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ANTHROPOLOGICAL BASIS OF AUTHORITY

Armel HUET, Jean-Claude QUENTEL

When we speak about authority in general terms, we think we know what the word means. Indeed we consider that, without it, no situation can be dealt with, that no knowledge or know-how can be recognised, that no job can be carried out suitably and to the required satisfaction, and that no decision can be easily accepted and applied. This is the case for all societies and throughout history. So authority is a fundamental property of man, essential for the permanent construction of his relationship with fellow human beings. At the same time it is a constant cause of problems because it is something that is both asserted and rejected. It has been the subject of much debate through the history of our societies and in all cultures.

Today the question of authority is one of the most pondered. The media are constantly warning us about its decline, but sometimes are at pains to point out its new forms and its new rules¹. The fact that it very much worries our fellow citizens is without doubt related to the changes in our society, and the confused and controversial issues around equality and "democratisation". Everything is happening as if authority had become difficult to contemplate, and even impossible to apply in the social context. At the same time, there is no real doubting its necessity ; there is even widespread support for its return, in response to the path of decline along which the ideas of equality and accelerated democratisation are leading us. Authority stands out as a major issue in the changes of our times. It is therefore necessary to explain what makes it and what differentiates it among all of the human abilities.

Philosophy since Plato, theologians from all religions, and more recently human and social sciences, have examined this question at length. There is general agreement on the existence of a strong link between authority and legitimacy. The differences occur when one comes to the very foundation of authority, which is considered as an intrinsic human ability, independent from legality, and the social and institutional conditions of its application. Even so it seems to us that it is through this distinction between legitimacy and legality that the question of authority should be tackled, if we want to understand how it is used by each human

¹ The review *Sciences humaines* (Human sciences) had as the title for its no. 243 edition (December 2012): "Authority, the new rules of the game".

being involved in the most diverse of social situations. This is how certain authors such as Hannah Arendt² thought it to be so. It's here that we come up against the clinical anthropology of Jean Gagnepain³, who, using this distinction, based authority solely on legitimacy.

Authority and power

More or less everybody automatically makes the initial distinction: authority should not be confused with authoritarianism, which most people understand as an excess of authority. Nevertheless it's far from certain that the processes here are of the same kind. Without any doubt authoritarianism concerns the question of the power exercised towards other people and it is as it happens seized upon as tending towards the abuse of power. Yet, today our society has ended up questioning everything that is denoted by power and is particularly vigilant in respect of any type of abuse of power. Whatever forms it takes, it is tainted with suspicion, due precisely to the ideas which are fundamentally egalitarian and dominant in our western societies and which constantly proclaim their "democratic" and "individualist" virtues. This mistrust which confines some people to a state of radical rejection, pervades every aspect of relationships with other people within our society. It concerns first of all the major "institutions" of power, but it has also invaded, as the various examples of daily life demonstrate, school and the family life.

The display of equality which prevails in our society leads us to advocate the removal of any otherness. Everything happens as if it should be asserted, outside any other consideration, and that any difference should pertain, when all is said and done, to the same or to what is similar⁴. In other words, our society is moving towards, irrespective of what it maintains, a form of promotion of the same which would result, if it were taken to its conclusion, in the destruction of the social issues themselves.

More especially, our society seems to display a rejection of this type of rapport which we sometimes describe as "vertical", based on which the phenomena of hierarchy can be understood, but also everything which concerns tradition and legacy as well as the link between generations.

² Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, "London, 1961, trad. *The Culture crisis*, Paris, Gallimard," Folio, 1972.

³ Jean Gagnepain (1923-2006) produced a clinical anthropology at Rennes-II university which characterised all of his scientific work. In collaboration with Olivier Sabouraud (1924-2006) neurologist at Rennes University hospital, he worked on making good use of the "experimental cases" that "mental" pathologies provided, in order to understand the way humans function. He set out the results of his work in the "theory of mediation" which he presented over forty years of seminars and publications: *The sense of meaning, Epistemology treaty for the human sciences*. 11. *The sign, The tool*, t. II, *The person, The norm*, Paris, Book and Communication, 1982, re-published 1990, and *More reason or less reason. Writings on medicine and theology* Paris, Le Cerf, 2005.

