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Phenomenology of authority. The formation of the Other as a political aporia

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The objective of this paper is to formulate a broad definition of “authority”. The coincidence of the formulated concept with the institution of the “other” to whom Derrida claims to grant an unconditioned sacrifice will show the dangerous lack of political difference between Derrida’s attitude and the logocentric attitudes he intends to deconstruct.

Authority is here understood as any structure of forces whose power is actively recognized or accepted as legitimate. This is due to the fact that accepting such a power is seen as coincident with the preferable way to fulfill perceived needs and desires or, in other words, to fulfill a perceived naturalness. This preferable attempt of fulfillment is mostly accompanied by a compromise between the naturalness of different individuals - also in the sense of accepting the lesser evil by subordinating oneself to a violent individual and authority.

The most obvious example of authority is political legitimacy obtained thanks to empathy toward certain necessities and desires perceived by a community. Another example is the power given by the possession of economic instruments which can offer a larger spectrum of modalities and situations for obtaining wealth with respect to other instruments. This is the field of, for instance, the power to increase the price of a possessed building during a property bubble or the power to obtain a surplus-value from her workers’ labor by an entrepreneur.

In both examples we find the act of a will which is compelled to accept the functioning of a certain power in order to realize as much as possible its naturalness. Such a realization occurs in the face of the action of other forces which tend to interfere with this naturalness, forces which can coincide with the surrounding environment in general, as in the example of political legitimacy, or with the possible acts of the same authority whose power said will ends up recognizing, as in the example of the entrepreneur.

What stands out from this picture is that the condition of existence of an authority is the awareness of a certain interest in acknowledging a power within a certain context of more or less adverse forces. In other words, we cannot understand the authority without understanding the formation of the self, of an identity which is the consciousness of certain needs and desires in a certain environment. As Adam Seligman points outⁱ, though, the opposite is also true: we cannot understand the self by separating it from the formation of an authority, that is to say from the recognition of a certain power coinciding with what is desirable and achievable within a context. A self, namely an awareness of what is convenient, cannot articulate what its aims and desires are without reacting to a specific configuration of forces and, therefore, without having a confrontation with a certain power whose language game is totally determined by such a contextual configuration. An individual, for instance, shapes her convictions and aspirations by supporting or reacting to existing political ideologies, or by imagining what her economic instruments can offer her in a bargain with other individuals.

The pragmatic power of an authority can also manifest itself through seemingly mere “intellectually” imposed forms of rationality. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno famously denounced how the cultural attitude which was supposed to free human beings from the authority of myth and superstition, the rationality of Enlightenment, has revealed itself to be founded on a similarly biased and partial set of values in order to assess the “truth” of a proposition or the worthiness of a form of life. Modern and contemporary rationality ends up being “speculative” and even “totalitarian” despite its assuming «the form of the sober matter-of-factness by which it purported to distinguish itself from Hegel and from metaphysics in general»ⁱⁱ In the first chapter of their book, the authors elucidate the authoritarian character typical of such a form of reason:

«enlightenment is totalitarian as only a system can be. Its untruth does not lie in the analytical method, the reduction to elements, the decomposition through reflection, as its Romantic enemies had maintained from the first, but in its assumption that the trial is prejudged. When in mathematics the unknown becomes the unknown quantity in an equation, it is made into something long familiar before any value has been assigned. Nature, before and after quantum theory, is what can be registered mathematically; even what cannot be assimilated, the insoluble and irrational, is fenced in by mathematical theorems. In the preemptive identification of the thoroughly mathematized world with truth, enlightenment believes itself safe from the return of the mythical. It equates thought with mathematics. The latter is thereby cut loose, as it were, turned into an absolute authority. [...]Thought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced, so that it can finally be replaced by the machine»ⁱⁱⁱ

To the extent that an advance of knowledge produces results which are determined by a specific, restricted form of rationality – such as mathematics in the case of what Horkheimer and Adorno refer to as “Enlightenment” – it is doomed to exercise a violent authoritarian stance over human conception of truth and “nature”. Modern reason, as opposed to myth, is supposed to uncover the effective structure of nature and human naturalness, in order to become aware of what rules of actions are really preferable to feed human practical spirit. But if such a survey is carried out in function of an arbitrary, abstract rationality – that is a rationality which does not take into account all practical risks and potentialities of a human context, in particular those which cannot be referred to by means of univocal logics such as mathematics – any social and political decision following it will be as “irrational” as a superstition. The “irrationality” of modern reason, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, shapes the policies and psychology of today’s individuals.

