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Bringing Historical Dimensions Into the Study of Social Problems: The Social Construction of Authority

Abstract   Appeals to authority have always played a key role in the construction of social problems. Authority legitimates claims, which is why claim-makers have always sought its validation. An exploration into the historical dimension of the social construction of authority provides insight into changing foundations on which claims about social problems are made. In contrast to the Middle Ages, the modern era has found it difficult to gain consensus on the meaning of authority. This historical shift in the status of authority provides the context for contemporary competitive claims-making about social problems.

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Whether implicitly or explicitly, the social constructionist sociology of knowledge has always been oriented towards the problem of authority. For Emile Durkheim, the constitution of moral authority represented the fundamental question facing sociology. In his classic, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, he noted that the "problem of sociology—if we can speak of a sociological problem—consists in seeking among the different forms of external constraint, the different forms of moral authority corresponding to them, and in discovering the causes which have determined these latter" (Durkheim 1968:208). Today, even if by its absence, the problem of moral authority dominates the landscape of social problem construction and claims-making.

Claims-making always has been a competitive enterprise; but, this competition has become complicated by the fact that the authority or authorities it appeals to are also intensely contested. Who speaks on behalf of the child or the victim? Whose account of global warming is authoritative? Those in authority look for the authorization of others to validate their claims. Scientists and advocacy organizations seek alliances with authoritative celebrities. Governments appeal to the evidence of experts to justify their policies, and their initiatives appeal to "new research" for legitimation. As Giddens (1991:194) notes, in the absence of "determinant authorities," there "exist plenty of claimants to authority—far more than was true of pre-modern cultures."

Authority has never been entirely a taken-for-granted institution. Even during the Middle Ages, often described as an epoch of tradition and religion, competing claims to authority often disrupted public life. Yet the demands raised by medieval claims-makers appealed to a shared religious and cultural legacy and did not fundamentally query the authority of authority. In the centuries to follow, the range of issues subjected to competing claims has both expanded and assumed a more profound quality. The proliferation of competing claims-making today is a symptom of the difficulty that society has in elaborating a shared narrative of validation. Historically, the question of how to validate and give meaning to authority has been posed and answered in different ways.

It is widely recognized that claim-making involves socially constructing an issue or a problem.

What is less frequently discussed is the way that claim-making involves both an appeal to and the construction of authority. The aim of this essay is to explore the social construction of authority in a historical perspective in order to draw out some of its distinctive features in the contemporary era.

The Problem of Authority

Authority is a relational concept, and its study inevitably touches on the question of what makes people perceive commands and institutions as authoritative. Genuine authority possesses a compelling power to motivate and gain obedience. It is closely associated with power and particularly the power to persuade, yet remains distinct from it. As Arendt (2006) and others have argued, persuasion through the use of argument is alien to the concept of authority. The very need to persuade is usually a testimony to authority's absence (Lincoln 1994:5). Authority's capacity to guide people's behavior is an outcome of a moral influence which, when allied to the power to compel, can gain obedience without either having to argue or to threaten.

Authority should not be equated with, or reduced to, the act of justification. It already contains a warrant for influencing and directing behavior and does not have to continually justify itself: Once authority has to be self-consciously justified, it is well on the way to losing its unquestioned status. Authority rests on a foundation that warrants its exercise and for the right to expect obedience. Throughout history, such foundational norms—divine authority, tradition and customs, reason and science, popular consent—provided the resources

for narratives of validation. Weber (1978) appeared less than certain whether political rule in his time could be underpinned by a form of foundational authority, and as we note elsewhere, the absence of any explicit engagement with this question represents a conspicuous gap in his sociology of domination (Furedi 2013).

Since the beginning of modernity, authority has invariably been deemed problematic. Hannah Arendt (2006:91) put matters most starkly when she declared that "authority has vanished." She took it for granted "that most will agree that a constant, ever-widening, and deepening crisis of authority has accompanied the development of the modern world in our century" (Arendt 2006:91). In her account, the crisis of authority is not confined to the domain of the political—she suggests that it exercises great significance in every dimension of social experience. As she observes in a passage of great interest to sociologists:

> the most significant symptom of the crisis, indicating its depth and seriousness, is that it has spread to such pre-political areas as child-rearing and education, where authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as a natural necessity, obviously required as much by natural needs, the helplessness of the child, as by political necessity, the continuity of an established civilization which can be assured only if those who are newcomers by birth are guided through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers. (Arendt 2006:91-92)

That the contestation of authority pervades the pre-political spheres of everyday life is shown by today's acrimonious debates over issues of marriage, child-rearing, health, lifestyles, and the conduct of personal relationships.