⁴ We agree on this point with the analysis of Marcel Gauchet!, *Democracy against itself*, Paris, Gallimard, 2002, more especially pp. 372-374.

The only valid relationship is that based on parity, any form of dialogue based on power would be banished.

This operation is encouraged intellectually by the reduction that is frequently maintained of power in relation to domination⁵. For sure, it can be confined to domination, or even result in it totally. Nevertheless, it's no longer power but a phase which should be described as an abuse of power; domination drives us from the human level onto one which is about the struggle for life.

If all power were to be reduced to domination, it would become impossible to account for how a whole part of our society works, which is based, like any society, on the notion of the social division of work and that of skills which is linked to it. This level of social issues manifests itself in the positions which are necessarily asymmetric from the point of view of those involved in the relationship, but doesn't mean any less the reciprocity in the vast framework of exchanges of service, which is to say the various social contributions which are the lifeblood to any society. If confusion between power and domination becomes established, social relationships become tainted with a generalised mistrust to the point of becoming the theatre of a constant open confrontation. Confusing power and domination results in relegating power to the level of animality or perversion, in the psychopathological sense of the term.

A human group, of whatever type, *even more so* a society, will always search for a coherent organisation, notably a necessary distribution of the particular tasks of their different members and therefore their hierarchical organisation. This implies a complex set of delegations of responsibility within the same team or establishment. Everything functions as long as the principle of delegation works, including the person who is at the top of the organisation. For he does indeed have to be accountable, himself, to the mission which is his and the fulfilment of his responsibilities. Should he claim a form of immunity in respect of his way of functioning or think himself all-powerful, he will slip into the abuse of power and exert a type of domination on others. He will no doubt be feared, but he'll have everyone against him and those who are under his orders will no doubt not have the slightest regard for him. In other words, because he doesn't have any respect among them, he will not have any authority as far as they are concerned, although he is in a position of power. This is what happens when institutions or people take decisions which seem to them completely legal or even necessary whereas they are felt by those whom they concern to be unjust and inconsistent.

⁵ An author like Pierre Bourdieu has a lot to do with this simplification operation, whatever, moreover, the relevance of his thoughts.

Of course everything depends here on the meaning that one gives to "authority". But whatever the case, we note that currently two different human processes are being referred to. Dealing with the question of power, which depends on the cohesion of a group, leaves unaddressed that of regard and the respect under which we are already classifying here the issue of authority. Just as, calling for the notion of equality, on condition of a democratisation which is moving towards relegating the rights of man to a position under those of the individual as Marcel Gauchet⁶ has it, will not solve in any manner the problem of this other form of difference, of this "increase" that is implied by authority given to certain people but certainly not to all. The field covered by this phenomenon of authority does indeed escape this type of consideration.

Everyone one of us can come up with an example of people who are in a position of power but who even so are not recognised. Conversely, we know others who don't have any particular power, but who enjoy this regard which the former are lacking⁷. This goes for the whole of society (where we often talk about a "moral authority"), within a team, whether professional or not, but also for each one of us in the relationships that we have with those around us. Certain "are worthy" in our eyes, whatever their social situation and the position of power in which they may find themselves in respect to us.

Although we may not agree with the conception of equality that we have reached today, it is none the less true that the changes which have occurred to our society over the last forty years have led us to keep our distance from the concept of how power is exercised which was hardly ever discussed. So now, the difference between these two levels of power and authority seems more distinct than in previous times. For then, it was more difficult, without a doubt to display a non-recognition. Conformism, even obedience were the order of the day. Even so the distinction between these levels already applied. Today it has become effective, with conformism and obedience no longer having the same importance. Just being the chief is not enough for asserting one's authority; decisions can be discussed and sometimes not followed.

