

OFFPRINTS FROM
PHENOMENOLOGY AND NATURAL EXISTENCE - RIEPE
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, 1973

A NATURALISTIC INTERPRETATION OF AUTHORITY, IDEOLOGY, AND VIOLENCE¹

Ch. Perelman, The University of Brussels

Authority and Power

The political demonstrations, the campaigns of civil disobedience and university strife which are widespread across the world during the last years, have been presented on all sides as a rebellion against authority, the latter being identified with power which, thanks to the public use of force, constitutes a continual threat as regards individual liberties.

It is in this way, as opposed to liberty, that authority was presented more than a century ago by John Stuart Mill in his famous study "On Liberty," from which I wish to the following passage:

"The struggle between Liberty and Authority is the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history with which we are earliest familiar, particularly in that of Greece, Rome, and England. But in old times this contest was between subjects, or some classes of subjects, and the Government. By liberty was meant protection against the tyranny of the political rulers. The rulers were conceived (except in some of the popular governments of Greece) as in a necessarily antagonistic position to the people they ruled. They consisted of a governing One, or a governing tribe or caste, who derived their authority from inheritance or conquest, who, at all events, did not hold it at the pleasure of the governed, and whose supremacy men did not venture, perhaps did not desire, to contest, whatever precautions might be taken against its oppressive exercises."²

In the course of this account, Mill no longer uses the term "authority," and regularly replaces it by "power," as if these terms had been synonyms. But are these terms interchangeable-

able? If one speaks of the holders of power by saying "the authorities," one wishes to mean by this that their power is recognized, adding a nuance of respectful submission or flattery, and, in this way, the two terms come to be considered as synonyms. It is this that Littré expresses in a note on the word "authority," where he admits that "in a part of their usage these two words are very close to one another"; but he adds this restriction: "as authority is that which authorizes and power that which empowers, there is always a nuance of moral influence in authority which is not necessarily implied in power."

Indeed, even in the 18th Century these two notions were thought to be as opposed as fact and law. It is in this way that the English Bishop and moralist Joseph Butler, in his second sermon, opposes the power of the passions to the authority of the conscience, that which is pursued for the sake of its control of the actual event, to that which is pursued for the sake of moral superiority itself.³ *Auctoritas*, in Latin, is that which the guardian supplies to the will of the infant, and which the law validates: it transforms a juridically ineffective expression of will into a juridically valid action.

It is an opposition of the same type to which Jacques Maritain refers in the important essay entitled "Democracy and Authority," which is published in the second volume of the International Institute of Political Philosophy has devoted to a discussion of power. He there sets down two definitions:

"Let us call 'authority' the right to direct and command, to be listened to or obeyed by others, and 'power' the force which one uses and by the aid of which one can oblige others to listen or obey. The just man, deprived of all power and condemned to hemlock, does not see his moral authority reduced but enhanced. The gangster or the tyrant exercises a power without authority. There are some institutions, the Senate of ancient Rome, the Supreme Court of the United States, whose authority seems the more manifest because they themselves do not exercise determined functions in the command of power... All authority, as soon as it relates to social life, desires to be completed (in any sort of way, which is not necessarily juridical) by a power, without which it risks becoming useless and inefficacious among men. All power which is not the expression of authority is iniquitous. To separate power and authority is to separate force and justice."⁴

Bertrand de Jouvenel, in his remarkable studies "On Sover-

eignty” and “On Authority,” insists at length on the importance of authority in political matters :

“I call authority the faculty of gaining the consent of others. Or again, and this comes to the same I call authority the efficient cause of voluntary association. When I observe a voluntary association, I see in it the work of a force, which is authority.

Without doubt, an author has the right to use a word in the sense which he chooses, provided that he has given one warning. Nevertheless, one invites confusion if the bestowed sense is too removed from the usually recognized sense. It seems that I am putting myself in this position, since “authoritarian government” is readily being qualified, that one which largely has recourse to violence, in act and in threat, in order to be obeyed, a government of which it would be necessary to say, according to my definition, that it lacks an authority sufficient for carrying out its designs, so that it makes up the gap by intimidation.

But this corruption of the word is altogether recent, and I am only replacing it in the correct way by its traditional sense.”⁵

The same deformation, pointed out by de Jouvenel, is found again in those who identify the authority of the law with the fear of sanction, but, in fact, the police should only intervene if due respect to law is not by itself sufficient to prevent its violation.