Given this double bind between the formation of an awareness, which we can also name as the formation of a certain piece of “rational discourse”, and the constitution of an authority, we need to notice now that what Derrida puts as a condition of possibility of the rise of any truth and rationality can lead us to cancel any structural difference between a will explicitly coerced by a violent authority and a will compelled by its own desires, such as the one which support a political authority.

In fact, if we call “violence” the act of reducing to silence a potentially legitimate rational position, it cannot be simply identified with the domination of a “violent” person, to which the economic exploitation of human beings by a monopoly can be, for instance, associated. Derrida’s essay *Cogito and the History of Madness* famously illustrates this point^{iv}. Here, the French philosopher shows how, for Foucault, Descartes’s treatment of madness within his *Meditations* is a specific and defined historical event of violence^v. In reaching the ground of the Cogito, in fact, Descartes would have excluded from the perils of skeptical self-doubt the possibility of one’s own madness, which would be emblematic of a schism, enacted by Modern thought, which interrupted the dialogue between “reason” and “madness”:

«Foucault writes thus: “Descartes does not avoid the peril of madness in the same way he circumvents the eventuality of dreams or of error. . . . Neither image-peopled sleep, nor the clear consciousness that the senses can be deceived is able to take doubt to the extreme point of its universality; let us admit that our eyes deceive us, ‘let us assume that we are asleep’— truth will not entirely slip out into the night. For madness, it is otherwise.” Later: “In the economy of doubt, there is an imbalance between madness, on the one hand, and dream and error, on the other. Their situation in relation to the truth and to him who seeks it is different; dreams or illusions are surmounted within the structure of truth; but madness is inadmissible for the doubting subject.”»^{vi}

Described in this way, Cartesian *Meditations* would represent the story of an explicit coercion of a legitimate discourse – the language of madness – by an external authority – the language of what we consider “reason” - a mechanism similar to the explicit violent submission to an economic power.

Derrida’s interpretation of the *Meditations*, though, is much more complex. He notices how Descartes makes the Cogito works *despite* the haunting danger which madness represents - which can be translated, in our discussion, “despite the fact that the content of a certain awareness may become senseless, inadequate due to the structural arbitrariness of any form of accepted reason in comparison with what would be preferable to optimize a person’s satisfaction”. The certainty of the Cogito would represent, in its surviving the hyperbolic doubt on the “reality” of one’s own experiences and convictions, the instant of hyperbolic and extreme possibility of radical “madness” which the existence of a logos has to face and despite which its sense and its capability of being “communicated” can maintain itself. Madness, therefore, does not represent for Derrida a precise form of alternative language but, rather, the ever present risk that an embraced rationality may be out-of-place in comparison with potentially preferable choices and the risk, therefore, that such a form of reason may perform a violence, whether such a violence is perceived as a clear act of coercion or not. The Derridean philosophy of *dissemination*, in fact, reminds us of the completely contingent and random character of any form of rationality, which disarms the possibility of univocal guidelines in order to perform a maximization of the naturalness of each consciousness. This discloses a scenario in which any authority is in danger of reflecting the requests of an arbitrary rationality^{vii}. This is because the contingency and arbitrariness of the configuration of rationality, thanks to which an authority, or a will, perceives the desires to fulfill, ensure that the very fulfillment of these latter coincides with an equivalent arbitrariness in comparison with what is an optimization of a consciousness’s satisfaction.

Take, for instance, what we are currently experiencing in Southern Europe. The currently accepted form of rationality among political exponents and technicians has persuaded them that in the past we have borrowed too much and lived beyond our means and we need, therefore, to keep our borrowing under control and to cut our public services in order not to make creditors worry.^{viii} In this story no form of violence by an external authority is recognized or perceived. The dynamic narrated is just that of a sequence of decisions driven by different autonomous desires. According to this

narrative, we have followed certain authorities because our will was compelled by our perception of necessities and desires and we need now to follow certain other authorities for the same reasons.

