

Why “¿Authority?”

Observations on the Authority/Power *Continuum*

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Abstract

The title of this work refers to the title chosen by the EPF (European Psychoanalytical Federation) for their congress in Berlin in March 2016 (¿Authority?) and references the themes that were chosen by Serge Frisch, Laurence Kahn and Leopoldo Bleger for a seminar they organised, also in Berlin, in September 2014 (Psychoanalysis in 2025). The questions that underlie these initiatives are numerous. Given the scope of this text, I'll limit myself to pointing out the question that seems to me the most interesting: what can psychoanalysis offer for the understanding of a topic of such great social relevance as authority?

The following work begins with a series of two hypotheses.

The first assumes that authority and power are not substantially dissimilar manifestations, but constitute the poles of an unbreakable continuum. It is difficult to come across an authority entirely devoid of power, just as it is rare for the power of a subject, group or institution not to come with a certain amount of authority (of course, these terms require precise definitions that will be discussed in the next section).

The second hypothesis postulates that the problem of authority, despite being rarely discussed directly in psychoanalysis, is variously reformulated in several conceptual models that develop essential aspects of psychoanalytic theory and technique (it refers, as we shall see, the effects of the conflict between generations and the development of the Oedipus complex on psychic functioning: the formation of the super-ego and his ordinary and extraordinary maintenance).

Key words: Authority, power, leadership, group

1. The Problem of Authority. Some Conceptual Models

The first set of concepts I propose to use comes from the tradition of group relations, while the second set of hypotheses is based on extensions of the psychoanalytic method (clinical work with groups and with psychotic patients) as well as on more classic clinical practice. Here is the first.

In a text written when he was CEO of the Tavistock and Portman Trust, Anton Obholzer proposed some definitions of authority, its effects and its sources that are destined to remain an essential point of reference both for those involved in psychoanalytic clinics and those seeking tools to extend the usefulness of psychoanalysis to other fields of experience (Obholzer, 1994). Authority, the British analyst writes in *The Unconscious at Work* - can be conceptualised as “the right to make an ultimate decision, and in an organisation it refers to the right to make decisions which are binding on others” (ibid. p. 39). According to this definition, authority is a function determined by the organisational structure of the institutional system (i.e. a faculty granted from above as a privilege of the role) and based on the

functional attributes given to the leadership by the followership (the component of authority that is conferred on/confirmed for executives by the bottom). This is therefore an ability and a right that is based, as the political scientists write, on the “belief in the legitimacy” of the person or group to which responsibility has been delegated (Stoppino, 2001; p. 107 ff.).

Now let’s move on to another pole of the continuum.

Unlike authority, power is a word that designates the possibility of producing effects on things and/or persons regardless of the recognition of authority on which the social role of the subject is based. In the field of human interactions, the word refers to “man’s ability to determine man’s conduct” and in particular, the possibility of influencing the psychic and social functioning of *another* human being (ibid. p. 2). For Obholzer, power is to be understood as “an attribute of persons, rather than roles, and it can arise from both internal and external sources” (ibid. p. 42). When the organisational structure of a relational system is in crisis and the diminished collective belief in the legitimacy of the group in charge has reduced the persuasive force of the institutional authority, the leadership is driven to meet its responsibilities by boosting the effects derived from the possession of imaginary or material attributes of power—or by resorting to approaches that demand more coercive (or more indirect and manipulative) functions than ones based on authority. This puts at risk management’s ethical integrity, reduces their human reliability and helps to further diminish confidence in the personal legitimacy of the leaders.

Studied in institutional organisations, the complexity of the authority/power continuum is summarised by Obholzer in a few very clear sentences. “Authority without power leads to weakened, demoralised management. Power without authority leads to an authoritarian regime. It is judicious mix and balance of the two that makes for effective on-task management in a well-run organisation” (ibid.).

