‘might’ and ‘right’, argues the political theorist, Michael Oakeshott.³

In the present era, the discussion of authority has become even more confused than it was in the seventeenth century. Despite the frequent use of the phrase ‘moral authority’ as a cultural ideal, authority has an uneasy relationship with morality. Matters are complicated by the prevailing sensibility that authority has become an elusive force. People ask: ‘who is *in* authority?’, ‘who is *the* authority?’, ‘who can speak *with* authority?’ or ‘on whose authority do you *act*?’ Every controversy surrounding an act of misfortune – whether it is an outbreak of a flu epidemic, an environmental problem, a natural disaster, an accident or a financial crisis – creates a demand for authoritative solutions. Yet this aspiration for authoritative answers coincides with a cultural sensibility that is profoundly suspicious of the exercise of authority.

Unmasking authority has become a fashionable enterprise that resonates with popular culture. Those who hold positions of responsibility and power – politicians, parents, teachers, priests, doctors, nursery workers – are regularly ‘exposed’ for abusing their authority, a feature of life that is symptomatic of Western society’s disenchantment with the so-called authority figure. It appears that we have become far more comfortable with questioning authority than with affirming it. Consequently, even those who are formally in authority hesitate about openly exercising their influence. In businesses and public institutions, this objective is accomplished through the now widely practised custom of outsourcing authority to consultants and experts.

Though the question of authority constitutes one of the most significant issues facing our world, society finds this question difficult to acknowledge and explicitly confront. From time to time, queries are raised about the authority of science, religion, the media or the political class. But such concerns tend to respond to a particular dimension of authority and overlook its more fundamental and general features. More specifically, there appears to be a lack of interest in reflecting on the question of why Western culture finds it difficult to give a positive meaning to authority. Most serious studies of this subject have as their focus the political and philosophical debates that surround deliberations on political and religious authority, and related topics such as legitimacy, obedience, freedom, autonomy and consent. In my own discipline of sociology, topics that bear upon the question of authority tend to be represented as the question of trust.

³ Oakeshott (2006) p. 293.

Contemporary social theory also often signals the idea that authority no longer constitutes a significant problem. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has hinted that consumer society has transformed the mode of domination to the point that public relations, advertising and needs-creation have displaced the necessity for authority,⁴ while the eminent social theorist Zygmunt Bauman contends that the authority of the state is no longer a pressing matter: ‘authority has become redundant, and the category specializing in servicing the reproduction of authority has become superfluous’.⁵ One influential variant of this argument, put forward by Anthony Giddens,⁶ is that we live in an age of ‘multiple authorities’ where their commands are no longer ‘taken as binding’.⁷

Historically, authority has frequently served as a focus of struggle; even when authority itself was beyond question, its meaning and institutional expression was often an object of dispute and political contestation. Powerful lords resisted the demands of absolute monarchs, kings reacted to claims made by the Church on behalf of Papal Supremacy, and subordinate classes resisted the authority of their rulers. As one historian recalls, such challenges ‘helped to keep alive the habit of interrogating the most basic principles of authority, legitimacy and the obligation to obey, even at moments when social and political hierarchies were at their most rigid’.⁸ That is why authority served as a central category of Western political theory since the days of the Roman Empire. However, as we note in the chapters that follow, the relation of authority to society has undergone important mutations and its contemporary role arguably has little in common with the way it worked in the past.

History is implicated in representation of authority. Religious, cultural, nationalist and political movements have continually mobilised a narrative of history to justify their objectives and worldview. In times of social and political crisis, competing interests attempted to gain validation through drawing on myths of origin, tradition and precedent. But the consciousness of history that emerged with modernity altered the relation of authority to society. As society became sensitised to change and alteration, the past lost some of its authorising role. The idea that societies are subject to variations in custom and government encouraged a conventional perception of authority, and fostered a climate where authority can be contested, either implicitly or explicitly. The most important outcome of this process was the gradual dissolution of the authority of tradition – which is the authority of the past.