Such a model of rationality – and, therefore, of self-awareness and of authority - nevertheless, perfectly reflects the dissemination and de-contextualization which make its sense pragmatically inadequate. The narrative of “living beyond one’s means” can be suitable, for example, within a household scenario. It is quite damaging if it works within a context in which other factors have previously taken place such as, in this particular case, an acute weakening of national industry due to a too strong exchange rate and to salary dumping policies by other nations.^{ix} The presence of other factors which holistically transform the entire pragmatic sense of a situation makes the quoted model of rationality an abstraction and, in fact, arbitrary. To say that a similar rationality is “arbitrary” means, indeed, that the legitimacy of its usage may not be undermined by its inadequacy and by its possibility of being out-of-place in terms of practical convenience. It means that the possibility of violence, the possibility of reducing to silence potentially more legitimate rational positions are structural in its existence.

To summarize, I have concluded so far that the recognition of an authority, the formation of a model of rationality and the rise of a certain awareness converge in the process of recognition of what is preferable within a context. I have concluded, then, that such an authority stems from a reaction to perceived necessities and desires which are structurally random in comparison with what would represent a maximization of the well-being of a consciousness.

The question I want to address now is “why should the awareness represented by singularity-of-the-Other to which Derrida solicits unconditioned sacrifice follow a different path than this in its formation? Does not any formation of a will coincide with an authority?”.

Derrida’s quasi-transcendental motivation for his commitment is that any contingent rule shaped by the singular event of the Other’s coming would be an unconditioned act of justice, unconditioned because it would not have as *condition* of its performance the guidelines of a commonly accepted arbitrary model of rationality. Its only basis would be the sense of responsibility towards the demand of a singularity.^x This act, in other words, would not need to be justified by an external ethics. Of course, according to the French philosopher, we need to be conscious of contextual social values in order to do justice to the Other. But they would come after a calculation which takes into account the fact that the question whether to immediately apply them or not is undecidable, as he says in the essay *Force of Law*.^{xi} It is undecidable because these values are born from and pass through the dissemination which makes them random in comparison with our potentially best choice. Only going through this undecidable moment and by finally breaking it, Derrida claims, we can tend to a non-conditioned justice to the other’s contingent “naturalness”.

Now, it is the very existence of this “tension to the unconditioned” which I contest with the question I proposed earlier. The reason is that, first of all, the singularity of the other privileged by Derrida cannot help but represent still another authority – even if an “authority of itself”, as we can say in empirical terms, but still an authority which exists because it has fulfilled random needs and desires.

To say that the alliance with the Other has to be secret, that is devoid of any justification which recalls an external ethics means that, in the moment of its rupture from such an ethics, the awareness in which the will of the other consists had to recognize an inconsistency between the desires which the context of rationality where she lives accidentally produced and the desires which this same rationality proposes to fulfill. But it does not mean that the new perceived desires aim at an achievement which is less arbitrary than the previous one, for the very reason that their perception has been produced by the previous, arbitrary discourse.

For instance, going back to the previous example, a political personality can decide to react to the impoverishment of middle classes in a different way to the accepted one. She can decide that in Southern Europe we do not have to cut our public services and expenditures in order not to make creditors worry, we can simply operate a huge redistribution of wealth from the top 5% of society to the bottom classes and to the State, so to pay a minimum wage and to improve public services without borrowing more. This would respond to the desire of the people and would do justice to their demands of well-being, creating a new logic which would not correspond to the one which is contextually accepted. This move would be ultimately consistent with Derrida’s responsibility. Unfortunately, this mere desire of redistribution of wealth would be produced by the same context of rationality which claims that the problem of these countries has simply been too much borrowing and wasting of resources. An arbitrary rationality in comparison with the best pragmatic route to follow because it ignores other operating factors, such as foreign salary dumping and too strong an exchange rate. Such an ignorance and arbitrariness is transmitted to the new model of rationality which should coincide with doing justice to the Other.

All this demonstrates that the structure of alienation of the will in comparison with potential maximization of well-being functions indifferently of any alleged secrecy of the responsibility toward the other, and also indifferently of a higher frequency in the change of the authority to be relied upon, as the awareness of contingency would suggest to be done. The last point I want to make is connected with another reason explaining why deconstruction cannot tend to what Derrida calls “unconditioned”. In fact, the very process of deconstruction, which should unveil the necessity to rely on the event of the Other, can be understood and performed as long as the authority of the Other is recognized. That is to say that the idea of an absolute contingency of any rational value, as well as being the means we use to illustrate the arbitrariness of the desires which an authority expresses, can only be conceived after we concretely experience the existence of other potentially legitimate changing authorities within the area where we used to consider only some authorities. This means that our acknowledging the process of deconstruction is, in the end, our being “conquered” by the performance of these new authorities in their being in contrast with the performance of other authorities, which makes us perceive their being uncommensurable to each other, that is their being reciprocally arbitrary. Derrida himself, in *Force of Law*, defines the conditions of our performing a deconstruction as the awareness of a justice owed to the Other, rather than the other way around:

«If there is a deconstruction of all presumption to a determining certainty of a present justice, it itself operates on the basis of an “idea of justice” that is infinite, infinite because irreducible, irreducible because owed to the other – owed to the other, before any contract, because it has come, it is a coming, the coming of the other as always other singularity»^{xii}.

