

Legitimate Power in a Mediated Age: Revisiting Carl J. Friedrich’s “Authority, Reason and Discretion”

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Although scholars of political communication study legitimacy and power consistently, we often overlook older works on the topic from political theory and philosophy that might give us guidance in a mediated age. Friedrich was a contemporary of Lazarsfeld, Merton, and so many of the great 20th-century social scientists we look to as providing the foundations for our field. This essay asks that we go back to Friedrich as well, and to others who found authority to be one of our most complex and important social phenomena.

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At the base of so much of our research in political communication are queries about how power and influence are expressed and received, whether it be in the course of interpersonal dialogue, in the context of news reports, or via Internet channels. One key issue revolves around the nature of authority itself: We wonder who has authority, why they have it, and what media might have to do with the exercise of authority where it exists. These issues are a critical aspect of the landscape in our field, although we are better at empirical exploration than we are with the more vexing theoretical and often philosophical questions. On the nature of authority—what it actually *is*—we are fairly silent these days, typically unwilling to open what we suspect is a rather densely packed can of slippery worms.¹

There is no question that the study of authority in political science, psychology, sociology, and communication studies has waned over the last few decades, becoming oddly unfashionable. While the meaning of authority—and its relation to power, influence, and other vital social constructs—commanded the attention of our best scholars during the mid-20th century, interest is now scanty. The central reason for this vacuum likely revolves around global politics: Dictatorships of the Second World War led to a variety of scholarly projects across fields and enlivened research on authority through the study of authoritarianism. The intensity of the Cold War and a general interest in “open” versus “closed” societies led many to consider or reconsider the nature of authority (for a review, see Herbst, 2003).

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Looking back to the height of social science research on authority, there are a variety of seminal essays, among them Robert Bierstedt's brilliant sociological discourse on how we distinguish among authority, power, influence, and related notions (Bierstedt, 1954). Sociologists and philosophers were among the more active participants in the exploration of authority in contemporary culture, but contributions from psychology were vital as well, the most infamous being Adorno et al.'s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Here I revisit a less well-known essay by the German-born Carl J. Friedrich titled "Authority, Reason and Discretion," published in 1958. Friedrich, who spent much of his career at Harvard and was at one point the president of the American Political Science Association, produced a variety of books and articles on a wide range of topics, from the philosophy of Kant and Hegel to the nature of totalitarianism and violence. Many of these tracts somehow addressed issues of power and authority. But, to my mind, "Authority, Reason and Discretion" is one of his most pointed and useful contributions, especially interesting for his prescience with regard to communication. In this appreciation, I review Friedrich's communication-based philosophy of authority, explicate his notion of "false authority," and link all of this back to the contemporary study of media and politics.

Who Cares About Authority?

As I have argued elsewhere (Herbst, 2003), authority is a perennial favorite of social and political theorists. The literature is daunting, and the issues at stake are simply monumental: Many have argued, from antiquity forward, that it is the existence and exercise of authority that holds societies together. Sheer force and persuasion are not bricks with which one can build a society: It is legitimated power that makes possible the development of effective institutions, and in the case of democracies, it is authority that establishes venues for citizen participation, elections being the most obvious form. The study of authority has not been confined to politics, of course: Authority is often studied most intensely in tightly bounded environments such as families or organizations. But more diffuse forms of authority are found in unbounded arenas as well—in large social networks, for example. In any case, the import of legitimated power is obvious, hence the expansive literature on the subject. Political thinker Bertrand de Jouvenel wrote in 1955:

The phenomenon called "authority" is at once more ancient and more fundamental than the phenomenon called "state"; the natural ascendancy of some men over others is the principle of all human organizations and all human advances. (cited in Peabody, 1968, p. 473)

Beyond investigations of the meaning and importance of authority, there are a variety of studies of how authority is exercised by leaders, accepted by citizens, or resisted. Very often philosophers have pondered the relationship of authority to freedom, especially in the 20th century with increased interest in authoritarian states. Among the most vexing questions, not easily answerable through empirical research: What exactly do we sacrifice when we comply with authority? And are those sacrifices—sometimes small and other times quite significant—worthwhile, as they create or maintain social order? To my mind, questions of authority are among the most engaging in political theory because they demand thought about two levels of analysis simultaneously. Authority can be the glue that keeps societies intact and prevents disarray and even violence. But these macro-level

concerns often come in direct conflict with individual moral standards and preferences. As Peabody (1968) pointed out, the argument has been long running, trace-able to Socrates's dilemma: Should he accept the state's fatal verdict, as a willing citizen of that legitimate state, even if he feels it to be fundamentally wrong?