The conditions for authority

If authority does not come from power, where does it come from ? Could it be "natural" ? People who display it, seem to have it in themselves, as far we can tell in any case, hence this initial way of trying to grasp its essence. Even so, it doesn't come from any "gift" ; it implies processes

⁶ See for example *The Religion in democracy*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998, p. 111.

⁷ "Authority, we know, only comes by addition: that which is lacking *in* it and it is the most frequent of which power is legal; that which benefits from it which has never received nor sought the investiture," (Jean Gagnepain, *"Du vouloir dire" (Meaning)*, t. II, *co. cit*, p. 83).

which are specifically human and it is something that is worked on. For many, the nature of these processes remains something which is mysterious and impenetrable⁸. Thus modern authors question the etymology and sometimes don't wish to see in the word *auctoritas*, the Latin term which our language borrowed, that there is the word *auctor*, which means author. So authority comes from the ability to carry out a basic act, to find oneself at a point of origin and when all is said and done to make history. Just like, for example, the author of an essay.

In fact this is not the side we should be looking at. Education, meanwhile, offers enlightening prospects for reflection. On the other hand it has to appeal to the notion of authority, even among those who contend that everything must come from the child itself and who prove to be critical, in respect of a legacy which is always suspect, of reproducing "tradition". On the other hand and above all, education needs to reflect on the relationship that man has with the notion of authority from his earliest age.

In his relationship with an adult, the child will start by obeying. Freud explains, with good reason, that the child obeys because it is afraid of losing the love of his parents. That is the first stage of the "creation of the moral conscience". It's not a case of veritable morals, he contends; morals based on obedience would keep us in a sort of continual fear of the gendarme.

There is no doubt that man functions like this, but that is insufficient for appreciating the question of morals and that of authority. Using the same reasoning as Durkheim and almost all the sociologists after him, Freud claims that the child becomes truly moral by "interiorising" parental interdictions. Such a pattern, which itself turns out to be very contestable, puts the origin of morals in last place in a social environment which is interiorised or incorporated⁹. For the moment, we will go along with Freud's argument that the child is, starting from a certain moment, in another relationship with morals, and as a result with the adult. It will no longer settle for just obeying ; it is going to "legitimise" the person who is educating it, whether this is its parents or those with whom it comes into contact professionally based on their delegation of

⁸ The same more or less goes for another notion, for which it would be interesting to draw a link with authority; and that is culpability.

⁹ Paul Ricœur insists on the fact that this explanation "leaves intact [...] the problem of the inevitable as such" and "is limited to psychoanalysing the social *phenomenon*" (*From the interpretation. Essay on Freud*, Paris. Le Seuil, 1965, p 187). Before him, another philosopher, Jean Lacroix, was more radical stating that "we only receive that for which we have receptivity", which ruins the Freudian argument (*Philosophy of culpability*, Paris, PUF, 1977, p. 115.

responsibility. It¹⁰ doesn't just give way but on the other hand doesn't accept any type of type of action which concerns it.

The child legitimises the adult in terms of what he is "worth" to it and the degree to which it can recognise this precisely. For the child and beyond it for man in general, the basis of authority is to be found in the value granted to the other and therefore which is not in his power. Not every person in a position of power will have this value. Any adult who works with children knows it and the professionals who work with adolescents who have behavioural problems or who are delinquents know how difficult it is to get these youngsters to consider them as legitimate. Nevertheless it can still be difficult to find the source even of this legitimization. The child understands that this adult who protects it, has its best interests at heart: which is the reason why the child follows the adult.

Any parent, and for that matter any adult, knows, none the less, that it is not always easy to impose one's authority on a child (*let alone* on an adolescent) or, more exactly, to see authority conferred by him. The child will test his ability of placing limits in respect of a level of satisfaction he is aiming for. For that matter, we can show that the child is testing the authority of the adult and not disputing his power. Although the difference may seem subtle, the adolescent will assert it regularly: for he is not just content with testing, he disputes the power and generally the law of which he has just discovered the "arbitrary" dimension, which is to say relative. As for the child, it will test the firmness of the adult's decision.