We have, therefore, the paradox whereby our awareness of the necessity of deconstruction is nothing more than our being loyal to authorities which are equivalently alienated, arbitrary in comparison with hypothetical guidelines for our potentially best actions. This ultimately makes the alleged superiority in openness of a post-structuralist thought or of a philosophy of the event in comparison with a so called “metaphysical system” problematic in its pragmatic significance.

There is no time today to talk about what I propose instead in order to approach as much as possible what we call “justice to the Other”. I can hint, though, that a discussion should be set up to argue about the pragmatic structure of reciprocal bargaining power in which human relationships, above all economic ones, consist.

Reciprocal bargaining power can be interpreted as the basic structure of intersubjective agreements founded on what can be defined as an impulse toward reciprocal attraction - explained by the recognition of reciprocal utility. Any human agreement, included the ones arising from honest feelings such as love and protection, in effect, can be interpreted as a recognition of reciprocal instrumental utility – considered in its broad sense – and a consequent attempt to obtain what is desired while giving in exchange something which is desired by the partner in order to build up the relationship. In order to maximize reciprocal attraction and utility – and in order not to favor situations of exploitation and unbalanced bargaining power – we should maximize and equalize each individual’s instruments which are useful in doing that. So for instance, in the economic field, which is the field I mostly deal with in my dissertation, we should provide each individual with the possibility of owning optimized skills and means of production and adequate supply of credit to get in contact with interests and desires flourishing in her context. That is to say, a supply of credit which is granted by means of a logic coinciding with “an investment which a community makes in order to maximize and equalize all individuals’ instrumental potentiality and reciprocal utility”. A logic which cannot be fulfilled, for instance, by private lenders’ risk aversion, by the current financial system’s allocation of credit which uses speculative and self-referential mechanisms to assess the expectations on a product, or by the quantitative and not contextual criteria used by most banks to evaluate the suitability of a loan.^{xiii}

Also, according to this logic, we should provide each community with the possibility of controlling its currency exchange rate, that is to decide the level of accessibility of its products according to whether it needs or not to stimulate the possibility of acquiring these latter rather than other ones, so to incentivize the confidence in an enlargement of its people activity.^{xiv}

The reciprocal “attraction” outlined above, in fact, because of the structural temporal discrepancies between the development of different desires and capacities to mutually fulfill them, has to incorporate reciprocal confidence and good social expectation. The stress on confidence in future reciprocal utility is a corollary of what can be defined as the “principles” of an exchange economy, in which “any individual, in order to maximize the fulfillment of her desires needs to maximize the utility which her product has for the other members of the circuit, so as to bargain the maximum in exchange”. As a corollary, the more an agent perceives an “attraction” toward the other, the more she desires to be recognized and satisfied by the action of the other. In economic terms: the more a producer feels the expectation of a future convenient deal in trading with the other, the more she commits herself in recognizing the other’s desires in order to realize an attractive product and be satisfied in exchange.

If we analyze human activities in terms of recognition of reciprocal bargaining power we can focus on factors such as reciprocal utility, reciprocal confidence, instrumental maximization, expectations and we can examine the best ways to improve these elements in order to achieve a higher “justice” to the Other’s potential desires.

I can conclude by stating what I think is the difference between Derrida’s approach and this one. While the former is more likely to limit an evaluation to what stands out in a certain moment as the solution to a problem perceived by a certain authority, to take into account the factors I exposed may help to investigate whether there may be an even “better” overall allocation of instruments and potentialities – and to analyze in depth the pragmatic structure according to which it would function within intersubjective life. Such an investigation would not forget the essential contingency in the formation of human desires, but it would focus on the telos of maximized production and allocation of instruments to achieve the highest possible recognition and reciprocal fulfillment of desires.

ⁱ A. B. Seligman. *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 51.

ⁱⁱ M. Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno and G. Noeri, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1944]), 18.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

^{iv} J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, (London: Routledge, 2003 [1967]), 36-76.