The second set of theoretical references I propose to use can be found in the writings of Thomas Ogden, René Kaës and Paul-Claude Racamier. In *Rediscovering psychoanalysis* (Ogden, 2009), Ogden proposes re-readings of some of the classics of psychoanalysis based on a rigorous review of the texts in which the fundamental notions of psychoanalytic theory and technique were elaborated. In the essay where he turns to a work by Loewald, who in turn rereads a famous Freud essay (“The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,” Freud, 1924), Ogden proposes making use of certain ideas that allow us to conceptualise one of the central motifs of psychoanalysis—the Oedipus complex—by turning to the notion of authority (Ogden, 2009). Without making an *ad hoc* definition, the text uses the current meaning of the word “authority” to connote the central aspects of the relational field in which parents and children interact and clash. “For Loewald” Ogden writes (ibid. p. 187), “the Oedipus conflict is in its essence [...] a fierce battle for autonomy, authority and responsibility.” Authority and autonomy are not automatically passed from parent to childlike aristocratic privilege, but are the stakes for a vigorous comparison so prolonged as to be virtually endless. In the relational field of the family, autonomy and power are in fact eternally contested between different subjects who are always more or less openly in conflict. In order for it to become the personal

inheritance of the offspring, autonomy—and the authority/power that make it possible—must be won at the price of a personal commitment that has a value and an effect that are, as we would say today, “subjectivising.”

The intra-psychic consequences of insufficient inter-psychic interaction between the generations are described by Ogden in a few very convincing phrases. “A relative absence of genuine parental authority leaves the child with very little to appropriate. Moreover, when the parents’ authority has not been established, the child’s fantasies lack ‘brakes’ (Winnicott, 1945, p. 153)—that is, the secure knowledge that his fantasies will not be allowed to be played out in reality” (ibid. 186). If he or she grows up in a relational context without parental authority and responsibility, the subject does not develop a flexible superego accompanied by congruent internal objects, but relies on defence mechanisms that leave the psychic apparatus devoid of the energy needed to give force to its own initiative. “Under such pathological circumstances, the child, in an effort to defend himself against the danger of the actual murder of the parents, represses (buries alive) his murderous impulses and enforces that repression by adopting a harshly punitive stance towards these feelings” (ibid.). The significance of this reflection is condensed into a very concise phrase: “In the oedipal battle, ‘opponents are required’ (Loewald, 1979; p. 389)” (ibid.).

In my view, the most important new theoretical contribution is that the psychic problem posed by the construction and redistribution of authority is never definitively resolved because both inside and outside the family, the Oedipus complex never dissolves.

Other authors who have written compellingly on this issue are René Kaës and Paul-Claude Racamier (among many others, of course—these are my personal preferences). Based on a formidable working hypothesis since the seventies—the group psychic apparatus (Kaës, 1978)—Kaës derives his hypotheses from the field of group psychotherapy, as well as clinical psychoanalysis (Kaës, 2007). The rethinking of psychoanalysis that Kaës proposes uses the logic of nonlinear systems, chaos theory and the hypotheses on self-organising mechanisms developed from complexity theories. In a recent essay, entitled *Le malêtre* (Kaës, 2013), he relaunched the Freudian project of 1921 and 1929 (“malaise” is the word used in the French translation for “das Unbehagen,” civilization and its discontents) and extended the observational field of psychoanalysis to include the specific type of *Kulturarbeit* (cultural work) that characterises contemporary societies.

In his most recent writings, the crisis of the traditional notion of authority is understood as a consequence of two converging cultural phenomena: the prevalence of “processus sans sujets” and the decline of the principle of responsibility, or rather the “disparition du répondant.” The endemic shortage of human subjects who can give relational concreteness to social authority (even extra-familial battles require opponents!) determines conditions of development of the system for thinking thoughts that are based on a reduction in the need for psychic work (*Arbeitsanforderung*) placed on the subject. The result is a reduction of the intersubjective matrix that promotes the processes of subjectivisation. “The idea that I propose,” he writes in *A Plural Singular* (Kaës, 2007; p. 249; emphasis added), “is

that the ego, the end of the process of subjectivisation, cannot take place in its reflexive organisation and appropriation of its subjectivity but in an intersubjective whole of which it is initially a tributary and from which it will have to be freed, but without liberating itself radically.” The research project that Kaës presents to the analytical community is based on the hypothesis that it is necessary to study the effects of the reciprocal influence between different processes occurring simultaneously in the relational field: the impact of groups on the subject and the influence of individual subjectivity on the functioning of the group. “The problem lies in understanding how these processes” he writes (ibid. p. 250), “are articulated to one other and how subjectivisation involves the concepts of subject, subjugation and intersubjectivity.”