This notion of firmness, that moreover we often associate with authority, allows us to advance in the search for processes which are at work in authority. What's more the child will put to the test the adult's decision which it thinks is unsustainable and which it can therefore manage to bend. In other words, the "no" that this adult confronts it with can be converted into a "yes"; the child feels it and knows it intuitively. The problem of authority occurs notably, when the adult does not follow a course of action, an educative course, which is to say when his behaviour with regard to the child is not consistent. Now the question is what kind of consistency we mean.

The child believes what the adult says to it because in its eyes the adult has already proved himself. The adult has proved himself over time, so to speak, and has become predictable. This point was known to the old

¹⁰ For which we can show moreover that he pertains to a special anthropological status which makes him necessarily socially dependent on the adult.

teachers¹¹ : the adult has a recognised authority, in as much as he knows what he wants for the child and will basically persist in his approach¹². Consistent in his attitudes, he sets a standard as well as acting as a beacon of security, so the child can have confidence in him. Put another way the child trusts him.

We need to point out here the importance of trust in as far as authority is concerned¹³. The adult shows kindness to the child; he only wants good for the child and the child knows it. Whatever age it is the child has no difficulty deciphering the intentions of the adult through the latter's behaviour towards the child. Similarly, the adult's actions seem fair to the child. At this stage, the notion of justice is very close to that of authority; they are related because they both pertain to an ethical dimension.

The legal and the legitimate

It is to be noted that among all these processes occurring to a child, its education is a decisive phase in learning about authority. Common sense says it all, anthropology shows it. We will notice also that during this phase of learning about authority, the child has no autonomy, let alone social responsibility. It must be deduced that authority is based on a human process which doesn't involve autonomy and responsibility in the slightest, which human and social sciences generally have a lot of difficulty accepting, especially when they are themselves, the unconditional sycophants of autonomy, as benefits and a necessity of modern man.

Authority appeals to another human ability different from that which governs our sociality and our relationships with others: it is the basic premise that we can measure our satisfaction. In other words, it requires first and foremost that we know more or less what we want, as it happens that within this tension we manage to strike the right balance between the search for satisfaction and the price that has to be paid to obtain it. Faced by the urges that we feel, the desires that we wish to satisfy, the plans that we want to see through, the decisions that we have

¹¹ "Authority comes solely from the character", wrote for example Alfred Binet. "If one wants another word, let's say will. So once again: strength, power, coordination. What the master needs is a will which is not impulsive, nor stupid, but a calm will, which is thoughtful, which doesn't get carried away, which is not self-contradictory and which never makes idle threats." And to conclude : "If you want to prevail, start with your own education, try to acquire a character and the rest will take care of itself" (*Modern Ideas on children* [1911], Paris, Flammarion, 1973, p. 258).

¹² Which moreover doesn't mean that the adult will be immune from doubt ; he must be capable of questioning himself, and of asking questions of his own educative attitudes. Conversely, nevertheless, teachers who are regularly heckled are often the ones who don't believe *in* what they're doing.

¹³ Etymologically, "confidence" comes from Latin, from the verb meaning "to confide".

to take, we are unrelentingly forced into making choices. In other words to give a tolerable appearance to this tension which forms the basis of our choices, to "control" them.

To be capable of controlling our urges and desires is one of the conditions for exercising human reason. It's the essence of the moral code. If this only happens within social morals, it is no less autonomous as far as its processes are concerned. More precisely, authority challenges the ability that man has to control himself, which is to say not to be at the mercy of his own urges. Not only is he who allows himself to be completely overcome by his urges a slave of himself but this also applies to the person who has so much control over them that he no longer allows himself any satisfaction.

It is in this ability to control his own desire that man acquires this increase in power to which the etymology of the term authority refers. *Auctoritas*, in Latin, comes in fact from the root *augere* meaning "to increase". Authority therefore "increases" the person to which it is attributed. It confers on this person "something else", a "plus" which give the person his or her moral force. This, for example, is what was meant by those who insisted on preserving the expression - "parental authority" and on not replacing it with the expression "parental responsibility". The responsibility, the duty in respect of others, is one thing (it refers to legality), authority is another thing which is based on a detailed and distinct level which is that of legitimacy.

