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Power and authority in schooling and education in South Africa

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POWER AND AUTHORITY IN SCHOOLING AND EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Education,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers an examination of the concepts of power and authority in order to highlight two conflicting conceptions of human behaviour : one in terms of cause and effect and the other in terms of reasons. Underlying each are divergent implications for a notion of change.

The concepts of power and authority are critically examined against the background of Western political philosophy. Within the context of South Africa, two influential doctrines, namely Christian National Education and Pedagogics, are investigated in terms of the notions of power and authority which they endorse.

A central issue revolves around the need to distinguish between the concepts of power and authority; failure to do so results in a notion of social control based on power relations which invite a causal account of human behaviour, thereby undercutting a notion of agency and reducing the possibilities for purposeful change. A further consequence of the failure to distinguish between 'power' and 'authority' is demonstrated in a parallel inability to separate the diverse processes of schooling and education. By contrast, the concept of authority opens up opportunities for choosing and changing according to rational principles.

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Education in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

S. E. Colquhoun

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INTRODUCTION

Fundamental to any understanding of human society is a consideration of the way in which its members interact. Two important ways of explaining behaviour will be the focus of my attention - there may be others, but they will not be of concern here. These are reducible to two, mutually exclusive conceptions: one explains human behaviour in terms of cause and effect and the other in terms of reasons.

The former is the way favoured by natural science and is particularly successful in explaining the phenomena in the physical world by answering the question: How does X happen? The latter seeks to explain man's behaviour by referring to the reasons given for an action, its purpose or intention by answering the question: Why does man do X? Intimately connected with each conception are different notions of change:

i) that which occurs through processes analogous to natural processes; as for example, illustrated in the growth of a seed into a plant, and

ii) change which is effected through personal agency, individual assertion or human action; as for example, when man decides to cultivate certain crops for consumption.

Although a causal explanation can lay down general conditions for behaviour to occur, it can never be sufficient to explain why man acts one way rather than another. This may be more clearly illustrated using the example above: a causal explanation can lay down laws necessary for the growth of a seed into a plant, such as moisture, optimum temperature, but it cannot explain why man chose to cultivate a particular plant in the first place. This can only be explained with reference to reasons and intentions, embedded in a human and social context.

And it is this dimension which distinguishes man's behaviour from that of animals, accounting for change, invention and resistance in human affairs in a way which a causal explanation cannot. Despite this, the spread of the 'scientific attitude' has tended to give precedence to a causal account so that an understanding of human behaviour in terms of reason has been overlooked.

From these competing conceptions of mankind, two ways of articulating human behaviour arise: one is entailed in the concept of authority and the other, in the concept of power.

This dissertation is an investigation into the concepts of power and authority, with particular reference to the way in which they operate through schooling and education in South Africa. The central thrust of the argument aims to show that power and authority belong to different conceptual schemes which coincide with the two above-mentioned conceptions of mankind, generating divergent consequences for a notion of change.

As different political philosophies construe power and authority differently, some consideration must be given to the political philosophy in which the concepts are located. For example, a conservative, on the one hand, might perceive authority as essential for the maintenance of stability, while a socialist, on the other, might perceive it as perpetuating inequalities inimical to egalitarian principles. To the extent that each interpretation leads back to a particular political arrangement, it throws into relief that which is often taken for granted. Consequently, a clearer understanding of what the concepts of power and authority entail, must needs afford some insight into the implicit

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assumptions and unstated intentions according to which society is constantly involved in reproducing itself through its daily activities.

At the root of our social interaction, the concepts of power and authority constitute the way in which we organize a variety of relationships such as parent/child, teacher/pupil, man/woman, and more specifically in a South African context, black/white relations. Underpinning each situation is a conception of human behaviour which is related to a particular notion of change that carries with it, or not, the possibility of envisaging alternatives.

Thus, it is on the basis of assumptions informed by the concepts of power and authority that an assessment of the opportunities for and consequences of social change might be inferred. The significance of these implications in the present moment of South African history is never far from the surface of my concern with the concepts of power and authority. A more immediate concern lies with the way in which they have relevance for the distinction between schooling and education; the consequences of which will be examined in discussing Christian National Education (C.N.E.) and Pedagogics.

It is from these suppositions that my discussion, which I shall arrange in four parts, takes its direction. In Part I, I shall examine the concepts of power and authority as they arise against the background of Western political philosophy. Part II will involve a more detailed analysis of authority, in contradistinction to power. Part III will explore the distinction between schooling and education in the light of the distinction made in Part II between concepts of power and authority. Part IV will evaluate with specific reference to C.N.E. and Pedagogics, the significance of these findings in the context of South Africa.

In arguing for a distinction between power and authority, I am critical of those positions which deny its viability because such a denial tends to result in a notion of social control based entirely on power relations. This invites a causal account of human behaviour which is inevitably limited in its ability to conceive of change as the outcome of deliberative action and which is more consistent with schooling than with education. In asserting a space for authority, I want to underline its contribution to an understanding of human behaviour in terms of reason and its importance for various social and political activities, such as education, in opening up opportunities for envisaging change on the basis of purpose and intention.

PART I : AN HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Power and authority have always been important factors in understanding how human communities are organized. They have led philosophers to raise such questions about social control, as: How is it organised? At what point might the liberty of an individual be curtailed? How is resistance to be reconciled with the need for peace and security? Under what conditions might revolutionary change be feasible and acceptable? What are the difficulties in creating new forms of control and winning support for alternatives?

While concern with these questions has opened up crucial areas for debate in political philosophy, the concepts of power and authority have sometimes tended to be conflated. What I hope to show is that these concepts necessarily entail mutually exclusive and logically incompatible conceptions of human behaviour. 'Power' involves a consideration of structures, cause and response, natural laws and determinism; 'authority' is based on the related notions of agency, purpose, rules, freedom and moral responsibility.

In this section I shall attempt to unravel some of the strands which have contributed to a contemporary understanding of the concepts of power and authority, by examining these concepts in the context of their discussion by various political philosophers. Two main themes will provide a framework for the discussion: one concerns the way in which the concepts of power and authority, initially located in the church, were transferred to the domain of science; the other concerns the extent to which varying interpretations succeed in distinguishing between power and authority, with diverging consequences for [illegible]nception of man. The subtle shift in the location of power and authority is traced here from the time that their original, classical meanings were transformed by their incorporation into Christian teachings (Section i), through the influences of particular political philosophers from the 16th to the 19th centuries (Section ii), to their submersion in the dominant tradition of positivism (Section iii).

Section i) Classical and early Christian Origins

a) Roman Origins

According to Hannah Arendt in her essay, "What is Authority?"(1) the concept and word are, in origin, Roman. Derived from the verb 'augere' - to augment,

'auctoritas' implies a special weight or authority with which the Senate or patres were invested by virtue of their relationship with the ancestors who had laid the sacred foundation on which Rome and the Republic stood. It was used in a political context, carrying connotations of a binding force, that had overtones of religion, obligation and duty rather than compulsion by physical violence.

This 'auctoritas' of the Senate, rooted in the past, was contrasted with the present or living power, 'potestas', belonging to the people. At most the Senate could command a respectful hearing and because its council was imbued with authority, the popular assembly might comply. Arendt quotes Mommsen as describing it as "more than advice and less than command, an advice which one may not safely ignore".(2) She compares it with the authority the Supreme Court of the United States which may issue decisions that are authoritative and binding, but which it alone cannot enforce.

b) The Greek Hiatus

That there was no actual counterpart for the Roman concept of authority in the language or political experiences of ancient Greece, Arendt illustrates with

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