Authority always presents itself with a normative aspect; as what should be followed or obeyed, like the authority of an adjudication, the authority of reason, or that of experience. In effect, those who possess power without authority can compel submission, but not respect.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, authority is a nonjuridical but moral notion; it is linked to respect. The model of authority thus conceived is that of the father over his children, whom he educates and guides, to whom he shows what they ought to do and what they ought to abstain from, who initiates them into the traditions, customs, and rules of the familial and social environment into which they are to be integrated. Authority derived from that of the father is that of the teacher, who tells children the correct way to read and write, and what they should consider as true or false. The teacher said so, *magister dixit*, is an excellent example of the argument from authority.

Authority in the Family and in Education

In any case, the question of equality is impossible either in

the relation between the father and the children submissive to his authority, or in that of the teacher to the children in primary school. In effect every variety of education, or instruction, no matter in what area, begins with a period of initiation in which it is absurd to concede the equality of the initiator and the initiated. It is indispensable that some authority be granted to whoever is responsible for the initiation, even if it concerns a relation between adults. If I direct myself to a teacher to instruct me in the rudiments of chemistry or Chinese, it is very necessary that during the period of initiation I conform to his directions and instructions.

All criticism implies the knowledge of the domain in which it will be exercised. This is the reason that primary instruction is usually more dogmatic than secondary, and that university instruction is characterized by the formation of the critical spirit. This is not, even, solely a matter of age and level of instruction, for it is the same in university education; for the subject matter unknown to the student, like Chinese, a period of initiation, of apprenticeship, will be inevitable; but the apprenticeship will occur on a base previously habituated to the critical spirit making a clean slate of the past, Descartes had been led to suppose the existence of innate ideas in the mind of all reasonable beings, which led Rousseau in his *Émile* to the aberrant theory according to which there is no reason to teach the sciences to a child: since it is necessary that he discovers the facts in his own way. We know today that the methods, called active, necessitate the cooperation of a much more competent and more inventive teacher than the traditional methods, where the teacher, could if necessary have been replaced by a manual.

The indispensable role of the authority of the father and the educator with regard to young children cannot reasonably be contested. The real problem is to know when and how the relation of authority ought to yield progressively to a relation of critical collaboration, and above all, what is the role of authority in relations among adults.

• Extension of Paternal Authority

Let us note that, in the political or religious domain, appeal is very often made to the image of the father to express the res-

pect due a charismatic leader. The father of a country is a political leader whose action had been, and sometimes continues to be, creative and protective. The "Founding Fathers," the founding fathers of the United States of America, are the ancestors who have established the American Constitution, and contribute to the respect which surrounds it. Ancestor worship is very well known in many countries of Asia and Africa. The Judeo-Christian tradition is remarkable in this respect for to who God the respect and love owes Him, one calls Him by "our father, our king"; and, in Christianity, the daily prayer begins with the well known words, "our father who art in heaven." The majesterium of the church is simultaneously the authority of the father and the authority of the master, knowing salutary truths and watching over the welfare of the faithful.

In the Hebraic tradition, God is the holder of political power and all royal power can only result from a delegation: the Lord's anointed is the vicar of God, all political power emanates from God and is answerable to God.

It is again this image of the father which served to establish in the Middle Ages the relations of the lord to his tenants and, later, to confer good conscience on colonizers with regard to colored peoples, those "big children." The paternalism which expresses this attitude is entirely discredited today.

Authority and Scientific Method

The philosophical tradition of the West, from Socrates to our day, has always been opposed to the argument from authority: and has taken this attitude in the name of truth. One of the reasons for the condemnation of Socrates was that he was in opposition to paternal authority in the name of truth. Later, Bacon opposed the authority of his senses and experience and Descartes opposed the authority of reason to the traditional authorities. In the conflict between the church and Galileo, the latter opposed observation and the experimental method to the authority of the Bible and Aristotle. The *philosophes* of the Enlightenment regarded as prejudices all affirmations offered in the name of religious or secular authorities.

