



Authority's Phantom Pain

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Recorded confrontations between the police and the populace are commonplace in the diverse halls of mass electronic media. In witnessing such instances, “abuses of authority,” as they are sometimes called, it is difficult not to experience discomfort, anger, alarm and pain. It is almost as though today, the brandishing of the right arm of the state—the one authorized to surveil, make demands, and coerce the domestic population—cannot fail to produce such sentiments en masse. The institution of the police is undergoing a general unveiling, one that emphasizes its violences and racism as a form of abuse. Critique, which

Marx called “the head of passion,” has turned and continues to turn relentlessly upon the police.¹

In light of this phenomenon, Hannah Arendt's famous and idiosyncratic claim that authority is precisely what is lost to the modern age seems especially timely. The word “authority” has helped Arendt, and the tradition of Western political theory more broadly, answer a difficult question: “Why do people obey?” The notion is that if an entity has authority then it commands obedience; obedience and authority, thus, can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. The difficulty in conceptualizing authority, however, is that it is often confused with power, violence and persuasion, all of which make people succumb to commands. Power, for Arendt,—that which is revealed when people act collectively, and violence,—a force of killing and destruction,— clearly persist in modern times. Arendt's claim, however, is that only *authority*, which she identified as a legitimating myth lying outside society yet binding all social action to a certain notion of *right*, is nowhere to be found in modern times.² Instances of command lacking recourse to coercion or persuasion—“where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance”—are rare, gone almost entirely, in society.³

In full recognition of the controversial nature of these assertions, my intention here is neither to challenge nor to defend. Instead, I will to use Arendt's argument to view a contemporary political experience through fresh lenses. My notion is that Arendt's terminological distinctions and claims regarding authority's absence uniquely highlight the phenomenon whereby an abusive police has today become

a central object of critique in the United States. For through Arendt, it becomes apparent that “authority” in fact retains an important contemporary political role as kind of lost limb, the phantom pain of which illuminates power and violence everywhere.⁴ What I mean by this, and what I shall attempt to show, is that authority’s general absence has created an uncomfortable condition through which police violence is made eminently subject to critique.

To make explicit the link I wish to draw between authority and critique, it will be helpful to first compare our society to that of Roman antiquity. For it is Arendt’s contention that the Romans, of all societies in the course of Western history, offer the clearest example of rule by authority (or, as they referred to it in the Latin, *auctoritas*). Like contemporary American society, Roman society was authoritarian in structure, hierarchically organized in the image of a pyramid.⁵ Only in Rome, however, was that structure secured by what Arendt calls authority. One of the principle differences between our society and that of the Romans’, Arendt argues, was that the Roman government’s success in exercising rule stemmed from a mythic understanding of the sacredness of its *founding*.⁶ The Romans shared, as such, the remembrance of a *common political experience*—the godlike deeds of Romulus and Remus—and this memory conferred an intense sense of dignity upon Roman rule. It imbued political actions with legitimacy because it granted that all practices of politics could be perceived as “preserv[ing] first and foremost the foundation of the city of Rome.”⁷ It is Arendt’s contention that Roman commands, unlike most contemporary ones, could also be infused with a

sense of *right* stemming from the fact of their connection to a foundational moment of legendary proportion. The Roman populace could locate the source of its obedience not only in the threat of physical violence or in the fact of having been convinced, but also in the knowledge that to obey was to augment the strength of the Roman republic itself.⁹ The implication, for our purposes, is that the social hierarchy and structural inequality of Rome was compounded not just by power and violence, but also by a mythological narrative: authority.

Thus, for Arendt, Roman society exhibited authority in a way that would be quite uncharacteristic and perhaps impossible today. But if we follow Arendt's narrative thus far, isn't the claim that the police abuse authority rendered incoherent? I would argue to the contrary. To recognize authority's abuse is in fact to call into service a notion of political foundations in a way that is both related and quite opposite their historical deployment in Roman discourses. It is necessary to recall that any act of founding, and this Arendt is careful to point out, constitutes an act of *making* (literally forming the political community). As making always implies the violent transformation of materials, to found is always an act of violence: the United States was founded through the genocide of native peoples and for a long time subsisted, like Rome, only through slave labor. Inherent in the act of making a political community, as a particular form of violence, is also the establishment of a spectrum of political membership. Foundation delineates those who will be included in the state as full members and those who will be banned entirely or, perhaps, included as Other

(that is, as foreigners, aliens, and/or members of inferior statuses). Foundational moments, viewed as such, are thus akin to Janus coins: they are characterized by godlike acts—the unprecedented exercise of power—but acts that are always also the violent assertion of domination by one group over another.

Our contemporary condition is not one that lacks foundations; rather, it is one where foundations can and have been revealed as exertions of violence and power because authority, in the Arendtian sense of the term, is no longer operative. Today, what is salient is not the presence but the absence of authority: the implication being that the Janus coin, since Roman times, has flipped. True authority, that order-establishing memory from antiquity, has been banished, and it is this historical fact that prepares the ground for the proliferation of critique. “The police have no right to act as such!” “We shouldn’t be treated like that!” Such claims assert that where once there was authority, a legitimating mythology, now gapes an empty space unveiling police activity as nothing but violence. With the nonattendance of authority, the police’s demands and compulsions are more readily viewed as abusive. This is what Pierre Bourdieu argues when he writes that, “aided by a crisis,” we perform “a critical unveiling of the founding violence that is masked by the adjustment between the order of things and the order of bodies.”⁹ Acts of police violence are set into relief when all attempts at justification find only more violence.

We might recall, in concluding, the tale of Marcus Sergius, a Roman general in the Second Punic War, who lost his right hand in battle quite early in his career. In response to his misfortune, Sergius fashioned himself a new hand from iron (in what seems to be the first documented case of the use of prosthetics) and continued leading his portion of the Roman military. In this story which comes to us through the work of Pliny, one is left to wonder how the ghostly ache of Sergius' missing hand weighed on his subsequent decisions and his conviction to carry on. Perhaps it sharpened his resolve. Phantom pain in our context, as I have been citing Arendt to suggest, is perhaps authority's final hold on the present. By withdrawing and refusing to vouch for violence, authority's phantom pain sharpens our ability to critique. We distinctly feel authority's absence in the visceral experience of witnessing police violence and recognize it as abuse.



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- 1 Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction" in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton & Company, 1978), 55.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 200-201, 139.
- 3 Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2006), 92.
- 4 I do not mean to imply by this statement that authority still exists as some kind of political phantom (though this would certainly be an intriguing notion). What I mean, rather, is that Arendt's claim that authority has been permanently lost can be interpreted in phenomenological terms as pain. The metaphor is not perfectly stable; its provocativeness and utility lie in the fact that loss and sensations of agony in the body (politic) coincide in discussions of authority and phantom pain.
- 5 While many Americans refer to the United States as a democracy, one need only briefly examine the structure of a given organization, the police for instance, to realize that it is authoritarian and not democratic in structure. Democracy, which (unfortunately) is generally conceived as "one person, one vote," plays quite a minor role in American's everyday experiences with institutions.
- 6 Arendt, "What is Authority?", 97.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 120.
- 8 Obedience, as it is generally found in American society today, does not stem from the "Founding Fathers," it takes hold, rather, from other sources, e.g. schooling and discipline, as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault argue. In a sense, many of us might better understand ourselves as illegitimate children, taken from our neglectful "Fathers" and raised by the state.
- 9 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 200), 188.

