Caught in the Web. Media and Authority, Between Old and New

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An ever-increasing number of world leaders who have risen to power in the liberal-democratic world over the past decades expose the need to rethink such fundamental concepts as authority, sovereignty, legitimacy and power in the modern state. The ascendancy of leaders such as Trump, Erdoğan, Netanyahu, and Putin is perceived as a new political phenomenon, one that often stumps and astonishes scholars of political science. It is easy to classify this new kind of political power as an updated version of populism, especially based on its widespread harnessing of resentment towards the elites, among other things, as a source of influence. Nevertheless, it would seem that the concepts formulated by populism studies fall far short of encapsulating the phenomenon. They fail to provide an explanation for the apparently global nature of the emerging trend, and more importantly, they seem unable to account for the new patterns of legitimation, political discourse, and authority characteristic of this new kind of politics.

The new right seems profoundly antagonistic and transgressive in regards to established liberal norms. In this it resembles the pre-totalitarian atmosphere as described by major commentators such as Arendt (2017, pp. 328-336) and Adorno (2020, pp. 17-19). This startling resemblance gives rise to the troubling expectation that ideological galvanization is soon to present itself. This is certainly a possibility, but far from a necessity. And

indeed, this very expectation might be a serious hindrance in coming to terms with our contemporary political reality. What if our very expectation, based on historical experience, in effect masks what is truly new about new-authoritarianism, namely, its ability to garner support and legitimation based on nothing but its transgressivity? If populism is too broad of a notion to capture what is unique about contemporary, right wing authoritarianism, then the somewhat hasty comparison to 20th-century movements such as fascism and Nazism risks being too narrow. While the comparison is understandable and significant, one is quickly struck by the absence in contemporary authoritarianism of an ideological vision of society such that would mobilize the masses, which seems to have been characteristic of 20th-century political movements. If what we are facing today is a species of totalitarianism, it is a totalitarianism without totality.

In what follows, I suggest, therefore, focusing on what seems to be a quintessential trait of the new politics, which is its direct appeal to the obscene as a source of power. This characteristic is especially striking when it comes to Trump, Netanyahu, and Berlusconi, as attested to by the spirit of hedonism or even vulgarity that surrounds them, in their ability to say things that are taboo, their disregard for the rules of political discourse, the public use of winks and "dog whistles" (i.e. the positioning of the obscene as the center of the transmitted message), and so on and so forth. No wonder such displays elicit the astonishment and frustration of political scholars and commentators. Patterns of discourse and actions that have traditionally been considered destructive to political figures are turning out to be secret weapons for securing power in the hands of these new leaders. They also pose a theoretical challenge to our ideas about political authority and legitimacy.

A good way to elucidate the theoretical challenge this present paper attempts to address is by referring to Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Emperor's New Clothes," which

illustrates a fundamental paradigm of modern thinking on the subject of authority. According to this paradigm, authority is nothing but external attire and all it takes to uncover this fact is to look at it with eyes free of the chains of traditional political culture.[1] If only we can gain enough insight—with the help of critical thinking, rejection of ideology, and recognition of the systems of power—we shall see that underneath the clothes, the people who hold the power are mere flesh and blood, and their nakedness will be exposed to all. And yet, the new authoritarians flaunt their nakedness, in the sense that their patterns of recruitment, legitimation, and maintenance of power are in fact based on the exposure and blatancy that they themselves perpetrate. Much of their appeal lies in this act of exposure.

One way of explaining the global nature of new-authoritarian legitimation patterns would be to link it to the development of new media. In order to establish the relation between the new politics and new media condition, it is necessary to address fundamental questions regarding new media. The fundamental question in this regard is what can be labeled the web's democratic paradox. In its first stages, the internet seemed to promise to advance democracy, enabling unprecedented freedom of speech and pluralism. This faith was founded on firm bases: the web's decentralized framework, the possibilities it opened up for individual self-expression, and individually-tailored use—all of which were perceived as the direct opposite of the centralized, unidirectional, homogenous broadcast media. While in some areas the web might have fulfilled its democratic promise, in other terrains it delivered

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[1] To borrow the terms of Ernst Kantorowicz's classic essay, the king's "attire" is that which distinguishes between his "natural" or mortal body and his immortal body, the body politic that represents the continuity of the nation. The king's insignia—his "ring, tiara, and purple"—are material objects that signify the transformation of a pretender to the throne into a king, and their removal, conversely, strips him of the king's dignity and authority, the consequences of which are often dreadful. See Kantorowicz 1956, pp. 35-6.

the opposite outcome. Phenomena such as online shaming, conspiracy theories, and hate groups have found the internet fertile ground for their toxic social effects, displaying social behaviors that were associated in the 19th century with the "crowd": a lack of judgment, loosening of the inhibitive effect of social norms, and diffusion of the limits of the self. John Suler coined the term "the dis-inhibition effect" (2004) to describe how, paradoxically, online media enforces a new mode of disinhibition that is not experienced as a release of the self, but as an injury to its integrity.