⁴ See Bourdieu (1984).

⁵ Bauman (1987) p. 122.

⁶ Giddens (1994) p. 87.

⁷ Giddens (1994) p. 42.

⁸ Wood (2008) p. 25.

4 Introduction: always in question

How authority emerged, gained shape and meaning, sought to reconcile itself to the loss of the past, and attempted to reconstitute itself in modern times is the principal focus of this book. Our aim is not to provide a history of authority, but to examine its shifting meaning from Ancient Greece to the contemporary era, and the beliefs, customs and conventions that provide a foundation for justifying authority.

History and sociology

Sociological accounts of authority, order and trust often suffer from their detachment from history. The powerful presentist imagination that dominates sociology means that often it ceases to have any serious engagement with the concepts that influenced proceedings in the past. Donald Kelley, the historian of ideas, believes that ‘few other fields of intellectual endeavour have taken so restricted a view of the past’ as sociology.⁹ There are some honourable exceptions to the anti-historical orientation of contemporary sociology; but as George McCarthy points out, the utilitarian turn of particularly Anglo-American sociology encouraged an ahistorical temper: ‘In the end, both philosophy and history were lost in a sociology geared to measure what is, but unable to understand what was or what could be’.¹⁰

Yet, the rise of sociology is indissolubly linked to the historical examination of the problem of order and authority. All of the discipline’s founding figures regarded authority as a key concept for inquiry, and in the nineteenth century, sociology embraced authority as its cause. Durkheim’s project of a ‘science of morality’ is underpinned by a concern with the relationship between authority and morality: for him, moral authority is central for the regulation of human behaviour and for mandating action. In developing his well-known typology of authoritative domination, Weber drew attention to the important relationship between authority and social action.

Weber’s theory of rationalisation and domination is based on a major historical investigation of the subject. But his attempt to reconstruct the changing forms through which authority was expressed and validated was integral to a wider conversation that social and political theorists conducted with the past. His peer, the Italian political theorist Gaetano Mosca, developed the idea of an authoritative ruling class as one that is ‘independent of those who hold supreme power and who have sufficient means to be able to devote a portion of their time to perfecting their culture and acquiring that interest in the public weal – that aristocratic

⁹ Kelley (1984a) p. 134. ¹⁰ McCarthy (2003) p. 2.

spirit' which 'alone can induce people to serve their country with no other satisfaction than those that come from individual pride and self-respect'.¹¹ Ancient Rome was his model for authority. The laws of society presented by Vilfredo Pareto's *The Mind and Society: A Treatise on General Sociology*, published in 1916, are almost exclusively based on historical examples that go back to Biblical times.

Arguably one reason why sociology has become detached from history may be due to the loss of authority of the past. As Harrison states, 'since Aristotle, thinkers have posed their problems with an eye to history of their past answers'.¹² However, as I discuss elsewhere, the past has lost much of its capacity to validate the arguments conducted in the present. Indeed, past answers are frequently interpreted as irrelevant precisely because they have become de-authorised in contemporary times.¹³

Conceptualising authority as a problem

Max Weber's sociology of domination exercises a powerful influence on the conceptualisation of authority in the social sciences: a point illustrated by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's statement that 'we know of no justification for authority which are not Weberian in form'.¹⁴ One well-known introductory text for sociology undergraduates published in the 1960s claims that Weber's 'account for the history of authority and power in the West' and his 'sociology of authority' informs the 'bulk of inquiries into the subject'.¹⁵ Weber's writings indicate that he was profoundly interested in, but also deeply troubled by, the problem of authority. As Turner argues, in 'Weber's sociology of law and in his political writings, the disenchantment of capitalist society precludes the possibility of any normative legitimation of the state'.¹⁶ The question that haunted Weber was how the prevailing order could be legitimised, yet his theory fore-closes the possibility of providing impersonal formal authority with moral content. That is why, in his political writing, Weber places his hope in the charismatic authority of individual leaders.¹⁷

The question of 'normative legitimation' constitutes what I characterise as the problem of foundation. Rules, procedures and laws possess no intrinsic authority; as the legal scholar Harold Berman states, the law 'in all societies . . . derives its authority from something outside itself'. That 'something' which is separate from and logically prior to the formulation of a rule or the codification of a law, is the *source* or the *foundation*

¹¹ Mosca (1980) p. 144. ¹² Harrison (1994) p. 9. ¹³ See Furedi (2009a).