In contemporary times where authority has to continually justify itself and is continually contested, the authority of authority requires reflection. Authority is not a taken-for-granted institution. Concern with "crisis of authority" has expanded and encompasses questions such as "trust," "confidence," and "competing knowledge claims" (Furedi 2013). Lack of certainty about the authority of authority is both an encouragement to social problems claims-making and to its contestation.

Claims about social problems are "connected through the great inventory of cultural resources" argues Joel Best (1999:164). Such resources are created through a common understanding of what a community values, fears, and trusts. Foundational norms that serve to authorize a claim are among the most important cultural resources available for claims-makers. Historically competing visions of authority have drawn on foundational norms such as the authority of the past, the authority of religion, the authority of the people/nation/public opinion, the authority of the Great (charismatic) Leader, the authority of the law, or the authority of science and the expert (Furedi 2013:279-298).

Today, as in the past, every claim about a social problem seeks validation from one or more foundational norms. As Hannigan (2006:35) wrote, warrants, which are "justifications for demanding that action be taken," are central to the rhetoric of claims making—yet warrants must be linked to some form of authority for legitimating the claim. As Driedger and Eyles (2003:478) state, "it is primarily in the warrants where the greatest challenge lies to any claim." Challenging the values and interests motivating a claim invariably targets its legitimacy. From this perspective, the contemporary controversies surrounding the authority of science and of the expert represent the latest phase in the quest for foundational authority.

Conceptualizing the Problem of Foundational Authority

Max Weber's sociology of domination exercises a powerful influence on the conceptualization of authority in the social sciences: a point illustrated by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's (2007:109) statement that "we know of no justifications for authority which are not Weberian in form." Weber's writings indicate that he was profoundly interested in, but also deeply troubled by, the problem of authority. Weber argued that in the modern world legal-rational rules constituted the foundation for authority. But, he also was aware of the limited potential that legal-rational rules have to inspire belief in the legitimacy of the political order. Turner (1992:185) observed that in "Weber's sociology of law and in his political writings, the disenchantment of capitalist society precludes the possibility of any normative legitimation of the state."

The question of "normative legitimation" constitutes what I characterize as the historical problem of foundation. Rules, procedures, and laws possess no intrinsic authority; as the legal scholar Harold Berman (1983:16) states, the law "in all societies...

derives its authority from something outside itself." That "something" which is separate from, and logically prior to, the formulation of a rule or the codification of a law is the *source* or the *foundation* of its authority. When "a legal system undergoes rapid change," notes Berman (1983:16), "questions are inevitably raised concerning the legitimacy of the sources of its authority."

The social theorist, David Beetham, provides an important insight into the problem of foundation in his discussion of the relationship between legitimacy and the law. He contends that legality, on its own, "cannot provide a fully adequate or self-sufficient criterion of legitimacy" (Beetham 1991:67). Conflicts of interpretation about the meaning of law invariably attempt to justify their claims by "reference to a basic principle," which refers to "norms or an authoritative source that lies beyond existing rules" (Beetham 1991:67). Beetham (1991:67) asserts that the compelling power of rules, their moral authority, requires that they are "normatively binding" and based upon a "common framework of belief." The problem of foundational norms constitutes one of the fundamental questions facing public life:

> [w]hat is the ultimate source of law and social rules, from whence do they derive their authority, what provides the guarantee of their authenticity or validity—these are questions that concern the most fundamental of a society's beliefs, its metaphysical basis...which cannot itself be questioned. (Beetham 1991:69-79)

The "ultimate source" that validates society's laws and conventions has been subject to historical

variations. In the past, it has been served by tradition and custom, divine command, popular will and consent, and the doctrine of science.