Against a structuralist, overly static tradition, the conception of the self that Kaës proposes is a radicalised version of classic Freudian hypotheses (the subject as an only relatively autonomous formation that develops with wish fulfilment as a mushroom rises from intricate tangle of its mycelium) and presents many similarities with the elegant reformulation of the psychic functions proposed by Racamier in *The Genius of Origins* (Racamier, 1992). “We can formulate one fundamental principle,” wrote the latter after a life spent caring for subjects in psychotic functioning (ibid. p. 61): “the ability of object love, the ability to enjoy pleasure and the ability to stand the feeling of grief all together constitute the preconditions for any psychic health.” The paradox of identity that underpins the strength of the subject is, in a nutshell, that “the ego is found in the moment it is lost” (ibid. p. 40). They are the “crippled of mourning, [those] who can never go back on their illusions [that] they cling to like indispensable and vital narcissistic growths” (ibid. p. 53). The authority/power over the self—that is, the strength of the ego—ultimately turns out to be like a paradoxical and positive consequence of the collapse of the omnipotent illusions with which we console ourselves of our substantial powerlessness. This principle is stated by Racamier in even clearer terms in the aphorisms that conclude the first chapter of the book: “No one can ever find themselves without losing themselves first” (ibid. p. 62). Obholzer’s comments cited to at the beginning of this section can act as a useful counterpoint to the theoretical reflections developed by Ogden, Kaës and Racamier. Therefore, I shall attempt a synthesis. In an organisation, authority is the right granted to an individual or to a group to make decisions that guide internal social processes. In clinical work and intrapsychic dynamics, the authority of a subject is instead expressed as the possibility of suggesting hypotheses that revive the analysis of experience, and as the faculty of offering syntheses that make choices and initiatives possible. In both fields of experience, authority is the result of a functional and integrated relational system that is based, unlike with power, on an asymmetrical reciprocity.

2. The Ego *in vivo*: Relational Fields and Emerging Psychic Structures

The definitions and conceptions mentioned in the previous section can be put to the test in different fields of clinical and non-clinical experience. To avoid the misunderstandings that result from a too-direct application of psychoanalytic

concepts to social and institutional situations that have their own specific setting (Robles, 2004), I will analyse the dynamics of the processes of construction and distribution of authority that can be observed during a psychoanalytically oriented procedure/consultation (Ferruta et al., 2015; Perini, 2014).

2.1 The Three-Part Origin of Authority and the Temptation of Power

Psychoanalytic theories and models are useful tools for thinking about institutional dynamics; using them in the political-administrative environment, however, requires updating treatment methods and rethinking communication and listening techniques.

The Head of a Department of Mental Health of a city in central Italy calls for action to prevent the effects of the crisis of the residential structures of the service he directs. In order to pay the consultant, he has modest funding that is only sufficient only for a brief intervention. According to the “client system” (a term designating the buyer as a multi-subjective whole), the consultant agrees to three remote meetings two weeks apart.

The first meeting is a classical clinical conference. The staff at the residential facility presents a case that has sparked heated debate among the workers. The work proceeds rapidly and goes on for about three hours. Difficulties emerge as to collaboration within the DSM (between the residential facility and regional medical centres) and problems with integrating treatments with other social agencies (city police and social services).

The second meeting takes place using a technique derived from Listening Post and called GRADIOR (Organisational Dynamics Listening Group: Foresti & Sama, 2014). This is a study group that meets for about two and a half hours, investigating the emerging issues recognised by the staff and concludes with the drafting of a report that collects the hypotheses made by the group.

In this case, the emerging issues are the following:

- the group’s difficulty to adapt *reception practices* to the reality of new cases (the DSM is a strong structure and has a tradition of great hospitality: the new social reality calls for more selective decisions and more rigorous choices),
- the perception of an *endemic crisis* in the human and professional relations of the team that impedes the development of internal conflicts (the crisis is brought back to a nostalgic orientation of the group’s thought, more concerned with regretting and idealising the past than understanding the present and self-renewal),
- the feelings of *isolation and loneliness* that characterise relations between workers (understood as a consequence of the reproduction within the DSM of the over-demarcation of boundaries that characterises relationships between the DSM and the social and institutional context), and finally,
- a *tendency to expulsion and rejection* of problem patients (those who according to the usual working model call into question the cultural tradition of the group and risk becoming clinical failures).