^v See M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, Foreword by Ian Hacking, Jean Khalfa (ed.), Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (trans.), (Routledge, 2006), review by Colin Gordon, Royal Brompton & Harefield NHS Trust, available at <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/25226-history-of-madness/> (University of Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews). Accessed 24-11-2016.

^{vi} Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 56.

^{vii} See, for instance, J. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, (Northwestern University Press, 1977) and J. Derrida, *Speech and phenomena and other essays on Husserl theory of signs*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

^{viii} On the denunciation of this form of rationality see, for instance, A. Bagnai «Unhappy families are all alike: Minskyan cycles, Kaldorian growth, and the Eurozone peripheral crises», chap. 6 in O. Dejuan, E. Febrero, J. Uxó (eds.), *Post-Keynesian views of the crisis and its remedies*, (London, New York: Routledge, 2013); Emiliano Brancaccio e Marco Passarella, *L'austerità è di destra. E sta distruggendo l'Europa*, (Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2012); as example of this rationality see ECB, *A Fiscal Compact for a Stronger and Economic and Monetary Union*, Monthly Bulletin, May 2012; 12 -02 -2014, available at http://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/other/art1_mb201205en_pp79-94en.pdf.

^{ix} See, for instance, F. Jaumotte, H. Morsy. «Determinants of Inflation in the Euro Area: The Role of Labor and Product Market Institutions». *IMF Working Paper*. 2012 Available at [https://www.google.it/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCUQFjAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.imf.org%2Fexternal%2Fpubs%2Fft%2Fwp%2F2012%2Fwp1237.pdf&ei=Gml_VK2OJ4qP7Aa-2oHwDQ&usg=AFQjCNHUFStTEcOdXOnKqo0QcUqLKdQClg&sig2=KfiCI_EMfjmuF0QTxrPkw&bvm=bv.80642063.d.ZGU:](https://www.google.it/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCUQFjAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.imf.org%2Fexternal%2Fpubs%2Fft%2Fwp%2F2012%2Fwp1237.pdf&ei=Gml_VK2OJ4qP7Aa-2oHwDQ&usg=AFQjCNHUFStTEcOdXOnKqo0QcUqLKdQClg&sig2=KfiCI_EMfjmuF0QTxrPkw&bvm=bv.80642063.d.ZGU;) A. Bagnai, *Il Tramonto dell'Euro*. (Reggio Emilia: Imprimatur, 2012).

^x J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995); J. Derrida, *Given time: I. Counterfeit money*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

^{xi} J. Derrida, «Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'» in *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990): 919

^{xii} Derrida, Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority', 254.

^{xiii} See, for instance, Patrick Bolton, Xavier Freixas, Leonardo Gambacorta and Paolo Mistrulli. «Relationship and Transaction Lending in a Crisis». BIS Working Papers (2013): 147. Available at www.bis.org; J. E. Stiglitz, and B. C. Greenwald. «Industrial Policies, the creation of a learning society, and economic development». Paper presented to the International Economic Association/World Bank Industrial Policy Roundtable in Washington, DC, May 22-23, 2012; J. E. Stiglitz and A. Weiss, «Credit Rationing in Markets with Imperfect Information». *The American Economic Review*, Volume 71, Issue 3, (1981): 393-410.; E. Tymoigne and R. L. Wray, «Macroeconomics Meets Hyman P. Minsky: The Financial Theory of Investment». The Levy Economics Institute, Working Paper No. 543 (2008); A. Bagnai, «Crisi Finanziaria e Governo dell'Economia». In *Costituzionalismo.it* (Fascicolo 3/2011). Available at <http://www.costituzionalismo.it/fascicoli/27/>; B. Scott-Quinn, *Commercial and Investment Banking and the International Credit and Capital Markets: A Guide to the Global Finance Industry and its Governance*. (Chippenham and Eastbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

^{xiv} On this mechanism see, for instance, A. P. Thirlwall. «Kaldor’s 1970 Regional Growth Model Revisited». University of Kent, School of Economics Discussion Papers 1311 (2013); A. P. Thirlwall, «Emu is no cure for problems with the balance of payments», *Financial Times*, 9 Ottobre 1991; M. Setterfield, «Endogenous Growth: A Kaldorian Approach». In G. C. Harcourt and P. Kriesler (eds.) *Handbook of Post Keynesian Economics*, Vol. 1. P. 231-56. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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