And in fact, every time methods based on experience exist, enabling one to test the soundness of an affirmation and to

check its truth, no authority can set himself in opposition to such methods; *a fact is more respectable than a Lord Mayor*. Everyone validly using experience or calculation arrives at the same result and without miscalculation, will arrive at the same result. In this case recourse to an authority is not only useless but bizarre. In order to admit that two plus two make four, I have need of no authority: when methods exist, which everybody can apply, and which lead to the same result, everyone is equal and invoking authority is quite frankly ridiculous.

Negative Authority of Reason in the Domain of Action

For centuries the classical tradition, resting on religious, as philosophical considerations has been able to claim that a true answer exists to all clearly posed human problems. This answer, that God knows from all eternity, is the one which all reasonable people must endeavor to rediscover.

But is it true that to any question that men can reasonably ask themselves there is a single answer that will be true? Can one admit this truth, that there exist some methods which permit the testing of any hypothesis which one would be able to formulate?

It is undeniable that in a great number of areas, when it is a matter of knowledge, the ideal of truth ought to prevail over any other consideration. But when it is a matter of acting, of knowing what is just or unjust, good or bad, what to encourage or proscribe — do there exist verifiable objective criteria? Can one speak of objective truth in matters of decision or choice, when it is a matter of indicating preferable conduct?

If this were not the case, is reason able to guide us in action? Is the idea of practical reason, as Hume held, a contradiction in terms?

Personally, I hold that there is a role for practical reason, but that it is purely negative : it allows us to discard unreasonable solutions. But, in practical matters, nothing guarantees us the existence of only one reasonable solution. This being the case, if there is not some unique solution in practical matters, like that which a correct answer in theoretical matters supplies us, the choice of a solution rests more on will than on reason.

Authority of laws

It is in this perspective that the laws, the obligatory rules in a State, have been presented as the will of the sovereign, who according to a good number of theoreticians, from Thrasymachus, whom Plato made known to us, to Marx, would impose on everyone all the laws most propitious to his own interest.

If, contrary to natural law theorists, according to whom some valid objective rules exist which the legislator ought to discover and promulgate, obligatory rules are the expression of the will of the legislator, it is natural that those upon whom they are imposed demand to participate in their formulation, to grant their consent, directly or through their representatives. Thus, in this way that, since the Magna Charta of 1215 – which promised the nobles and the bourgeoisie that no tax would be imposed upon them without their consent – we have seen democratic ideology progressively develop, according to which powers do not emanate from God or his representatives on earth, but from the Nation and its elected officials.

Democratic ideology is opposed to the existence of objectively valid rules in matters of conduct, because what the majority decides is not what is true or false. Those who, like Godwin, the anarchist disciple of Bentham, have believed that in matters of conduct there is a way of objectively determining that which is “the greatest good for the greatest number,” are opposed to the idea that a legislator is indispensable to formulate our rules of conduct. And, in effect, in scientific matters, there is no question of a legislator imposing his authority. If everyone possessed in his heart and conscience the objective criteria of justice and injustice, the idea of recourse to any legislator whatever would not only appear to be odious, but quite simply ridiculous. But if, for us, anarchy signifies not only the absence of government, but also disorder, this is because when decisions are to be made, rules developed, or persons chosen to discharge certain functions, after having averted unreasonable solutions, it is indispensable to confer on a selected individual or a constituted body, the power of making a decision that will be recognized as authoritative. Only the legislative power can formulate the obligatory rules in a given territory. And as these rules can very often be the object of diverse interpretations, it is indispensable to confer to a judicial authority the right to interpret the law.

Authority, Legitimacy, and Rationalization

The constituted powers charged to direct a politically organized community would be ineffective if they had to count on force alone to be obeyed. It is essential for the exercise of power that its legitimacy be recognized, that it be possessed of an authority that carries the general consent of those who are subject to it. That is why ideologies are indispensable, whether religious, philosophical, or traditional. They aim beyond truth at the legitimization of power. Its legitimacy often results from its legality, that is to say from the fact that it was designated by legal procedures; but this presupposes that these same procedures are not contested, that they accord with a recognized ideology, explicit or implicit.

Indeed, scientific procedures, aspiring to establish the true or the false or at least the probable or improbable, never enable us to justify our decisions, nor furnish us with reasons for acting, choosing, or preferring; scientific methods allow the establishing of facts, but not the consideration of reasons for acting.