Weber's sociology of domination attempts to analyze the foundation of authority as consisting of different sources of legitimation. He argues that it is "rare" for rulers to rely merely on "one or other" of the pure types, and reminds us "that the basis of every authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a *belief*, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (Weber 1978:263). This focus on belief raises the question of "belief in what?" It is evident that Weber is referring to some kind of foundational norm. Weber (1978:263) states that "the composition of this belief is seldom altogether simple," and that in the case of "legal authority" it is never purely legal. Moreover, "belief in legality comes to be established and habitual, and this means that it is partly traditional"; and consequently, "violation of the tradition may be fatal to it" (Weber 1978:263). Weber also asserts that authority even has a charismatic dimension, "at least in the negative sense that persistent and striking lack of success may be sufficient to ruin any government, to undermine its prestige, and to prepare the way for charismatic revolution." At the same time, "entirely pure charismatic authority is rare" (Weber 1978:263-264).

The problem of foundation demands an engagement with history. As Quentin Skinner (1998:105), the pre-eminent historian of political concepts, observed, political theory and action continually draw on the legitimation of the past since "what

is possible to do in politics, is generally limited by what is possible to legitimize." In turn, "what you can hope to legitimize" depends on "what courses of action you can plausibly range under existing normative principles" (Skinner 1998:105). Historically, the imperative to legitimate claims has provided an invitation to social construction.

The Emergence of Authority

The idea of political authority gained shape and definition during the evolution of the Roman republic. Although the meaning of sociological concepts are subject to historical variations, it is in Rome that many of the themes and problems associated with the modern understanding of authority—tradition, religion, morality, competing visions of the past—emerged with force. As one of the most insightful reviews of the history of this idea concluded:

> [t]here is common agreement that the idea of authority, in the full range of meanings that have given it an integral intellectual life to the present, has its origins during the Roman Republic with the coinage of the distinctive term, *auctoritas*, to cover several kinds of primarily, albeit not exclusively legal relationships. (Krieger 1968:163)

The Romans expressly attempted to consolidate a powerful sense of tradition and continuity. They self-consciously went about the business of constructing tradition as a solution to social problem. The Emperor Augustus was an inventor of traditions and the constructor of social problems such as the loss of moral standards and traditional virtues

(Furedi 2013:63-66). The affirmation of continuity with its connotations of a thriving and living tradition played an important role in the construction of a unique Roman sensibility towards authority. As Rawson (1985:322) remarked, the Romans continually wrote about their past and were self-consciously devoted to their ancestors, traditions, and customs. It is at this point in time that the social construction of the problem of tradition and claims based on it gained a self-conscious expression.

The Roman constitution or, to put it more accurately, constitutional arrangement, expressed a powerful sense of continuity with the past, as well as an open orientation towards further development in the future. It offered a synthesis of tradition with a willingness to adapt to new experience. It was a product of social construction engineered through successive generations. It codified a myth of common origin as the foundation for authority and the making of claims based upon it. Cicero (2008:35) noted that since "no collection of able people at a single point of time could have sufficient foresight to take into account of everything; there had to be practical experience over a long period of history."

The emphasis which Cicero and others placed on foundation as a sacred moment in the constitution of the community was motivated by the understanding that a consensus on common origins and a way of life was essential if the city was to cope with the internal tensions and external pressures that confronted it. From 250 B.C. onwards, a series of major foreign wars and imperial expansion irrevocably transformed the Roman world in a way

that began to expose the "weakness of a governmental system that relied upon respect for authority and adherence to tradition" (Shotter 2005:10). In such circumstances, tradition needed be nurtured and cultivated.

As one overview of this period noted, "constant expansion required a basic consensus at home" (Flower 2004:9). That is why arguably the Romans were not simply traditionalists but also self-consciously traditionalists! For Cicero, the foundation for belief, including religious belief, was tradition. The founding of Rome was presented as the culmination of historical events that could never be recreated. It was an authoritative event that contained within itself the potential to authorize. In her reflections on this process, Arendt (2006) posits the act of foundation as the source of authority. The act of foundation represents a unique experience which Roman tradition developed to authorize belief and behavior.