These are weighty matters, but ones that Carl Friedrich and others of his generation took on passionately and fully. I should note here that much philosophical and theoretical work on authority is about typologies and categories. This is, as in so much philosophical work, where much of the action is because categorization is such a useful tool in defining terms and provoking debate. We've many schemes, providing us with different "types" of authority, some of them—like Weber's (1978)—being extraordinarily useful in direct application to organizations. But Geuss (2001) did us a wonderful service by looking across theorists' proposals and arguing for five overlapping categories of authority. In his scheme, one can have authority by being an expert (epistemic authority), by being a leader (natural authority), by occupation of space (de facto authority), by election/appointment (de jure authority), or by possession of superior ethics and norms (moral authority).

Friedrich was not particularly interested in categories, except as they touched upon his own themes. In his 1958 essay, my focus here, he instead went beyond categories to try and skim across them, posing critical questions about the relationship of authority to reason: "Ever since the eighteenth-century revolt against the established authorities in church and state, there has been a marked tendency among freedom-loving intellectuals to view 'authority' with a jaundiced eye. . . . But are reasoning and authority so antithetical? Does authority have no basis in reason?" (pp. 28–29). Friedrich rejected this opposition and did so on the basis of communication. Long before Habermas provoked widespread academic debate about reason in public discourse, Friedrich posited that reason and authority were closely linked and that expression and argumentation are key to understanding these links. To develop his position, Friedrich noted that authority had been to date understood as—my word—a *commodity* but that this was not an effective way to view it. Foreshadowing the immense contributions of Michel Foucault—who saw power not as a commodity but as a practice embedded in both patterns of social interaction and institutions—Friedrich demanded a more sophisticated understanding of authority. Yes, people and institutions have authority, but *why* they have it is a more complicated question, Friedrich argued, than we have admitted to date. Authority figures (individuals or organizations) may possess legitimacy by way of law or social practice. But they can undermine that authority, and those without it can obtain it, through communication of a particular sort. For Friedrich, truly effective communications, communications that either enhance those already with authority or help them maintain authority, rely on reason. And reason can be located only through the analysis of communication. He argued for a complex two-way street, full of subtlety in both lanes.

Put another way, we should not worry so much about who has authority by some definition or other, and who does not. Instead, we should scrutinize how real authority is upheld, lost, or gained by evaluation of discourse. Friedrich was interested in how authority figures communicate, but also in reception—what sort of standard or calculus the audience might employ in assessing the communications they endure. Friedrich explained:

When I speak of authority, I wish to say that the communications of a person possessing it exhibit a very particular kind of relationship to reason and reasoning. Such communication[s], whether opinions or commands, are not demonstrated through rational discourse, but they possess the *potentiality of reasoned elaboration*—they are "worthy of acceptance." Seen in this perspective, authority is a *quality* of communication, rather than of persons, and when

we speak of authority of a person, we are using a short-hand expression to indicate that he possesses the capacity to issue authoritative communications. (pp. 35–36)

Friedrich went on to say that the “potentiality of reasoned elaboration” might be called the “rational factor” in authority.

This is a fair amount to chew on, presented very quickly and even a bit telegraphically by Friedrich. He clearly underscored that the reason one hopes for in an authoritative communication might not in fact be present or may be “hinted at or suggested by symbols.” Friedrich argued that people need some solid clues, some sort of experiential basis for expecting reason. The ground may be a bit shaky, but if it is there, people are open to the potential for reasoned elaboration, also understood as authority itself by Friedrich.

One might argue that Friedrich was unnecessarily complicating the already complicated matter of authority. Why not think of authority as a commodity, which is a much cleaner analytical approach? Kings have authority through a bloodline, university presidents have it by the vote of the university’s board of trustees. And, while it is murkier territory, a variety of pundits or celebrities have authority by way of their own charisma. Why not just leave it at that? Individuals or institutions either possess authority or do not, and either they are persuasive communicators or not. Friedrich believed that it matters immensely to invoke communication, and in my view this is fascinating because it demands an entirely new philosophical approach: What if the typologies we have used for different forms of authority are themselves not simply overlapping (as in Geuss) but basically not very useful? For example, if charismatic authority can *in practice* be as powerful as rational legal authority, isn’t there something else going on? Indeed there is, and according to Friedrich it is the precise nature of communication that both clarifies the situation and throws another wrench into the entire philosophical works.

