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Authority

A Sociological History

Concern with authority is as old as human history itself. Eve's sin was to challenge the authority of God by disobeying his rule. Frank Furedi explores how authority was contested in ancient Greece and given a powerful meaning in Imperial Rome. Debates on religious and secular authority dominated Europe through the Middle Ages and the Reformation. The modern world attempted to develop new foundations for authority – democratic consent, public opinion, science – yet Furedi shows that this problem has remained unresolved, arguing that today the authority of authority is questioned. This historical sociology of authority seeks to explain how the contemporary problems of mistrust and the loss of legitimacy of many institutions are informed by the previous attempts to solve the problem of authority. It argues that the key pioneers of the social sciences (Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Tonnies and especially Weber) regarded this question as the one principal challenge facing society.

FRANK FUREDI is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent in Canterbury, and Visiting Professor in the Institute of Risk and Disaster Reduction, University College London. Dr Furedi has published widely on controversies relating to issues such as health, parenting children, food and new technology, and his books and articles provide an authoritative yet lively account of key developments in contemporary cultural life that have been widely debated in the media.

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Preface

During the past two decades I have been preoccupied with the difficulty that Western culture has in giving meaning to authority. In a number of studies I explored the different manifestations of this problem in relation to issues such as disputes over child-rearing, scientific advice or who to trust in public life. From these studies I became aware of the absence of a serious account of the cultural devaluation of an idea that once constituted a central category of philosophy, political theory and of my own discipline of sociology. This study attempts to find answers through the sociological investigation of the concept of authority.

During the past five years I have attempted to understand how authority emerged, evolved and changed through different historical periods. This work of historical sociology represents an attempt to mobilise the experience of the past to help explain why authority today has such an elusive quality. The story begins with the Homeric legend and leads up to our present day predicament. Hopefully, through providing a historical context for the constitution of the problem of authority, it will allow twenty-first-century readers to interpret the relation between society and authority in a new way. I believe that history provides a unique vantage point for understanding the different symptoms of the crisis of authority. Studying and maybe diagnosing those symptoms will be the subject of my next book on this area.

Despite the length of this study, it was impossible for a single author to do justice to the history of authority. The wealth of historical and philosophical scholarship devoted to all the periods and debates covered in this book is truly impressive. Any sociologists attempting to familiarise themselves with Socrates' Athens or Hobbes's England will find the task a truly humbling experience. They will also be surprised by the important sociological insights that can be gained from the study of the historical literature.

I used this journey into history as an opportunity to reflect on what can be learned from old intellectual friends and enemies. After all, some of the most influential figures in the humanities and social

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sciences – Hobbes, Hume, Mill, Marx, Durkheim and Weber – were deeply concerned about the question of authority. And even when their views appear incompatible they have something important to add to our understanding of the problem. No doubt many readers will note the influence of Hannah Arendt on the way that the problem of authority is conceptualised. It was not until I finished the book that I came to appreciate her extraordinary intellectual courage of going down a road where others fear to tread. At a time when many of her colleagues abandoned this journey, Arendt remained committed to completing it.

I am grateful to the many colleagues who have helped me to navigate around the intricate and complex scholarly debates that surround all the subjects covered in this book. In the course of researching and writing *Authority: A Sociological History* I have had the pleasure of encountering a variety of thinkers whose work is often hardly known and therefore underappreciated. The historian Leonard Krieger has written what are arguably the most important reviews of the history of authority.¹ His all-too-brief monographs demonstrate an unparalleled capacity to capture the movement and evolution of authority in history. His unexpected contribution has significantly influenced the direction taken by this study. Towards the completion of this book, I encountered an article ‘Towards a Sociology of Authority’ published by a young American sociologist, Jeremiah Wolpert in 1950. Unfortunately Wolpert passed away a year before the publication of his immensely suggestive contribution to this subject and therefore did not have the opportunity to make a significant impact on the discipline. I hope that some of my readers will feel stimulated to revisit these ideas as well as those of some of the other scholars mentioned in this book, for their ideas can help encourage a much needed rethink on the meaning of authority.

My close collaborator Jennie Bristow served as a constant sounding board and her comments have helped to clarify many of the arguments in this book. I thank her for patience and her friendship.

¹ See Krieger (1968) and Krieger (1977).