The Latin term *auctoritas*, from which the word "authority" is derived, expresses the Roman orientation towards origins and tradition. Its meaning is captured by phrases such as "being in authority," "speaking with authority," or "moral authority." The root of *auctoritas* is *augere*—to initiate, set in motion, to found something, or to make something to grow. This usage of the term communicates the ideal of a foundational authority which someone develops (augments) and moves forward into the present. According to Hopfl (1999:219), *auctoritas* "is a capacity to initiate and to inspire respect," and in this respect the moral quality of authority is emphasized.

It is useful to remind ourselves of the historical relationship between *auctoritas* and authority for it helps highlight its foundational aspiration. As Friedman (1990:74-75) points out, from the perspective of *auctoritas*, "a person with authority has been understood to be someone to whom a decision or opinion can be traced back as the source of that decision or opinion or else, as someone who carries forward into the present, continues or 'augments' some founding act or line of action started in the past." The Founding Fathers of the America's revolutionary generation provide a paradigmatic example of the working of *auctoritas*.

Authority in Question

The disintegration of Roman civilization in the fifth century had a devastating impact on European societies. The unified system of administration institutionalized during the Roman Empire gave way to fragmentation and a highly unstable form of rule. In the absence of a recognized ethos of authority, no stable institutions of governance emerged to provide a focus for cultural unity. Latin Christianity was the only institution that could contain or at least minimize the tendency towards political fragmentation. The Church itself lacked unity and it took centuries for the establishment of an effective papal monarchy which could serve as a focus for spiritual unity. The pope served as a symbol of religious authority of a medieval Europe that shared a common religion.

One of the principal questions confronting Europe in the Early Middle Ages was how to establish and give meaning to authority. The Church

of Rome sought to claim authority on the grounds that it was responsible for the spiritual guidance of Christendom. Although the Church was militarily weak, the "[p]opes were enormously influential as custodians of ideational bonds that continued to hold medieval society (*populous christianus*) together" (Damaska 1985:1813). Despite the absence of order, medieval Christian culture could draw upon the legacy of the Roman past, and possessed an idealized version of how authority worked in previous times.

The distinctive feature of medieval authority was the idea of divided lordship. This idea was based on the principle "that human society was controlled by two authorities, a spiritual, as well as a temporal, represents the development of what is one of the most characteristic differences between the ancient and the modern world" (Parsons 1963:42). Unlike other religions, Christianity accepted what sociologist Talcott Parsons (1963:42-43) has characterized as a "fundamental *differentiation* between church and state" and between secular and religious authority.

Medieval Europe was continually preoccupied with the fragility of authoritative institutions, and consequently drawn towards constructing, elaborating, and innovating ideas about authority. All the main doctrinal and political disputes of the Middle Age were expressions of the impulse to seek a resolution to this problem. "Twelfth-century political thought was preoccupied with the legitimacy of political institutions and of governing authority," states one study of this period (Benson 1991:339). Throughout this period the relationship

between religious and secular institutions was one of tension; but, it was a form of tension that contained the potential for both conflict and harmony.

This tension was immanent in the uneasy relationship between spiritual and temporal authority, and expressed through a ceaseless attempt to assert, claim, and contest authority. As a result, every assertion of supreme authority was challenged by counter-claims. Arguments about authority from the past were continually rehearsed and elaborated by medieval claims-makers, who most often were lawyers. Typically, competing claims about the nature of social problems were based on either Roman or Cannon Law.

Parsons (1963:49) noted that the "differentiation of the church *from* secular society" and its institutionalization was one of the distinct features of Western socio-cultural development. For Weber, the differentiation of society into two independent spheres represented a significant contrast with the workings of other cultures. He wrote that "at least from a sociological viewpoint, the Occidental Middle Ages were much less of a *unified culture* than those of other societies" and was particularly struck by the remarkable tendency to contest authority (Weber 1978:1193). His statement—"in the Occident, authority was set against authority, legitimacy against legitimacy"—recognized one of the defining features of this era (Weber 1978:1193). In an embryonic form, it also anticipated the kind of conflicts that were to crystallize in modern societies. The competing claims based on sacred or secular authority anticipated disputes between those founded on traditional or scientific authority in modern society.