The third meeting is preceded by a discussion with the management team of the DSM (the Principal and most influential top figures) and a meeting with the manager of the

residential structure. In both cases, the discussion was aimed at reviewing the results of the GRADIOR and preparing a presentation of the report for the workers. During the third meeting, the residential facilities manager does not comply with the agreed objectives and radically changes the course of action. Instead of sticking to the task established in accordance with the consultant working on the hypotheses formulated in the report, the manager insists on repeating the clinical case discussed in the first meeting and directly attacks the team he is the head of. The result is a violent altercation in which everyone argues with everyone else: the manager scolds his collaborators for not recognising the usefulness of his work, while the latter retort that they do not feel heard or helped by him.

2.2 Epicrisis

The described sequence reveals a desperate struggle to assert authority and the temptation to solve the problem by turning to the exercise of power. Instead of accepting the long way of working on DSM culture and the difficulties hindering communication between workers, the leader in crisis refuses the task laid out by the consultant and turns directly to his colleagues and collaborators. Neglecting the importance of the authority that is conferred on the professional by institutional stability and the clarity of that person's role in the organisation (the authority that comes from above, in Obholzer's definition), the authoritarian leader claims the full legitimacy of his personal power and accuses the team at his service of failing to provide the support to which he is entitled. The unconscious and counterproductive search for an authority that should be ratified by the collaborators from below, the leader acts as if he could solve the crisis by resorting to an act of force. In this way, the synergy between the sources of authority is not created and the result ends up being, rather than mutual reinforcement, a pernicious vicious circle. The claim to power appears authoritarian and that further diminishes the authority of the leader, who reacts by increasing the volume of his claims and the autocratic nature of his arguments.

2.3 Work Hypothesis

The possible interpretations of a fragment of institutional life like this are numerous and their choice depends on the interlocutors with whom the work will proceed. If the leader in crisis accepts psychodynamically-orientated coaching (Brunning, 2006; Perini, 2013), the focus of the previously described processes can be analysed due to the hypothesis on the demands of psychic work that are placed on the subject so that the group psychic apparatus comes together and the group will work. The key question to ask the leader in crisis involves research into the effects of disorganisation on the individual by group dynamics: what explains the difference between the thinking skills of an individual and his impulsive surrender to the automatism of the institutional dynamic?

According to Kaës's hypothesis, there are at least four emotional foundations for good integration between individual and group: "the obligation to invest in the group" (the opposite of expressing claims and annoyance towards colleagues);

“making latent or giving up certain psychic formations of the subject” (the choice to postpone the more delicate and personal explanations, for example); “the need to implement processes of repression, denial or rejection so that the group can be created and maintain its bonds” (the acceptance of the unsaid that form the autistic-contiguous basis for group functioning) and “mutual renunciation of the realisation of instinctual aims,” i.e. the establishment of “a community that guarantees a bond” (the ability of containment and self-control that renews the social contract of the institutional group every day).

Whereas if the work continues with the principal and the management team, the focus should be on the interaction between the residential facility group and the other groups that give life to the institutional dynamic. In this case, the key question concerns the basic assumptions that hinder the functioning of the working group. Within the overall framework of a basic assumption of dependence (the noble history of the service and aristocratic tradition of its leaders), what are the factors that have determined group’s shift to a basic assumption of attack-and-run? What prevents DSM workers from reflecting on the changes in use and the need to rethink of institutional work that are imposed by the economic crisis? Where do the weakness of the leadership team as a whole and the lack of authority to lead the group towards the principal task come from?

And finally: what initiatives should be taken to try to do tomorrow what cannot be done today?

3. Conclusions

If someone undertakes a discussion on the problem of authority with any group of professionals, sooner or later he always encounters in a conceptual antinomy as simplistic as it is inevitable: the opposition between ‘authoritative’ and ‘authoritarian.’ These adjectives highlight the inevitable ambiguity between authority and power that can be intuitively grasped by anyone and that recurs insistently, often thematised with remarkable clarity.

The thesis that this work has tried to illustrate is that there are manifestations of authority that elicit respect and are seen as positive and constructive—the ‘authoritative’ forms of authority. While there are phenomena, intersubjective relations and social processes in which authority is perceived as a negative and destructively oppressive component—the ‘authoritarian’ forms of authority. The two poles of the *continuum* authority/power are not substantially different and between them exists an embarrassing continuity which is made even more disturbing because the intra- and inter-psychic processes that produces them don’t reach an end point: they go on influencing themselves reciprocally and continually.

With the vocabulary of classical psychoanalysis we could say that the Oedipus complex is never overcome once for ever: its equivalents, due to the transference phenomena, repeat and reproduces themselves during all the life cycle and the authority which organizes the social relations, therefore, is never stably distributed.

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