Nietzsche, notably through his so derided concept "will of power", insisted particularly on the difference of these levels and the foundations of authority. This "power" is not to be understood as a power over others or a harmful and exacerbated will to dominate; it supposes first and foremost a patient control over oneself, a domination of one's urges. The real strength of man resides in this control of himself which he must endeavour, in the act of bettering himself (the *Selbstüberwindung*), to surpass himself. Which explains that Nietzsche has no qualms about denouncing traditional morals, social morals which are those of conformism and which is what precisely prevents one from carrying out this work on oneself. Nietzsche always posed a problem to his commentators because he gets us to distinguish between the levels which we've always confused since the Ancient Greeks: that of power and that for which he tells us that it bestows true power upon man¹⁴.

This *Selbstüberwindung*, this surpassment of oneself is consequently what contributes to "increasing", to bringing consideration to that to which we

¹⁴ The most lucid author in the analysis of these Nietzschean theses and the clear illustration of this style, to be separated consequently from that of power, is unquestionably Jean Granier, notably in his work on *The Problem of truth Nietzsche's system*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1966 (pp. 394-429 are particularly illustrative of this point of view).

attribute authority. A form of elevation¹⁵ comes from it that the person with whom it connects, perceives. This person will only be capable of it if he himself finds himself acted upon by the same necessity which is found in the person in whom he recognises an authority, and therefore by the same processes that his behaviour gives rise to. As a consequence it is in the context of a relationship that the authority is noted : it is attributed by someone to someone else.

This "power", this determination which produces authority, does not however have its source in the relationship ; it supposes that, simultaneously, the person upon whom the authority is conferred and the person who recognises it in that person, carry it in them and that they feel, in one way or another, this necessity for a surpassment of one self. The relationship is therefore not the cause of these processes ; it merely offers the opportunity of seeing these noble feelings manifest themselves as the moral force and the righteousness of will. He who is capable of it can be "proud of having bonded the barbaric passions and of having achieved a sovereign equilibrium"¹⁶.

Nietzsche was not the first to have understood the issues concerning authority. The Greek philosophers were already studying these questions: for example Socrates, in the *Gorgias*, contended that the best and most powerful are those who have an ordered life and who are in command of it themselves. Tyrants, he insists, those who have all the power, do not do what they want in as much as they do what pleases them; they possess no good. To Callicles he asks the question : are they the governors or the governed¹⁷ ?

Even so, these illustrious philosophers didn't systematise the difference between the level of power and that of pure "power" that Nietzsche talks about. What's more the remarkable analyses by Nietzsche go hand in hand with a depreciation and even a rejection of everything that is based on power. He went as far as to contend that this becomes stupid. Yet, it's not a case of choosing one to the detriment of the other ; for sure, one needs to be able to make a clear distinction between them, but at the same time to explain them to one and another and to relate them to different processes, which in the cases are an illustration of a specifically human function. Such is the approach and no doubt what is most original about the thinking of Jean Gagnepain. He asks us not to confuse legal with legitimate, and the laws which form the basis of each of them. The legal is a social matter, whereas the legitimate is a matter of ethics.

¹⁵ Nietzsche's "superman" is he who rises above himself; he embodies power.

¹⁶ Granier, *op. cit.* p. 394.

¹⁷ Plato, *Protagoras, Euthydemus, Gorgias, Menexenus, Menon, Cratylus*, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1967, pp. 196-197 et 234-237.

What is stated by the law in society is not what our conscience dictates to us ethically speaking and vice versa. The first is constantly negotiated and is the result of a more or less temporary consensus; it is always debatable because it is necessarily arbitrary and therefore relative, since it introduces a social contract at an acceptable and necessary moment. It is however essential as a principle because it is not possible to do without the consistency that it introduces to social relationships. The chief is, for his part, the guarantor of a law that he applies, but which always surpasses him and cannot be of his sole doing; on the other hand he has the responsibility of introducing it in his way, based on a position which is unique to him.

