

Topic 2 – Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?”

“Since authority always demands obedience; it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order, which is always hierarchical. If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments.”

MODERN AUTHORITY

I – Introduction

If we think about elections and electoral campaigns, there's something that usually doesn't come in our minds, but that doesn't really reflect the idea that we have about authority: the two candidates are at the same level. Sounds obvious, I know, and probably it would be terrible if it wasn't like that, but what if I said that one of the two candidates could be the President in that moment?

Think about the leader of a big country, with enormous political, geopolitical, military and economical responsibilities, facing someone in world-vision that can have the freedom to make him appear weak, not good and so many other critical aspects. Where's his authority? It's gone. In that particular moment the authority of one of the most powerful people in the entire world can get legally damaged, or at least ignored, by a “normal citizen” facing him at the same level... and damaging his reputation.

That's democracy, for sure. That's exactly what living in a not-dictatorial world (or country) means, but surely that's a particular moment we create, in which the authority of a powerful person, symbol of a country, becomes invisible. Is it dangerous? Is authority fundamental? How could we create it, then?

Authority can mean a lot of things, from obedience to respect, and we can agree or not agree to it, even in small parts. At the same time, we haven't still probably understood how to create it, how to make it possible to maintain and control the authority, even if it could be the only way to make people respect rules and decisions.

As Hannah Arendt shows, people mistaken it for some forms of power or violence, or a form of obedience you get using persuasion. But... are we really sure that this really works? Can we say that authority comes from the exact opposite of both of them?

II – authority as violence

If we think about a hypothetical powerful - and maybe violent - authority, we could think about a Leviathan-like leader, as the one that Hobbes tells in his book. That's similar to what Machiavelli says in *The Prince*, showing us a totally powerful leader, someone that can use violence and everything else without limits to preserve the interests of the State. Actually, Machiavelli and Hobbes tell also that this would be justified only for the real interest of the State and the people, but it seems that, finalized to the authority and the need of the State, violence should be totally normalized and... useful.

In his letter to Einstein, known as "Why the War?", Freud tells us something really interesting about that: violent dominance and unjustified power used on the people harvest revenge... and this is critical.

Freud's thought, telling us why peace after wars can't be permanent, can be read also in political terms. In fact, we could say that the election of a President could be considered as "the end of a war" between the candidates, and oppressing and being violent to the losers of the elections (in terms of candidates and electors) would be the same of being violent with the beaten enemy. This brings to the idea that you can't have a full authority on someone that wants to take his revenge on you, or, at least, that your authority will be only temporary, until your enemy will be ready to take his revenge on you. Regarding to Freud, this happens in war, slavery, work and - why not? - probably also in politics (in fact every of them shares what the politics is based on: managing and having power and responsibilities on people's life).

It is also true that, even more in violent situations, the authority of a person is not even decided by us (we will be soon back to this), but even the area of power of a person can be totally justified, and in some cases, violence is the only thing that allow someone to control someone other, causing the problems I have mentioned before. That's the idea between *Imagined Communities*, by the American writer and philosopher Anderson, that shows us how all the countries, regions and empires (of the past and of the present) are only "imagined communities", based only on our mind and conception of them, but empty of real links between the people that live in them.

Take the example of old empires, or of today's wars and conquers. Should I respect your authority, only because you had more weapons than me? If you are more powerful, and your invented-by-people-country invades mine, should I really respect your authority as your citizen since always do? Am I really part of your country only because of that?

Even Yuval Noah Harari shows as countries, companies and the most of the things that compose our society are only human inventions, and exist because of we believe in them. Does Germany, USA, Mexico, Italy, Vietnam or Tanzania... actually exist, as this computer exist and I can touch it? Of course, they work and probably keep us safe thanks to the fact

that we believe in them, but violence can't be the instrument (in certain cases the only instrument) to make me believe in my country and to consider the authority of its leader.

The material examples of this could be the countless rebellion groups and wars in the world, now and in the past. Palestine, Sahrawi, Somaliland, Taiwan and many others (I'm not going to show my opinion about that, just mentioning some examples of what I'm saying) wouldn't respect the authority of the countries in which they live, and this causes wars and battles. This, if we consider war as violence and power, means that the only way their countries have to make them follow their authority is... violence? Does it work? Do they actually follow it?

We can imagine a violent leader as the old man in Max Siedentopf's artistic installation "*Choices*" (I'm not sure at 100% that this is the real title), at the end of a room and surrounded by the red paint that he put everywhere. He's doing a good job in his opinion, but that is bringing him to traps and problems that he has created by himself.

III – authority as persuasion

On the other hand, Hannah Arendt explains another form of mistaken authority: persuasion.

She says that persuasion needs two things: equality and arguments. However, both of them are what destroys authority, where authority disappears.

Authority means in fact that there's not equality between you (the authoritarian) and me. Regarding to Hannah Arendt, authority means, without any doubts, hierarchy, and everything connected to it... and there's no equality in hierarchy.

Some people tend to confuse respect and authority. In an equal group of people, in fact, the leader could have the respect of the others, be liked and everybody would follow him because of that, but he wouldn't be on another level of hierarchy. On the other hand, a hierarchical society, in which someone has an authority, doesn't always mean that people on lower levels respect and appreciate him. In a hierarchical society we follow the leader because we have to, because hierarchy's rules are these, surely not because we all want to, only because we like and respect him. This misconception brings us to the thought that, even in equalitarian conditions, the leader could have the authority on me, but that's not authority. That's respect. A liked and respected person can have authority, but an authoritarian one can't be always liked and respected.

On the other side, the persuasion by arguments by a leader could appear as a good reason to follow his authority... but it's not at all.

