

“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.”

Hannah Ardent, What is Authority

It is a common mode of thought to associate the state with the monopoly on violence. After all, what is the state if not for its ability to prosecute, to imprison, to deprave an individual of their freedom through the use of violence, a rebellion against the state means the possibility of losing your most precious belonging, life. But then one came to the realization that state is not really a monolithic entity, it consists of a hierarchy of power, where those at the bottom-feeder level of the hierarchy, the soldiers, police, prison guards of the state are never the source of authority of the state in and out of itself, rather the authority belongs to the upper-echelons of the state, the nobility, politicians, the elites. Then came the question, what exactly is the source of authority that we inscribed on those sitting in the upper-echelons of the state? One tempting answer might be that it is sourced from persuasion, that through a process of discourse and the cost-benefit analysis of the state, such form of authority is conceived. But again, the state is by nature, a power structure, it means losing some form of individual rights for the sake of the formation of the state. What then, is the allure of the state such that it could even tempt an individual to surrender their own freedom?

To better digest the position of Hannah Ardent as stated by the excerpt above, I will break the excerpt down into a few simple premises and conclusions:

- i- That it is part of the inherent nature of authority to demands obedience, for without obedience authority would be left into a state of vacuum.
- ii- That while violence might be seen as an extension of authority, violence is never the a priori prerequisite of authority itself since the need to exert violence implies the existence of a vacuum of authority.
- iii- That authority is not sourced from persuasion either, since persuasion implies a prerequisite state of equality, while the inherent nature of authority is the exact opposite of authority, again authority is a hierarchical power structure.
- iv- Thus, a true definition of authority must be free from the need of both force and persuasion.

In order to adequately answer Ardent's definitional challenge, we ought to drag the very conception of authority into the mud in order to see what is left of it. To achieve that, in this essay I will first examine the existing modern paradigm of thought on the conception of authority, particularly through the lens of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Next, I shall explore the conception of authority as it is seen from the lens of the ancients, from the Islamic conception of the Commander of the Believers to the Chinese Mandate of the Heaven. Finally I ought to definitively answer the prompt in my final section by referring to the postmodernist thought of Carl Schmitt and Rene Girard, a Schmittian and Girardian reading of the prompt, in the end synthesizing the product of the reading with Hegelian dialectics.

But first, one key definition ought to be clearly laid out here, what do we even meant by authority? Authority in sense of this essay could the be as interchangeable with legitimacy, in this sense,

authority is a source of power, but an immaterial one. What then, is the property of the immateriality of authority? That question ought to be answered latter in the essay. What we can properly establish here is that authority allows power hierarchy to be formed, it allows coordination of social institutions from the state to the nuclear family. Authority is legitimacy in so far as it allows power to be wield within a hierarchical framework

a. The Conception of the Moderns

The arguments posited by Thomas Hobbes would be familiar to many modern readers. That, before the existence of the first state, man lives in a “State of Nature”, a chaotic, violent and archaic state of mankind, the *casus belli* for the existence of the state in this case then, is simple, namely that it allows a population of a particular state the benefits of safety and security at the cost of sacrificing a certain level of individual freedom. While there are noticeable differences from that of Locke and Rosseau, namely that the two believes that man in the state of nature already lives with a certain natural rights, and it is the duty of the state to protect the natural rights, essentially the view of Hobbes, Locke and Rosseau shares a commonality in so far that it presents us with a secularised view of what authority is. Notice here that this does not really answer yet the question raised by Hannah Ardent in the passage above, that is even if man sacrifices his right to the authority for safety and security, or that the duty of the state is to protect the inalienable natural right of man, what allows authority to the state exactly, how does a particular conception of state, whether it be religion, economic or political systems, gains legitimacy over the other?

From the secularised lens of the Enlightenment thinkers, we are forced to resort back to square one that is violence. This is because we need to admit that an inherent likeability is impossible to exist within any social structures. Consider that I am a resident of a town, and the election of the town mayor is coming close, I might prefer Candidate A over Candidate B and this might because I have a personal tie with the candidate or that I just like his policies better, now say that Candidate A is elected, meaning that the majority of the town’s population is in agreement with me, do those who does not vote for him rebels, or they just allow Candidate A’s ascension to power, in many cases the second scenario occurs, As a matter of fact, even if over time Candidate A became less popular, it is still plausible that the townspeople will still accept his legitimacy as the mayor. What then is the source of this legitimacy? An easy option might be that the citizens find the cause of rebelling to not be worth the effort, but this breaks down when we consider cases such as Pol Pot’s Khmer Rogue regime, where your very existence as a citizen might be threaten by the state, why is it then that even in these extreme cases, rebellion is still not inflicted? Thus, we go back to violence. It is the same way that the Nazis utilizes the Gestapo to retains power, or how Stalin weaponizes the NKVR against his political enemies. But again, we already have established that the use of violence implies a vacuum of authority, why do we still see that the state that utilizes violence the most, to be the most legitimate and all-powerful? The cost-benefit analysis as argued by Hobbes failed to adequately respond to this.

b. The Conception of the Ancients

The basic assumption of the Enlightenment thinkers is a liberal one. That is, it lies on the assumption that the state exists to serve human purpose, even more specifically, that the state exists to serve individual purpose. The breaking point of the assumption is when states that are obviously harmful to the people, that of Pol Pot’s Cambodia or Maoist China still retains widespread support and legitimacy. Perhaps, in order to close the gap left by the liberal paradigm of thought, it would be beneficial to look at the conception of authority as it is held by the ancients.