Authority and Reason

What is the “value added” to theorizing about authority, if we accept Friedrich’s notion of authority being reliant on the potential for reason? For one, it brings reason back into the discussion of authority, opposing the fairly robust Enlightenment notion that reason and authority are deeply antithetical. They can indeed be fit together, philosophically, and Friedrich gave us the tools to manage this. He encouraged study of the *actual* strength of authority figures: We can, by scrutinizing the communications sent by authority holders and seekers, judge the solidity or extent of their authority, for example. Perhaps most interesting in these days of mass mediated political culture is Friedrich’s notion of “false authority.” He asked:

What then is “false” authority? It is that phantom which recurs in human society when men issue communications as authoritative which are believed to allow for reasoned elaboration when actually they do not . . . for people may well *believe* that communications could be effectively elaborated and are therefore worthy of acceptance when no such potentiality exists. . . . Only when what is commanded and maintained can be thus reasoned upon and defended is authority secure. (pp. 27–28)

Friedrich made allowances for deception, and how it is that deception—in communications—can weaken authority, no matter if it is *de jure* authority or any other kind. Holding

authority is more complicated than argued by previous theorists, Friedrich posited, as it can indeed be weakened by problematic communication: Discourse can dramatically undermine authority, and it is up to scholars to explore this empirically.

Examples of how communication can subvert or destabilize authority abound in our time. I find the Bush administration's inaccurate claims of Iraqi military force one of the more productive applications of Friedrich's ideas. Was Secretary of State Colin Powell—knowingly or not—exercising false authority when he went before the United Nations to accuse Iraq of harboring “weapons of mass destruction”? President Bush did the same, in a variety of speeches. Powell and the president both held conventionally legitimated forms of power, granted to them by the American people: Bush won the presidency via the electoral college and, by the dictates of the United States constitution, appointed the secretary of state. But how have later revelations of the falseness of their claims affected their authority? How can we assess the damage, if any? What happens when one who holds tremendous charismatic authority issues communications that lack the potentiality for reasoned elaboration? And how often can one be caught in such a situation before authority—of any sort—deteriorates? All excellent questions, inspired by Friedrich, that open up new ways to think about authority, compliance with authority, resistance to authority, and the role of communication research in these determinations.

Since Friedrich wrote, we have witnessed growing debates across disciplines on authority, even if the language of mid-20th-century social science is not used. Many contemporary theorists are quite intensely interested in rationality and reason in relation to authority. Perhaps the most sophisticated and provocative work is Jürgen Habermas's *Legitimation Crisis* (1975), an attempt to evaluate how capitalist governments stave off problems of authority through discourse and other means. Habermas argued, among other things, that crises in capitalist societies are to be found in the superstructure—the world of discourse and institutions—not in the economic system per se. He probed just how governments battle the constant and potentially subversive slippages and threats to their legitimacy. Capitalism has, however, proved far more robust than Habermas believed in the 1970s, so he has had to revisit the theory, as have others. Stephen White (1988) noted:

In *Legitimation Crisis*, classical bourgeois ideology was also seen as undergoing an irreversible process of disintegration. And this disintegration (along with the fact that new ideology cannot be administratively manufactured to order) was one key to the appearance of a legitimation deficit Habermas forecast for advanced capitalism. Although this forecast was hedged with some provisos, it nevertheless seemed to promise a future in which the contrast between class structure and universalistic democratic values would become increasingly apparent to broad segments of the population. (1978, p. 118; see also McCarthy, 1985)

Perhaps capitalist governments are more robust because of the mass media, as so many communication researchers have claimed. This is certainly a central matter in our contemporary field, although our concerns about authority are no longer embedded in theoretical discussions about the nature of authority itself. In my view, a more philosophically informed approach would be useful and would help us develop increasingly sophisticated frameworks for distinguishing the nuances of legitimated power.

Friedrich's ideas about authority were foreshadowed a bit by Lazarsfeld and Merton's (1948) intriguing if skeletal discussion of “status conferral.” And in terms of the mass media and their “legitimating” powers—whether bolstering governments, people, or other

institutions—much scholarly work has appeared since Friedrich wrote as well. We have, for example, research on “source credibility” and other phenomena that brush up against Friedrich’s concerns, placing media front and center as the site where reasoned elaboration might occur. In my own work, I argue not for Friedrich’s model per se, where reason is actually inserted into the meaning of authority itself, but instead create a new category of (media-derived) authority (Herbst, 2003). To my mind, creating a new category of authority specifically tied to the mass media is not in contradiction with Friedrich, but fits nicely: Communication can be essential to all types of authority, if in fact we believe that reason is an important variable in the assessment of authority holders and their powers.

Friedrich’s contribution to theorizing about authority is without question one of the most important and greatly underappreciated works in the fields of politics and communication. It is not an easy read by any means, and is a bit hidden beneath some of the flashier sociological tracts inspired by mid-20th-century authoritarianism. I worry that many scholars do not know the work at all, as it has eluded inclusion in our various edited volumes and the collected works in our subfield. But should we be interested in authority—in all of its manifestations—we would do well to read Friedrich and his contemporaries, who struggled so passionately with the nature of legitimacy in the modern age.

Notes

1. I am grateful to David Paletz for inspiring this essay. It took me 20 years to write, but his notion that authority is central to all political communication dynamics is a compelling one that some of us are still processing.

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