¹⁴ MacIntyre (2007) p. 109. ¹⁵ Nisbet (1979) p. 142: originally published in 1966.

¹⁶ Turner (1992) p. 185. ¹⁷ See Potts (2009) p. 114.

6 Introduction: always in question

of its authority. When ‘a legal system undergoes rapid change’, notes Berman, ‘questions are inevitably raised concerning the legitimacy of the sources of its authority’.¹⁸

The social theorist David Beetham provides an important insight into the problem of foundation in his discussion of the relationship between legitimacy and the law. He contends that legality on its own ‘cannot provide a fully adequate or self-sufficient criterion of legitimacy’. Conflicts of interpretation about the meaning of law invariably attempt to justify their claims by ‘reference to a basic principle’, which refer to ‘norms or an authoritative source that lies beyond existing rules’. What Beetham suggests is that the compelling power of rules, their moral authority, requires that they are ‘normatively binding’ and based upon a ‘common framework of belief’. The problem of foundational norms constitutes one of the fundamental questions facing public life:

What is the ultimate source of law and social rules, from whence do they derive their authority, what provides the guarantee of their authenticity or validity – these are questions that concern the most fundamental of a society’s beliefs, its metaphysical basis . . . which cannot itself be questioned.¹⁹

The ‘ultimate source’ that validates society’s laws and conventions has been subject to historical variations. In the past it has been served by tradition and custom, divine command, popular will and consent and the doctrine of science.

Weber’s sociology of domination attempts to analyse the foundation of authority as consisting of different sources of legitimation. He argues that it is ‘rare’ for rulers to rely merely on ‘one or other’ of the pure types, and reminds us that ‘the basis of every authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a *belief*, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige’. This focus on belief raises the question of ‘belief in what?’ It is evident that Weber is referring to some kind of foundational norm. Weber states that ‘the composition of this belief is seldom altogether simple’, and that, in the case of “legal authority” it is never purely legal’. Moreover, ‘belief in legality comes to be established and habitual, and this means that it is partly traditional’; and consequently, ‘violation of the tradition may be fatal to it’. Weber also asserts that authority even has a charismatic dimension, ‘at least in the negative sense that persistent and striking lack of success may be sufficient to ruin any government to undermine its prestige, and to prepare the way for charismatic revolution’. In the same way, ‘entirely pure charismatic authority’ is rare.²⁰

¹⁸ Berman (1983) p. 16. ¹⁹ Beetham (1991a) pp. 67, 69 and 70.

²⁰ Weber (1978) pp. 263–4.

While Weber's discussion draws attention to heterogeneous foundations for people's belief, there is a tendency to conflate the manner in which authority is exercised with its source. Although he writes of a 'legitimacy derived from the authority of a "source"', he does not reflect conceptually the relation between source and its authority.²¹

Authority is a relational concept, and its study inevitably touches on the question, what makes people perceive commands and institutions as authoritative? The one relationship of authority that appears to have existed in 'all historically known societies', which is that of parents over children, has frequently served as a model in political thought.²² Aristotle, in claiming that 'every community is composed of those who rule and those who are ruled', used the example of inter-generational authority to substantiate his point, writing that 'nature itself has provided the distinction' between 'the younger and the older ones, of whom she fitted the ones to be ruled and the others to rule'.²³ However, this form of simple and non-political relationship expresses the relationship of authority in only an embryonic form. Authority is a both a social and cultural accomplishment that presupposes a consensus on the norms through which it gains both meaning and force.