The internet, which began as a promise to radically democratize human communications, a promise to deliver us from the remainders of authority inscribed in the very centralized nature of broadcast—which allows, as it were, for authority figures to speak at us, putting us in the position of passive spectators. Yet somehow, this decentralizing medium of the internet has come to host and proliferate a culture ridden by conspiracy theories, shaming, and cyberbullying, and a corresponding politics of obscenity, in which disinhibition endows certain politicians with a unique type of aura and authority, quite similar to that which, according to Freud's famed analysis, attaches to the leader of the crowd (Freud 1949, p. 102). The only difference is that our crowd behavior, so to speak, is no longer eruptive, but somehow integrated into our daily lives.

Now, the notion that these things—new authoritarianism and new media—somehow belong together is embarrassingly obvious, and yet, at the same time, I would argue, it is profoundly puzzling, posing some deep theoretical challenges. We soon run into a bifurcation, a cross in the road. Political theorists and social scientists who study the new wave of populist authoritarianism tend to view technology as epiphenomenal to their topic, a mere means of communication, utilized for effective propaganda, whereas theorists of technology tend to view the transformation in technology as almost a lone factor, certainly the determining one. But this is not merely a problem of the scholarly division

of labor, a matter of perspective; what is at stake is a profound puzzle regarding the very nature of power.

Why is it puzzling? It is puzzling because, in this conjuncture of technology and authority, in terms of mastery, we have two, opposing complaints. When it comes to technology, we tend to complain that we have not yet, and maybe can no longer, master technology, our instruments have turned against us, and we are dealing here with a slave revolt that we cannot crush. In the words of philosopher of technology Bernard Stigler, it is an issue of questioning "what power (*pouvoir*) do we have over our power (*puissance*)?" (Stiegler 1998, p. 21). Our means of mastery have turned against us. In politics, on the other hand, we tend to complain that we have not yet shaken off the shackles of old masters. Indeed, we are witnessing the rise of something that resembles the primordial, mythological, uncastrated father Freud writes about in his *Totem and Taboo*, a leader who governs by means of standing outside social laws, unencumbered by the inhibitions and taboos that define social life (Freud 1950, pp. 91-2).

There seems to be a short circuit between two opposite tendencies: we get a strong sense that technology is heralding us towards a post-human future; it decentralizes, disrupts, diffuses, and deindividuates (Deleuze 1992, p. 5), whereas authority, and in particular authoritarianism, seems to be all too human, an atavistic, primordial mode of attachment, firmly rooted in the archaic, mythological past, maybe even our animal nature. Technology leads us towards an impersonal and hyperrational world, to such an extent that it renders human subjectivity outmoded, threatening some of the core, essential features of our human subjectivity, ushering in a post-human age. Authority, on the other hand, anchors our subjective identifications to particular authority figures and seems to be hopelessly primitive and irrational.

Somehow, the forward rush and constant disruption driven by new technologies coincides with the return of the repressed, and so we find ourselves pushed towards a (pre)theoretical choice:

either we view the transformation in media technology as fundamental, and the political and cultural content of the moment as epiphenomenal, or the other way around: what we are seeing is yet another return of the repressed, and technical media is ultimately but a means of its expression.

To mention just two quick examples: for a philosopher of technology such as Bernard Stiegler, the story of our moment is about how the dialectics between disruptive technological innovation and its subsequent absorption into culture, the phase in which it becomes second nature, absorbed into the background, is something digital technology no longer permits, for it has made disruption its eternal entelechy, so to speak (Stiegler 2019, p. 52). One way of grasping this point would be to notice how generations are a trait now possessed by technology, not by culture. We have a 2.0 etc. for all of our devices, and can no longer sustain a relationship between generations in society. For Stiegler, the cultural and political phenomena we observe are epiphenomenal of this fundamental arrhythmia of digital technology we have reached. Nonetheless, he hangs his hopes on law and culture somehow reigning in digital disruption (ibid., pp. 232-3).