If we think about a 70 million citizens Country, it is impossible to think that its leader should convince every single person to get the authority on him. We have also to consider that, by argumentation, I'm putting me on the same level as you, trying to find a link between my ideas and yours. Then, as I wrote before and as Hannah Arendt says, authority can't comprehend equality.

Anyways, persuasion hasn't only problems, but can also bring risks to the society. In fact, the persuasion of a leader doesn't always mean that a leader is telling us his ideas, and showing us how they should be right... and followed. In some cases, in fact, it could persuade us with psychological tricks, making us believe in what he wants, creating an authorities based on lies and illusions.

In *The Nationalisation of Masses*, by George L. Mosses, the author says that, during WWII and before, the Nazi government in Germany had created a real myth, a religion around the idea of its leaders and Country. Being part of that Country didn't mean supporting the ideas of the Nazi Party, but, instead, falling in an incredibly efficient machine of illusions, lies and mythical ideas of what there was around them, without actually being conscious of what was really happening.

That way of "persuasion", created masses of similar ideas, beliefs and elements, made of people that where psychologically forced to do it without even being conscious of that. But... is that actually persuasion? Can we consider illusive persuasion at the same ethical level of argumented and thought persuasions, critically analysed and understood by people?

We do also need to know that that's not only existing in dictatorships, as we could see even these days. For big powers it is actually really easy to change our vision on reality, if needed. The polish philosopher Gadamer shows how our vision of history and present times is affected by decisions and manipulations, and that we think we have an objective view of the world, but in reality, we are partialized and manipulated by our culture and by the "history written by winners".

There's a document called "*McCollum memorandum*", in which the US General McCollum wrote to President Roosevelt how the US could have provoked Japan to attack their naval bases, with the goal of changing the mind of Americans about entering in war. I'm not here to say if that is true or not, but with the Pearl Harbour attack every single American changed his mind about the war, wanting to enter in it. Was the US a dictatorship? Not, at all, but persuasion can be used also by actions (even if partially illusive or built), not only by argumentations by the leader.

IV – I-know-everything leaders

On the same line, how could we think a leader should be persuasive and argument properly everything he has to do, to convince everyone about that to get the authority on him?

In *De Oratore*, the Latin orator Cicero affirms that an orator should talk about something only if he knew it perfectly. He shows how much dangerous and wrong it is to talk to a group of people, trying to convince them about something not known or studied properly. An orator, regarding to Cicero, should obsessively study a subject or a topic before talking about it, before exposing it and trying to convince people about his ideas about it.

This creates a problem in our societies. In fact, while in the past leaders only had the power on few things, facing with what they have always done (a medieval lord, managing the war

he had always fought, or other leaders that controlled the life in small cities or reigns, maybe delegating some tasks and duties to other experts), today's leaders have to face globalised countries, with a huge number of topics and subjects to manage and work on. This, in Cicero's opinion, means that they should be experts in all of them to persuade people about their choices.

A lot of choices don't come directly from the leader, that's true, but it is the leader to own the authority, and he should represent all the decisions and actions of all the government. Imagine the most powerful person in the world, facing internal nuclear-energy problems and external geopolitical issues. Should he know everything about nuclear energy and geopolitics both and at the same time, to talk to the people and get their obedience to do what is needed? If no... what should happen then?

V - conclusion

This could only have created more confusion, and I'm not here to determine what's the actual way to gain and maintain the authority.

Even in democratic countries, in which authority is given to the most-voted people, there could be a problem: democracy, in certain ways, is mathematically impossible.

As shown in a video by the scientific YouTube channel Veritasium, the "Past the Post" voting system (present in a lot of countries, in which the most voted candidate wins an election, even without the 50% + 1 rule) has, the majority of the times, given the power to people that weren't been voted even from half of the people. That brings to us the already listened problem of authority: how a party not even chosen by half of the people should have the authority on everyone? That's not even more democracy, as most of us consider it. Maybe only a third of the entire Country wanted someone as a leader, but, being the first between a lot of candidates, he takes the authority on everyone.

This brings to a lot of paradoxes about power and authority, that have taken the mathematician Kenneth Arrow to win the Economic Nobel Prize. The conclusion in those studies is that probably the democratic system is not completely functional in terms of authority of a person on all the citizens, but it is the best system that we have.

At the same time, Arrow shows a possible solution to that: what if in voting, instead of selecting only our favourite candidate, we selected all the candidates whose authority would be totally respected and considered by us? Probably we wouldn't only try to give the power to our favourite candidate, but we would also, all together, decide whose authority would be accepted by the most of us.

Probably, only in a system like that the authority of a person would be supported by a large majority of people, and the remaining ones would only be a little – and maybe convinced after a while – group of people.

The incredible difference from our society would be that in our world, leaders take the power and gain authority, asking for it to the citizens. On the other hand, in a system like Arrow's one, the power and the authority would be given by the most of the people to the leaders. Leaders shouldn't need violence or persuasion to gain authority from citizens... it would be citizens to decide to give it to them!

Having authority, as I think, means having everyone following and respecting your laws, decisions and actions. That, sometimes, doesn't even happen always when the party at the government is the only one that you voted, so would it be a problem in the other case?

In conclusion, probably, the importance of political actions isn't only the political orientation of it, but making it acceptable and followed also by who doesn't vote for you, or by who isn't part of that political orientation. Is it better a law accepted (but maybe not completely supported) by the most of the people, or decided by a party that only the 30% of the people voted?

And, because of that, we should maybe change our perceptions and decisions about authority, instead of giving it to the wrong people.

Does authority owe to us, or do we owe to authority?