The differentiation of the two spheres was underwritten by Christian doctrine, which placed great emphasis on the Church's institutional autonomy and moral authority. This led to the development of what has been described as a "Christian dimension of authority," which, based on the separation of the Church from temporal rule, introduced a "source of authority independent of political power" (Krieger 1968:146).

The very institutionalization of Church independence created an actual or potential source of alternative authority to that of the feudal ruler. Institutional differentiation between the religious and the secular created the condition for the proliferation of claims-making activities. During the 12th and 13th centuries, secular and religious scholars and thinkers—usually with legal training—were mobilized to provide precedents and arguments to legitimate competing claims to authority.

Old dynasties searched for a new foundation for their authority, papal officials sought to expand the role of Rome in Europe's temporal affairs, and advocates of city-state autonomy were busy constructing arguments for their independence. In his fascinating account of the contestation of authority within medieval urban centers, Weber (1978:7) noted that "numerous claims to authority stand side by side, overlapping and often conflicting with each other." The authority of Roman law competed with that of feudal Germanic custom and Christian doctrine. Medieval lawyers had to integrate these "three systems of thought" and reconcile their potentially contradictory claim to authority (Pennington 1991:434).

During the Middle Ages, tradition was constantly tested through acts of interpretation and innovation, and it is difficult to disagree with Ziolkowski's (2009:439) verdict that "the long twelfth century is also a phase of extensive forgery and misattribution," where laws and customs were sometimes invented, and in some cases, directly challenged. But, nevertheless, even in the course of constructing new customs, medieval thinkers and claims-makers believed that they were acting in accordance with tradition. "They believed themselves to believing within a tradition, but actually were in the extended process of constructing one" (Coleman 2000:3).

In the prosperous commercial centers of Italy, rapid social and economic change created a condition of fluidity and instability that tested the influence of traditional authority. In such "relatively unstable circumstances with competing authority claims" (Weber 1978:1254), the traditional rulers authority was often displaced or "usurped" by popular associations led by a new class of prosperous merchants. This urban revolution was frequently legitimized by the construction of legal precedents and procedures (Weber 1978:1254).

Despite the intensity of the contestation of authority, all sides more or less accepted the foundational norms that validated rulership. McCready's (1975:273) study of the doctrinal positions of competing claim-makers concludes that "the major papal theorists and at least some of the antipapalists had much in common." Figgis (1960:26) reminds his readers of "the permanence of fundamental notions amid the most varying forms of expression

and argument." The coexistence of bitter conflict with a shared source of foundational norms meant that debates about authority were conducted within a common moral framework. Gray (2007:197) writes that "in the medieval period, the two centers faced one another as enemies, and yet both claimed authority from the same source, both acknowledged some force behind the enemy's claim of legitimacy, and both governed subjects who maintained loyalty to both."

In the end, the normative foundational unity on which medieval authority was based was tested by territorial fragmentation and the rise of nation states. What finally led to its demise was the expression of territorial divisions through the medium of religious conflict. The religious wars unleashed by the Reformation had grave consequence for the standing of tradition and authority. In the early modern era, foundational unity gave way to fragmentation. Protestant and Catholic claims-makers no longer appealed to the same authority and increasingly drew on different sources of legitimation.

The Demise of Authority

The 16th century Reformation Movement helped to create the conditions for the final unraveling of medieval authority. This movement can be interpreted as at once a cause, a response, and an expression of the moral crisis of the Roman Church. That Luther's break with the Roman Church coincided with the emergence of soon-to-be nation states ensured that controversies over religious doctrines would intersect with secular political conflicts. The ferocity of

theological conflict forced European society to look for an authoritative solution to the problem of endemic disorder and insecurity. Since violent conflicts of interests were expressed through religious disputes, the search for order was drawn towards secular solutions. This encouraged secularity. As a result, authority gradually divested itself of its outward religious appearance and assumed a political form. In the post-Reformation era, authority became increasingly politicized and gradually attached itself to the sovereign nation state.

The detachment of religious validation from power lent authority an increasingly secular character. This desacralization of authority stood in stark contrast to the previous medieval model. Authority was now perceived as conventional and frequently represented as the voluntary creation of consenting individuals. The validation of authority on the basis of ancient origins and tradition also weakened.