What our conscience dictates to us is of another kind completely and can generate a conflict with the law. It is a case of basing our behaviour on a rule that we apply to ourselves and not based on a shared law ; this rule determines, for us, what holds and what does not, what is fair and what is not, what is tolerable and what is unbearable. The moral code is therefore this dimension which leads us to carry out this work on ourselves and which, making us keep our distance in respect of our urges and not leading us to forbid everything from ourselves, confers upon us an authority and a liberty which is understood to have a meaning other than social. At the same time this level is that which forms the basis for the decision that we are taking with good conscience, despite the doubt and the frequent ambivalence that we may feel.

This difference between legitimacy and legality is something which soldiers regularly experience, which is a source of tension for them¹⁸. They experience it particularly in the last-ditch moments of battle when they have to take quick decisions which they cannot do with a law book in one hand or by referring to the instructions of a legal advisor (the *legal advisor*). For sure, soldiers act within the letter of the law, but the law cannot specify how unique situations are to be dealt with. It comes down to the responsibility of the chief to exercise the legitimacy of his authority and decide. So that this can be done as consistently as possible and with the utmost efficiency in mind, it is necessary for those under his command to recognise his authority. Even so, they do not "submit" to the order of the leader. They exercise their own authority by accepting the decision of the person who has to manage them in the current situation. It's the noble meaning of obedience to the chief. This exercise of one's own authority may also lead the subordinate to doubt the authority of the chief and event to dispute it. The problem about authority with soldiers shows also, that in order for it to be applied, it must be learnt and worked upon as much on the part of the chief as well as the subordinate.

¹⁸ Armel Huet dealt with this question in an essay called "Soldiers between legitimacy and legality Essay on anthropological foundations" and delivered at the symposium "Justice and soldiers" held in Paris, at the Assemblée nationale (French parliament), on 1 and 2 December 2011 (acts to be published).

Conclusion

The problem of authority cannot be truly understood if we do not distinguish clearly ability from what Nietzsche calls "power" and if we do not separate the social and ethical levels from the legal and the legitimate. The foundation of the moral code where authority has its roots is not to be looked for in the relationship with other people for it will only evade the person who tries very hard to see in it his very cause. The concern with regard to others only results in a surpassment of oneself which is axiological in nature and corresponds to the complete opposite of an indulgence in respect of oneself.

The rule that man gives himself is the foundation for his freedom, at the same time, as a consequence, of this internal force which constitutes his authority. Controlling his passions, forbidding himself from giving in to them and sliding into impulsiveness or anger, he paradoxically takes to acting ethically. Such is the source of this uprightness of which the person who has the authority is an example. When all is said and done, it is to this authorisation which one grants oneself as the price of a requirement which before anything leads us to prove ourselves to ourselves, that authority refers to. The *auctor* (*author*) to whom the etymology refers initially takes on a real meaning here¹⁹. The recognition of authority, wherever it is embodied, supposes these processes of an ethical type, both with the person who is supposed to possess it and with the person who grants it to others.

And there where Socrates stated that it is a case of not being governed by oneself, Jean Gagnepain adds, in a very Nietzschean vein, that no one should claim to govern, and therefore display a form of power if he is not first capable of governing himself²⁰... Generally speaking, the chief, as Jean Gagnepain pointed out, is the one whose job is to decide for others. This job is exercised on people who have the anthropological ability to decide and not the social capacity of the job and who by delegation pass it back to the chief. One can understand that if the question of authority is a matter of ethics, it constantly chimes in with the issue of power.

¹⁹ "Authorisation" and "authority" both come from the Latin root *auctor*.

²⁰ A government, wrote Jean Gagnepain, is "a certain type of power which, by agreement or by dynasty, by majority or by majesty, imposes upon you a certain type of behaviour, of legitimate decision, yet for that, so that men can dare to decide for others, even though they have to be capable of deciding for themselves," (*Eight introductory lessons to the theory of mediation*, Jean Gagnepain Institute, Matecoulon-Montpeyrroux, 1994-2010 - digital edition, p 174).