

Social (de)construction of Authority

Rahula J McGaffey
Gallatin School - Rationale
Advisor: David Moore

As a student of revolutionary education, the concept of authority is central to my work. Radical educators have consistently argued that the school (following after the nuclear family) is one of the early loci of the construction of authority in our lives. The teacher-student relationship, in particular, is filled with mechanisms for control and obedience. Through a combination of graduate-level education courses, projects within the Community Learning department, and independent study, my work at Gallatin is focused on understanding the nature of authority, with the hope of developing educational models designed to deconstruct our "schooling." Yet, it is important that we proceed with an analysis before attempting to create fundamental, systemic change. Hence, my colloquium will explore the question "How has authority been constructed, and by whom?" that we may effectively challenge the status quo. This rationale will briefly touch on the concepts I propose for this colloquium.

To begin, a basic power analysis is necessary. In an environment of corporate globalization, neocolonialism and the permanent warfare necessary to maintain capitalism's global caste system, we find power concentrated in the hands of a very small group of white males. The dominant ideologies of our society are clearly white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism. Yet, these ideologies could not be maintained without powerful institutions like the state, the church, the military, and the school. How has this tiny group (roughly two percent of the population) acquired so much power? According to the social contract, is not all political power derived from the people?

Before proceeding with a more in-depth exploration, a basic understanding of the concept of authority will give useful guidance. In sociology, authority comprises a particular type of power, as in Max Weber's functionalist definition: "*power which is recognized as legitimate and justified by both the powerful and powerless.*" Another useful definition, coming from conflict theory, is "*power which is so institutionalized that it is largely unquestioned.*" A useful example is the Milgram experiment: over sixty percent of a sample of Americans demonstrated willingness to torture another person to death with orders coming from an appropriate authority figure. Replicated in other cultures, the experiment has had similar results. The Stanford prison experiment also shows similar ingrained obedience. Also useful here is Weber's division of authority into three ideal types: traditional domination (patriarchs, feudalism), charismatic domination (familial, religious), and legal-rational domination (modern state). Legal authority, he argues, is the most advanced form, and that societies evolve from

charismatic authority due to its inevitable instability or from traditional authority via “traditional revolution”.

From a libertarian perspective, it is necessary to question the authority of law. According to St Thomas Aquinas, the law is an ordinance of reason for the common good, created by he who has the care of the community. In stark contrast to a culture of honor, a culture of law must be maintained. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates uses something like a social contract theory to explain to Crito why he must remain in prison and accept the death penalty. Given Crito's occupation as a man of words and his relative silence in this “dialogue,” Plato's version of the story is somewhat suspect. In Rousseau's *Second Discourse* he explains his *naturalized* account of the social contract, describing the “noble savage” and his “fall from grace” at the invention of private property. In his *idealized* account, found in *The Social Contract*, the collective renunciation of individual rights where individual persons become a people is the “real foundation of society.” Echoing Plato's paternalism, Rousseau argues that individuals must be “forced to be free.” These theories have been significantly challenged by feminists (*The Sexual Contract*, Patemen) and anti-racists (*The Racial Contract*, Mills) in the past two decades, pointing to constructs perhaps even more fundamental to Western society.

An anthropological perspective is also necessary to understand the development of authority. The major turning point can be narrowed to the movement from hunter-gatherer societies (as described by Rousseau) to agricultural ones based in early cities around 11,000 BCE. While Aboriginal Australians and many Native Americans remained hunter-gatherers, most of Eurasia much of the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa gradually developed agriculture, herding, metallurgy and complex political organization. In *Guns, Germs & Steel*, Jared Diamond rephrases the question about modern inequality to “why did human development proceed at such different rates on different continents?” Citing four major factors—differences in plant and animal species available for domestication, rates of diffusion and migration within continents, diffusion *between* continents, and land area and population size—Diamond argues for geographic determinism.

The rise of urbanization brings surplus goods and the origin of private property. At this point, new ways to advance production emerged, and one group concentrates resources and organizes labor. This feudalism maintains coercive relationships by force, and here we find the origin of class, along with oppression of women, as in Lenin's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. After the bourgeois revolution, capitalism (private ownership of the means of production) appeared in stages with industrialization around the 18th century, the same time schooling became compulsory in the young US. This timing should not be overlooked. In *Das*

Kapital, Marx defines capital as a relationship between people (owners and workers) rather than between people and things, describing this exploitative relationship—the commodification and alienation of the worker—as the source of all social ills. Capitalism developed hand in hand, it seems, with the concept of the nation-state (as distinct from the ethnic nation). With this came a new framework for the enforcement of borders and the concept of national identity. Once there is a clearly defined “us” and “them”—based formerly on religion or culture, but now on nationality—there is a need for the “us” to be defended from the “them.” This protection from the “other” is where the State derives a significant portion of its authority.

Having established a basic historical and theoretical understanding of authority, we can use revolutionary education to better grasp the concept, and (with *praxis* in mind) work toward deconstructing that authority. In the context of today's authority, of consumerism, psychological disenfranchisement and continually deepening stratification, it is important to consider modes of oppression. Racism and sexism are at the core of our problem in a society dominated by white males, or more accurately by *whiteness* and patriarchy. In the relatively new field of “whiteness studies,” it is argued that race is a construct created by the white power structure in order to justify discrimination and ensure privilege. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire describes how an oppressed group often takes on the image of the oppressor, internalizing their hatred and developing negative views about themselves. This *internalized oppression* is essential for an oppressor to maintain power. Further, gender (as distinct from sex) has been considered an entirely constructed concept, equally essential to maintaining our power structure. Simone de Beauvoir argued that women have been consistently labeled as the “second sex,” an aberration from the “normal” male sex. Along with intense gendering in the nuclear family, women are subject to unfair division of labor and pay, sexual objectification, limited access to positions of power, and generally have been considered inferior. Marilyn French defined patriarchy as a system that values power over life, control over pleasure and dominance over happiness.

Finally, the school, according to Ivan Illich, has developed a monopoly on truth—to the extent that it encourages other institutions not to teach. By developing non-authoritarian learning models, we can use education to break down authority in the “class”room and beyond. Combining Freire's dialogical approach with inspiration from *Zapatismo* and the Argentinian *encuentro* model, self-agency becomes the new objective, and autonomy the new tactic. To deconstruct authority is not the job of one individual or school, but the collective work of a movement. The question becomes, then, where will the energy for this movement come from?

Social (de)construction of Authority

Rahula J McGaffey
Gallatin School - Book List
Advisor: David Moore

- Ancient:
- 1) Confucius, Analects
 - 2) Bible (King James)
 - 3) Qu'ran (Irving translation)
 - 4) Plato, Republic (*Crito)
 - 5) St Thomas Aquinas, City of God
 - 6) Hammurabi's Code
 - 7) Machiavelli, Discourses

Modern Humanities:

- 1) Kant, Metaphysics of Morals
- 2) Freud, Civilization and its Discontents
- 3) Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals
- 4) de Beauvoir, The Second Sex
- 5) Camus, The Rebel

Modern Politics:

- 1) Kropotkin, Mutual Aid
- 2) Rousseau, The Social Contract
- 3) Marx, Capital
- 4) Godwin, Inquiry Concerning Political Justice
- 5) Weber, Essays on Sociology

Revolutionary Education:

- 1) Diamond, Guns Germs & Steel
- 2) Hardt & Negri, Empire
- 3) Butler, Gender Trouble
- 4) hooks, Where We Stand: Class Matters
- 5) Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed
- 6) Illich, Deschooling Society