Through challenging the moral integrity of the Roman Church, Luther set into motion a chain of events that would lead to fundamental questions being asked about the workings of all forms of authority. "Do I obey my conscience, the established religious creed, my government, or the larger claims of mankind" were the kind of queries raised by Luther's actions (Hurstfield 1965:6). *Here I stand, so help me God, I can no other* was how Luther responded to the demand that he recant his views at the Diet of Worms in April 1521. His statement that he could do no other but act in accordance with his conscience gave voice to a sentiment that would eventually provide legitimation for the act of dis-

obeying authority. The English historian, Christopher Hill (1986:38), went so far as to insist that the "essence of Protestantism—the priesthood of all believers—was logically a doctrine of individualist anarchy." Writing more than three centuries after Luther's remarkable statement, Marx (1975:182) observed that in effect Luther had "shattered faith in authority." What Marx implied was that the sensitizing of European society to the sanctity of individual conscience would inevitably render problematic an unquestioned obedience to external authority. The idea that individual conscience could stand in opposition to authority or at least diverge from it often led to the view that these were principles that were potentially or actually antithetical.

Ideas about the right to resist despotic authority converged with those of the freedom of the inner-person and the acknowledgment of consent as the source of sovereignty to forge a cultural sensibility towards valuation of the authority of the self. This trend was more widely reflected in the rising influence of the conceptual distinction between subject and object and between the internal and external world. The political theorist, Kenneth Minogue (1963:33-34), claims that this reorientation towards psychology constituted a "fundamental blow to authority" since it "freed the inward-oriented individual from the duty to obey external rule."

As the English Civil War demonstrated, the tension between individual protestant conscience and prevailing forms of secular authority proved to be explosive. These dramatic events in England proved to be the precursor of a series of clashes over the constitution of authority. And unlike the

pre-modern disputes, these clashes came to directly involve and affect an ever-widening constituency of the public. In effect, the unraveling of authority, which "expressed itself with peculiar fervor of entrenched religious dogma" mutated into the modern problem of order (Hurstfield 1965:2).

Claim-Makers in Search of Foundational Norms

Situating authority in history is essential for understanding its distinct modern features. A review of the different ways in which the problem of authority has been conceptualized in the past shows an attempt to answer very different questions at different times. So whereas in the post-Reformation era, the demand for authority was fuelled by conflict and rivalry among the European secular and religious elites, in the nineteenth century it was activated by the imperative of containing the threat from below. Consequently, questions about the relation of religious to political authority, obedience, individual conscience, and resistance gave way to concerns about the status of public opinion and the role of democratic consent. In the sixteenth century, debates and conflicts were fuelled by competing visions of what constituted the source of authority; by the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries, the very possibility of constructing a normative foundation for authority was put to question.

Authority based on a normative foundation has become very weak; and the very modest role that contemporary social thought has assigned to authority is testimony to its diminishing significance.

Weber (1946:139, 144) believed that rationalization and scientific advance lacked the capacity to generate "ultimate" values. His analysis indicated that capitalist modernization had unleashed a process of rationalization that undermined custom and habit. Implicitly, Weber also understood that the erosion of tradition was not paralleled by the emergence of a mental outlook disposed towards accepting values that bound them to the prevailing order. According to his theory of domination, belief in the legitimacy of the political order grounded in legal and rational norms displaced the justification provided by tradition. However, he had little faith in capacity of rationally-devised rules to influence and inspire the public—which is why he tended to bank on the charismatic and inspirational potential of leaders to legitimate order (Weber 2008:312-313).

Weber's discovery that the process of modernization and rationalization has tended to diminish authority's foundation has not stopped social and political thinkers from searching for new ways of validating authority. However, rationalized forms of authority—legal, bureaucratic, scientific—often lacked the moral depth necessary for legitimating the exercise of power.

The progressive rationalization of society meant that science and expertise always had a presence and could be called upon to authorize decisions and actions. Moreover, as older forms of legitimation lose their salience, society becomes increasingly dependent on expert guidance. In his prescient study, *Toward a Rational Society*, Habermas (1987:53) observed that in the post-war period, technology and science worked as a quasi-ideology: he wrote

of the "scientization of political power" and argued that politicians had become increasingly dependent on professionals.