On the other hand, an intelligent analyst of contemporary global power, such as historian Timothy Snyder, is capable of observing how, while sharing some qualities with both tyranny and totalitarianism, a regime such as Putin's

> functions not by mobilizing society with the help of a single grand vision, as fascist Germany and Italy did, but by demobilizing individuals, assuring them that there are no certainties and no institutions that can be trusted…the Putin regime is imperialist and oligarchic, dependent for its existence on propaganda that claims that all the world is ever such. (Snyder 2022)

While these are certainly valuable observations, touching on a significant difference between contemporary authoritarianism and its 20th-century predecessor, for Snyder, not only is media

technology epiphenomenal, an instrument of propaganda, but, because of that very perception, he identifies the nihilism of Russian propaganda with the older generation of passive TV spectators, and hangs his hopes on a new generation for whom the web has become second nature, to fight for democracy. These are not just parallel arguments, different perspectives: they form a contradiction and it is impossible to reconcile them. So, which is it? Where is the locus of power?

The wager of my intervention here is that this contradictory attitude towards mastery might provide us with an opportunity to approach the contradictory nature of mastery as such. So, let this be our guiding hypothesis: Technology and authority—their impossible conjunction is the contradiction of mastery.

Let us begin by conceptually developing the tension between authority and technology. Then, we shall turn to Lacan in order to pose this (non)relation more precisely, and in direct correspondence with the technological event of our time, namely, the emergence of a world thoroughly networked by computers. With this, we shall come full circle in order to ask some fundamental questions about the relation between the medium of the web and the cultural contents that plague it.

Authority and Tradition—A Hermeneutical Circle

In her well-known essay "What is Authority?" Arendt approaches the object of her essay, Authority, obliquely, making clear right from the beginning that authority is no longer known to us, a thing of the past, felt by us only through the symptoms of its— probably fatal—crisis.

> In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What was—and not what is—authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question

because authority has vanished from the modern world. Since we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experience common to all, the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion. Little about its nature appears self-evident or even comprehensible to everybody, except that the political scientist may still remember that this concept was once fundamental to political theory, or 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 1961, p. 91)

So, authority is a thing of the past. This brief formula captures both what is perhaps the most essential feature of authority, and the reason for its epistemological unavailability. As we shall see, this unavailability or opacity of authority is a constant, and yet also what underwrites its profound transformation in modernity. Authority and tradition, I argue, form a hermeneutical circle, which, in one way, is precisely what made authority such an elusive concept, and is, in another way, all there is to know about both terms.

Let us begin with the modern, epistemological barrier: definitions of authority rely on a concept of tradition, whereas definitions of tradition rely on a concept of authority. We understand tradition to be that form of life in which authority is, or was, in full sway, and authority, as a mode of power that relies on tradition for its legitimacy. This is why "traditional" societies are the original object of anthropology, as it is what fascinated modern researchers about them—authority at its purest is the authority of a life form, of the unwritten rules of society, without recourse to grand mechanisms of control and enforcement such as the law and state bureaucracy. What, in the absence of modern mechanisms of power, holds such societies in order (Maine 1914, pp. 359-383, Mamdani 2012, pp. 21-23)?

Take Max Weber's classical discussion of the three sources of legitimacy. In his famous lecture *Politics as Vocation* (1946), Weber mentions three sources of legitimacy: 1. Tradition. 2. Legality.

3. Charisma. In his lecture, Weber quickly puts aside tradition as a source of legitimacy and focuses instead on legality and charisma, presumably, as the latter two remain relevant to the modern society that is the topic of his lecture.

What is striking about the two sources of legitimacy he does develop is their polar opposition. The connection to the charismatic leader is personal, whereas legality is appealing in its impersonal impartiality. Whereas the charismatic leader is defined by his mandate, that is, in Weber's terms, he is judged on the basis of his ability to attain goals and fulfill purposes, the legitimacy of legality lies in its instrumental and formal rationality, standing above, or underneath, the political debate over values and goals. It is technical or instrumental. It is the mechanism required for the accomplishment of any policy and the appraisal of its reasonability, the very medium in which the political debate can take place.

Today the two sources of modern legitimacy mentioned by Weber seem to be locking horns, entangled in a direct confrontation. Legality has come under attack mostly from the political right as politically biased ("the deep state"), undermining its claim for neutrality. This politicization of the neutral medium is a main feature of the new right, arguably, the core message of a new type of post-ideological charismatic authoritarianism. On the opposite side of the political fence, legality has become a strange political battle cry, which unwittingly participates in the politicization of that which draws its legitimacy from being a neutral medium.