Some critics claim that Weber tended to focus on the command side of the authority relationship at the expense of studying how it was accepted and internalised. As Turner remarks, 'Weber was more concerned with the problem of how authoritative commands were produced than with the conditions which made them socially acceptable'.²⁴ This focus on the relationship between command and obedience meant that he was distracted from analysing the social and cultural forces that could authorise commands. In this respect, compared to the work of some of his contemporaries, Weber's work on early twentieth-century authority comes across as narrowly political. Ferdinand Tönnies's conceptualisation of authority provides an interesting counterpoint, representing authority as a relational concept that is not merely or even principally political but that also has a cultural, social and symbolic significance.²⁵ In more recent times, the point has been stressed by Michel Foucault, who argued that 'power is not something that can be possessed, and is not a form of might, power is never anything more than a relationship'.²⁶

²¹ Weber (1978) p. 1124. ²² See Arendt (1956) p. 403.

²³ Aristotle *Politics* 1332b12 cited in Arendt (1956) p. 403.

²⁴ Turner (1992) p. 188. ²⁵ See Tönnies (1955).

²⁶ Foucault (2004) p. 168. Foucault sometimes uses the term power to connote authority but it is evident that his focus is on the relationship between command and its internalisation.

8 Introduction: always in question

Although authority is a relational concept, its ‘claim made to adherence depends on the antecedent authentication of the speaker’.²⁷ Genuine authority possesses a compelling power to motivate and gain obedience. It is closely associated with power and particularly the power to persuade, yet remains distinct from it. As Arendt and others have argued, persuasion through the use of argument is alien to the concept of authority. The very need to persuade is usually a testimony to authority’s absence.²⁸ Authority’s capacity to guide people’s behaviour is an outcome of a moral influence which, when allied to the power to compel, can gain obedience without either having to argue or to threaten the use of force.

The tendency to conceptualise authority as merely a relationship of power encourages a lack of clarity on this subject. Authority also gives cultural meaning to power, and provides the intellectual and moral resources through which authoritative acts and behaviour gains definition. When De Grazia argues that ‘authority is a communal matter’, he is attempting to point to its fundamental and foundational dimension.²⁹ The American sociologist Dennis Wrong focuses too closely on authority as a relation of power; however, he is also sensitive to the workings of its foundational dimension. Wrong states that it is the ‘*source* rather than the *content* of any particular command’ which ‘endows it with legitimacy’, and recognises that the ‘source’ is, at least in part, distinct from the exercise of ‘command and compliance’.³⁰

Authority should not be equated with, or reduced to, the act of justification. It already contains a warrant for influencing and directing behaviour and does not have continually to justify itself: Once authority has to be self-consciously justified it is well on the way to losing its unquestioned status. Authority rests on a foundation that warrants its exercise and for the right to expect obedience. Throughout history, such foundational norms – divine authority, tradition and customs, reason and science, popular consent – provide the resources for narratives of validation. Weber appeared less than certain whether political rule in his time could be underpinned by a form of foundational authority, and as we discuss, the absence of any explicit engagement with this question represents a conspicuous gap in his sociology of domination.

The problem of foundation demands an engagement with history. As Quentin Skinner, the pre-eminent historian of political thought, observed, political theory and action continually draws on the legitimisation of the past since ‘what is possible to do in politics is generally limited by what is possible to legitimise’. In turn, ‘what you can hope to

²⁷ Miller (1987) p. 29. ²⁸ Lincoln (1994) p. 5.

²⁹ De Grazia (1959) pp. 321–2. ³⁰ Wrong (1979) p. 49.

legitimise' depends on 'what courses of action you can plausibly range under existing normative principles'.³¹ The principles essential for legitimation constitute the foundation for authority. That is the subject of this book.

So what is authority?