In policy debates about social and public issues, evidence provided by experts is used by all parties to validate their arguments, and even constituencies who are motivated by moral, religious, and political concerns adopt a technocratic, rationalized, and scientific narrative. In recent decades, environmentalists who were formerly suspicious of science and anti-abortion activists who were inspired by a religious ethos have embraced the authority of scientific expertise to justify their cause. This pragmatic, arguably opportunistic, embrace of the authority of science has been pointed out by Steve Yearley (1992:511) in relation to the environmental movement that "has a profound dependence on scientific evidence and scientific expertise," but "at the same time, many within the green movement are distrustful of scientific authority and fruits of technology."

That moral discourse is frequently communicated through the language of science, is testimony to the authoritative status of the latter. As one American commentator observes, arguments framed in the language of science trump those expressed through a grammar of morality:

> [i]t is especially interesting that both religious and environmentalist voices—voices that in the United States culture often adopt similar rhetoric regarding the inherent wrongness of altering the natural or God-given order—tend to be quieted, especially in comparison to voices that make explicit reference to science or to its use and effects, bad or good. This

makes sense in light of the observation that in the United States culture, science is a very special form of authority. (Priest 2006:210)

The authority of science has become an indispensable resource for claims-making. Nevertheless, the authority of science and expertise is inherently unstable and ambivalent. It possesses the power and authority to weaken traditional attitudes and beliefs, but as Habermas (1976:84) argued, also sets the very standards by which its own claims can be undermined. The open-ended and provisional quality of scientific claims means that they can be adapted and used to support competing and conflicting interests.

A major limitation of science is that it cannot endow human experience with meaning. However, this limitation has not stopped advocates of specific causes from framing their appeals to the authority of science through a normative narrative: Robert Lackey points out that policy and scientific preferences often blend together, and that the moralization of scientific claims has become a regular feature of public life. He noted that in the U.S. "the use of normative science cuts across the ideological spectrum"; "it seems no less common coming from the political Left or Right, from the Greens or the Libertarians" (Lackey 2007:15).

Despite its pre-eminent role as an all-purpose source of authorization, the authority of science constantly invites its contestation. Its authority is continually scrutinized and sometimes subject to a powerful moral anti-scientific critique. So-called scientific advice is frequently questioned and attacked for

allegedly serving a nefarious agenda. Vitriolic moral denunciation is frequently present in discussions about stem cell research, GM food and technology, climate change, fracking, and a variety of other topics. Nevertheless, as Hilgartner (2000:4) argues, "science advice is a ubiquitous source of authority in contemporary Western societies." The mantra "research shows" has displaced the dogma "for it is written."

From the standpoint of our investigation of authority in history, we would conclude that the current ascendancy of scientific authority has far less to do with its intrinsic attributes than with the discrediting of other forms of authorization. It is the one form of authorization that is still left standing. That is why even movements that are profoundly suspicious of science seek to appropriate its authority. The embrace of creation science by some fundamentalist religious groups is symptomatic of this trend. As an author of a text on the politicization of science noted, "where religious conservatives may once have advanced their pro-life and socially traditionalist views through moral arguments, they now increasingly adopt the veneer of scientific and technical expertise" (Mooney 2006:75).

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The formidable influence of scientific authority encourages claim-makers on all sides to embrace it "with the ironic outcome that the demand for legitimation results in the process of delegitimation" (Liftin 2000:122). Liftin (2000:122) adds that "once science enters the political fray, especially for a high-stakes issue like global climate change, it risks being perceived as contaminated and thereby losing its authority." Attempts to moralize science represent an often unstated and unrecognized search for authority. As I have discussed elsewhere, there are powerful cultural pressures towards transforming scientific claims into non-negotiable truths (Furedi 2011:186-188). Terms such as "scientific consensus" are used to acclaim the "truth," and the recently constructed term "The Science" is a deeply moralized and politicized category. Those who claim to wield the authority of The Science are demanding the kind of submission historically associated with Papal Infallibility. However, we are no longer living in the Medieval Era. Such claims lack the normative foundations to prevent the inevitable rise of counter-claims. Ultimately, science lacks the unquestioned moral status needed to restrain the expansion of claims-making.

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