Is there something outside the forced choice between charisma and legality that seems to underlie our current predicament? Perhaps there is something to be gained from what Max Weber discarded, namely, tradition. In contradistinction from both charisma and legality, whose appealing rationale is thoroughly discussed by Weber, tradition's appeal is defined by Weber tautologically—it is the legitimacy afforded to 'the eternal yesterday', to that which always-already precedes us. (Weber 1946, pp. 78-9) Tradition draws its authority from being tradition. Implicitly, we

inherit from Weber a notion of traditional legitimation as uncritical, the unthinking acceptance of that which comes down to us. As such, it is lost to modernity. We can no longer naively rely on that which has come before.

And so, it is certainly to Arendt's credit that she approaches authority as primordially lost to modernity. But Arendt does not simply identify authority with the most primitive, with origin or beginning. Arendt famously argues that authority as a concrete cultural experience was absent from Greek culture, and thus comes to us from the Romans, who then, retroactively, constitute the Greeks as their—and therefore our—intellectual authorities or forefathers. In Arendt's account, western Political philosophy in its entirety emerges against this blank, this absence, which therefore could be said to occupy a position somewhat analogous to Heidegger's Being, the forgetting of which constitutes in his account western metaphysics.

For Arendt, our entire political tradition, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, is a massive forgetting of authority. The notion of authority, which implies an obedience in which freedom is retained, is inaccessible as long as we rely on the Greek division between despotic, coercive rule, natural in the household and illegitimate in the city, which is founded on freedom. (pp. 105-6).[2] And yet the "origin" of authority is not sought by Arendt in the Greek's own forerunners—she doesn't turn, as Heidegger did, to

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[2] Nicole Loraux's impressive study of the structural, mythical presence of stasis—civil war—in Greek culture and thought, can be interpreted as lending credence to Arendt's claim. The Greeks develop against an experience of a centuries-long civil struggle, organized to a large extent around the tension between a form of rule derived from the *oikos*, the family household bound to the necessities of nature, and the *polis*, the city. See Loraux, 2006, 15-44. Authority, it is implied in Arendt's account, is neither familial nor political, but rather resides in their point of extimacy, precisely the place Agamben reserves for stasis (Agamben 2015, p. 16). Elsewhere, Agamben explicitly links the question of authority to civil war. There, he seems to imply, the struggle is to a large extent around the very possibility of authority's existence alongside power (Agamben 2005, pp. 86-87).

the pre-Socratics, or as an anthropologist might, to an even more traditional society—but rather to the Greek's successors, the Romans. Authority, as it emerges from Arendt's account, is at once primordially lost, and somehow secondary, restorative, reactive. It is, as Arendt picks up from the word's etymology, an act of augmentation, specifically, of the foundations, thereby retroactively constituting them as such, as foundational. Authority is nothing but this circularity between establishment and reinforcement: a foundation operates as such—as truly foundational—only insofar as it has to be repeatedly augmented, only as long as we cannot tear it down and erect a new edifice in its stead. It is hallowed ground.

Implicit in Arendt's account of the secondary, retroactive place of authority in western history, is indeed a theory of its very historicality. It is because the west originally lacks an authoritative foundation that philosophy—not only political philosophy—is born, and the placing of that very philosophy as an authoritative foundation cannot but have a dialectical result, pushing us to search for firmer ground, and undermine it, again and again.

Compare, if you will, Lovejoy's famous thesis to Arendt's. For Lovejoy, "the great chain of being" that came to form the underlying ontological preposition of the greater part of western history was a compromise formation, an attempt to account for conflicting demands, at once philosophical and religious, that the ground of reality would be both transcendent (otherworldly) and effective (in the realm of the senses) (Lovejoy 2001, pp. 45-6). Plato's ideas were the first philosophical articulation of such a double, contradictory demand.[3] For Arendt, Plato's theory of ideas as a transcendent standard emerges directly from the absence of, for the Greeks, the experience of authority. In the absence of

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[3] Agamben traces the political genealogy of this very same tension. For Agamben, our fundamental notions of power are a secularization of the tension between God's sovereign power and his providential governance of the world (2011).

authority, standards lack, she suggests, an efficiency of their own and can only become instrumental tools in the hands of philosopher kings (p. 110). Can we conceive of an efficacy that is different in kind from the compulsory action of one body on another? This, as we shall see, is indeed the problem raised by Arendt. Authority is eclipsed, for us, because we find it next to impossible to think of such a modality of power, a power not measured by its actualization. Its effectiveness is increased in direct proportion to its remaining virtuality. What makes authority difficult to grasp is precisely its strange, indirect presence.