Hannah Arendt, one of the leading political philosophers of the twentieth century, has argued that, 'if authority is to be defined at all it must be in contradistinction to both coercive power and persuasion through argument'. From this perspective, authority is not reducible to a relation of power; when governments force an issue through the exercise of power they inadvertently draw attention to their inability to act authoritatively. Nor can authority simply rely on persuasion to gain public endorsement for a specific objective. Persuasion through debate presupposes a relation of parity between competing but equal parties, and Arendt suggests that the use of coercion and of persuasion is symptomatic of non-authoritative behaviour. In writing that a 'father can lose his authority either by beating his child or by starting to argue with him, that is, either by behaving to him like a tyrant or by treating him as an equal',³² Arendt means that when authority relies on coercion or persuasion it is forced implicitly to concede that it has lost the trust of those whom it seeks to influence.

Lincoln explains that coercion and persuasion exist as 'capacities or potentialities implicit within authority', which are 'actualized only when those claim authority sense that they have begun to lose the trust of those over whom they seek to exercise it'.³³ Historically, the meaning of authority was associated with the acknowledged capacity of certain people to gain the voluntary obedience of people to commands and beliefs. As the historian Leonard Krieger remarks, authority has the ability to place 'pressure upon men to conform in ways' in which 'they could not be ordered or compelled by the possessor of power'.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the term authority encompasses the exercise of influence and pressure in a variety of relationships. In its starkest form, it expresses 'the right to command' and the 'power to influence action'. Those in authority are presumed to have 'power over the opinions of others', they have power to 'inspire belief' and a 'title to be believed'. According to the *OED*, those in authority enjoy 'moral or legal supremacy'. They can be people 'whose opinion or testimony is accepted'. Through its different usage this term evokes political, moral

³¹ Skinner, Q. (1998) p. 105. ³² Arendt (1970) p. 45. ³³ Lincoln (1994) p. 6.

10 Introduction: always in question

and intellectual qualities. The Latin term *auctoritas*, from which the word ‘authority’ is derived, was not a political term but had more in common with the meaning captured by phrases like ‘being in authority’, ‘speaking with authority’ or ‘moral authority’. The root of *auctoritas* is *augere* – to initiate, set in motion, to found something or to make something grow. This usage of the term communicates the ideal of a foundational authority which someone develops (augments) and takes forward into the present. According to Hopfl, *auctoritas* ‘is a capacity to initiate and to inspire respect’, and in this respect the moral quality of authority is emphasised.³⁴

It is useful to remind ourselves of the historical relationship between *auctoritas* and authority for it helps highlight its foundational aspiration. As Friedman points out, from the perspective of *auctoritas*,

a person with authority has been understood to be someone to whom a decision or opinion can be traced back as the source of that decision or opinion or else as someone who carries forward into the present, continues or ‘augments’ some founding act or line of action started in the past.³⁵

Studying authority in history

Situating authority in history is essential for understanding its distinct modern features. A review of the different ways in which the problem of authority has been conceptualised in the past shows an attempt to answer very different questions at different times. So, whereas in the post-Reformation era the demand for authority was fuelled by conflict and rivalry among the European secular and religious elites, in the nineteenth century it was activated by the imperative of containing the threat from below. Consequently questions to do with the relation of religious to political authority, obedience, individual conscience and resistance gave way to concerns about the status of public opinion and the role of democratic consent. In the sixteenth century, debates and conflicts were fuelled by competing visions of what constituted the source of authority; by the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries, the very possibility of constructing a normative foundation for authority was put to question.

Analysing authority in history is a strategy that emerges from the constitution of this concept. Since the time of Aristotle, political thinkers have ‘posed their problems with an eye to history of their past answers’.³⁶ Even future-oriented modern revolutions – those in America, France and

³⁴ Hopfl (1999) p. 219. ³⁵ Friedman (1990) pp. 74–5. ³⁶ Harrison (1994) p. 9.