Rather than serving individual purpose, the ancient state rarely justifies themselves as being of any utility to the individual, rather the ancient state appeals to the world above, an other-worldly conception of authority as opposed to a this-worldly conception as discussed earlier. The dynastic families of China, from the Shang to the Qing, does not justify their authority as serving the need of the average peasant, but as a Mandate of Heaven, a mandate of the dynasty to rule all of China. The Caliphate of the Muslims see themselves as the Commander of the Faithful, a frontliner of God's holy war on Earth. Bu

But then, two questions could be raised here. First, how exactly is the myth or grand narrative given by the ancient regime is even accepted by the population, especially if the narrative harms them on a personal level? Chinese dynasties had been responsible for various atrocities that results in the death of millions of faceless peasants, from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Ming-Qing conflict all in the search of the Mandate of Heaven. Second, if the ancient regime appeals to an other-worldly authority for the sake of their legitimacy, what is the source of the legitimacy of the other-worldly authority

c. Man's Search for Meaning and the Conflict of Recognition

An answer might be sourced through an investigation of man's very own psyche. The question of authority could never be separated from the question of politics, as politics is at the very core, the question of authority, who should be in power, how should one be elected to power, and what is power? The question of politics symmetrically, could never be separated from the question of human nature, as power operates within human chambers of interaction, subservient to the property of the nature of human being itself. What then, is at the core of human politics?

From a Schmittian perspective, it is the distinction between the friend and the enemy. In the Concept of the Political, Carl Schmitt argues that man is by nature bounded to two basic categorizations, that is of the friend and the enemy, the ingroup and the outgroup. This could also be seen as an extension of Hegel's conception of the *thymos*, man's struggle for meaning, the struggle of the bondsman to be recognized by the master. It is from this conflict of recognition then does the property of the friend and the enemy arises. Further extending from Francis Fukuyama's the Origins of Political Order, the friend is the realm of the *isothymia*, being recognized as equals and the enemy inversely is subject to *hypothymia*, being recognized as less or inferior. Now, why does the discussion concerning recognition vital in my argument? Borrowing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, man recognizes himself through his recognition from the Other, better explained using the Hegelian master-bondsman dialectic. Through his subjugation to the master, the bondsman requires himself to be recognized, to be valued as a man, conversely the master gained his sense of self through a recognition of his superiority by the bondsman, this arrives us at a point of convergence where man's identity will always be tangent to the Other.

How then is the Other relevant to our discussion of authority? It implies that, in line with Hegelian master-bondsman dialectic, the identity of the population is in the end subject to the sovereign. But then, a critique could argue that how exactly could a particular Other be chosen, especially if that Other is harmful to oneself as had been pointed out earlier? Here, we could employ Mimetic Theory as laid out by the 20th-century French philosopher, Rene Girard. The core of Girard's argument is that human behaviour is a mimicry of each other, that is, similar to waves in a shore, one disturbance would cause similar disturbance to the wavelength of other waves, humankind in this sense lives in a state of resonance. To tie it back to Hegel and Schmitt, this behaviour of mimicry could be explained by man's desire for recognition. Essentially, when a man changed his desire or pursuit, others in his chain of *isothymia*, equal recognition as friends would be tempted to follow due to the needs to be

recognized. An extension of this could also be found within the thought of other Ancient thinkers, such as Ibn Khaldun's conception of the *asabiyya*, or group cohesion as one of the most important ingredient in the formation of states, though Ibn Khaldun does not explain the ontological structure of the *asabiyya*, the concept could be extended through Girard's Mimetic Theory, in essence group cohesion is driven by mimicry, which itself is driven by the need for recognition and the friend-enemy distinction. The gist here is that the conception of politics from the Ancients is much closer to the conception of authority as advocated here than the atomised individual approach of the liberals. The existence of power structures could be seen as a manifestation of human mimicry. The question then is how does this behaviour of mimicry directed? It requires a sacrificial lamb using Girardian terms. As explained by Hegelian master-bondsman dialectic earlier, recognition is not only gained by those from your in-group, but also those from your out-group, the enemy. Meaning that whoever can give a sacrificial lamb to the in-group, will be the sovereign of the in-group as the first to trigger a chain of mimicry. Thus, the narrative as we have seen in the ancient regime serves as a tool of narrative-building of the enemy, to paint a picture of the Other as a source of cohesion within the in-group. One plausible critique that could be posited here is how exactly does triggering a mimicry translates to having a power structure? When a mimicry is triggered, and a threat identified, and a narrative enveloping that threat is crafted, legitimacy is then derived, as a leader amongst the in-group against a supposed threat, that is the moment power hierarchy began to be formed. One final critique here might be of how one choose a particular narrative over the other? It is simply through threat distinction, as man is wired by his survival instinct, whoever triggers the instinct the most will have a winning narrative, a sacrificial lamb be it the Jews for the Nazis or the Muslims for post-9-11 America.

In summa, authority is tangent on the sacrificial lamb, on the conception of an Other which could trigger human mimicry, a narrative that is an expression of the human desire for recognition. Thus, as long as a conception of a threat from the Other exist, status quo authority will exist. This explains how the legitimacy of the liberal international order is tangent on the threat of Communism from the Cold War, or how MAGA America's authority comes from the supposed unfairness of the liberal international order. In the end, while authority does not comes from violence, authority does come from the threat of the violence of the Other. Hence, what is authority? Authority is an immaterial aspect of power that is driven by human collective need for recognition, both from the in-group and the out-group. Through creating a vivid image and narrative of threat coming from the out-group, authority is derived to the sovereign as one who crafted the image of the in-group, the Friend as opposed to the Other, the enemy.