For certain positivist or naturalist philosophies, the sole motives of our actions consist in the pleasure they procure or the pain they avoid, in the satisfaction they can give us in allowing us to gratify our instincts, our needs, our interests of any sort. All judgment of value would be a disguise for an interest, a rationalization of a desire. Any ideology would only be the delusive mask of an enterprise for serving the strongest. This is exactly the thesis which is revealed in the works of a Marx or a Nietzsche.

Ideologies, Revolution, and Evolutionary Change

Philosophical criticism of the dominant ideology, when it bares the fallacies and sophisms which legitimize a power in establishing its authority, is the precursor of revolutionary action. When power is considered as the simple expression of an arsenal of force, one will not hesitate to oppose it with a revolutionary force in the service of antagonistic interests. But the partisan of revolution cannot be content to counter with a revolutionary force the force which protects the established order; he ought, besides, to be the apologist for the new order,

which will be more just, more humane, which will rescue man from his diverse alienations while restoring to him his lost liberty. In the end, another ideology must be elaborated to show the superiority of the new order over the old, of the revolutionary order over the established order.

As scientific methods are able, at most, only to test the facts on which an ideology is based, but cannot criticize the reasons which serve to justify preferences, so it is in terms of another ideology, of another ideal of man and society, that the dominant ideology can be criticized. But this new ideology itself will not for long be able to escape criticism; the philosophical debate thus appears as a permanent struggle between ideologies which endeavor to impose themselves on all in the name of truth. Accordingly, these critiques with which one group opposes the others, are the occasion for both sides to experience spiritual progress, because each, to the extent to which it takes into account objections of the other, modifies his position when it seems vulnerable. After a prolonged debate — sometimes a century long — the competing positions will be very different from what they were at the beginning.

Ideologies and Violence

But today we very frequently witness not a struggle between ideologies, but an uprising which, doing away with all theoretical structures, borrowing slogans from anywhere which though they be inconsistent, or directly contradictory, yet are always insulting, and unwilling to recognize any authority in the established order, is content to resist the established order with violence.

This attitude can find its justification among those to whom the establishment refuses to listen, whose representatives are denied an opportunity to state their grievances, and who are obliged to resort to violence to make themselves heard. But such a reaction merits respect only if it avails itself of an ideology which demands, for example, respect for the dignity of the person, or the establishment of a more democratic society. In the case of disorders in the universities, only an ideology justifies revolt against calling in the police, for without it, why be shocked that the defenders of the established order resist force by force?

Indeed, if it is traditional in the universities not to resort to outside force in order to maintain discipline, it is because, traditionally, the universities distrust governmental power, considering it as a menace to academic liberty. It is in the name of respect for the ideal of academic liberty that universities do not like to appeal to the police power which could endanger the free expression of opinions. It is because the universities are considered in the West as the traditional sanctuary of liberty of thought and expression, of free pursuit of the true and the just, that they ought to be protected against the use of violence, from any source whatever. And it is only in the name of ideology that recourse to force can be prohibited. But if one rejects all ideologies, as being unsound rationalizations, if political life is presented as a preponderance of force, then not only is the most stringent law always the best, but the very idea of law disappears to produce universal violence.

Conflict of Ideologies

In conclusion, in order to prevent social and political life from being merely a pitting of force against force, we must recognize the existence of a legitimate power, whose authority is based on an acknowledged ideology. Criticism of this ideology can only be made in the name of another ideology, and it is this conflict of ideologies, whatever they may be, which is at the root of the spiritual life of modern times. To oppose competition between ideologies is to reestablish dogmatism and orthodoxy; it is to subordinate the life of thought to political power. To deny the worth of ideologies is to reduce political life to an armed struggle for power, from which the victor, incontestably the military chief, will emerge victorious.

To enable universities to operate under the safeguard of academic freedom is to recognize the existence of values other than force; it is to admit that none among them is immune to criticism, that no ideology need count on brute force to assure its survival.

NOTES

1. Translated by J. E. Hansen, Brock University, and William Gerber, University of Maryland.
2. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, New York, 1954, Everyman's Library, p. 65.
3. J. Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Upon Human Nature* (London, 1726), in A. I. Melden, ed., *Ethical Theories*, Englewood Cliffs, 1967, pp. 252-253.
4. *Le Pouvoir*, Paris, 1957 tome II, pp. 26-28.
5. Bertrand de Jouvenel, *De la Souveraineté*, Paris, 1955, p. 45.