Since authority is unapproachable, inaccessible, we might get a better understanding of Arendt's interpretation of it if we follow her strategy and approach it through its very disappearance, by means of that which eclipses it. Significantly, Arendt views the rise of the functional view of society as the other side of the decline of authority.

> There exists a silent agreement in most discussions among political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions and proceed on the assumption that everything can eventually be called anything else, and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right "to define his terms." Yet does not this curious right, which we have come to grant as soon as we deal with matters of importance—as though it were actually the same as the right to one's own opinion—already indicate that such terms as "tyranny," "authority," "totalitarianism," have simply lost their common meaning, or that we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness … [the] theory implicitly challenging the importance of making distinctions is, especially in the social sciences, the almost universal functionalization of all concepts and ideas. A convenient instance may be provided by the widespread conviction in the free world that communism is a new "religion," notwithstanding its avowed atheism, because it fulfills socially, psychologically, and "emotionally" the same function traditional religion fulfilled… (Arendt, p. 102)

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For Arendt, the fact that we can speak of a function of authority already means that it is utterly lost to us. Although Arendt doesn't quite spell it out, we may offer several different ways in which authority as it emerges from her essay is the obverse of the functional:

1. If authority is lost once we can speak of it as a function, this is because authority "functions" to the extent that it is taken for granted, presupposed, operative insofar as it forms the very background of our reality: "the groundwork" of the world, as Arendt puts it (p. 95). It is to be taken on trust, implicitly. To view it as a function is the first sign of its malfunctioning, so to speak, its loss of immediacy and transparency. If authority cannot be taken for granted, it cannot be taken at all, would be the idea. In this sense, authority is necessarily veiled; we are not to see behind its curtain. Recall the famous quote attributed to Bismarck, according to which laws and sausages are two things about whose production processes the public should not be made aware. The function of authority is mysterious, indeed, the mystery as to its functioning is the essential ingredient of its unique functionality. This is one way of understanding the importance of ceremony, or what Walter Benjamin called "Cult Value" for traditional authority (Benjamin 1969, p. 7). And hence the appearance of authority via the medium of crisis—it only comes to view when things are not quite right, where there is a significant enough disturbance to the "smooth running" of things. As Agamben notes, the senate's authority was invoked, in Roman law, in the "interregnum," in the time between one established, or posited order, and the next, in the vacuum of power (Agamben, 2005, p. 79).

2. Authority does not perform a function. It is profoundly anti-instrumental, and cannot be viewed as a means to an end. We know this, although we hardly understand it—authority is not something to be executed or realized, but is a virtual presence that accompanies power, giving it or withholding from it symbolic support. It ceremoniously augments acts and institutions by

sanctioning them, permitting them a symbolic entrance into the space of possibility. This is perhaps the key to its fraught distinction and relation to power, as we commonly understand that term, a relation "at once antagonistic and supplementary" (Agamben 2005, p. 80). Authority is not something to be enforced; it does not hinge on its realized effects and it is "more than advice, less than a command," as the famous quote from Mommsen describes it. Authority is superfluous, signatorial, and yet, as such, essential.

3. Authority is substantial, it attaches itself to concrete individuals—a person or a tradition. It is never, as Arendt emphasizes, "authority in general." It is rooted or seeks to be so, and is by no means something transferrable and translatable in the way that a function is. Put in problematic functional terms, it is precisely what endows a person, an institution, or an activity with substance, a dimension of depth, gravitas, the corporeal density of material, as opposed to formal, distinction.

4. Authority belongs to a substantial *We*, a pre-individual sense of community, of a commitment to *our* way of life. To view it as a function is to view things externally, as it were, from a sociological, scientific point of view, which can only conceive of society as a functional construct. Authority, as we have already indicated, is directly linked to the mysterious way in which I am inscribed into a given community. It is a view from within a medium of tradition, hence Arendt's turn to the particular history she sees herself an heir to, the history of western political thought. This is also why, in her account, when authority is intact, it brings together freedom and hierarchy. Properly authorized, things are in their right place, so to speak. There is an accepted hierarchy, a sacred order. Hierarchy and freedom coincide, insofar as I can see my concrete freedom as inseparable from the totality to which I belong. It is, say, as a father that I realize myself, as a son and a citizen of my country, as opposed to a liberal, formal-legal abstraction. It is an order in which differences—between the young and the old, between men and women, between nobles and serfs—must be accepted and reinforced.

5. Authority is paradigmatic. It belongs to an order in which the singular is not posed as the opposite of the general rule, but as its expression or manifestation. The link between authority and charisma (Agamben 2005, pp. 83-84), has to do with this feature. Authority is not an office, a role—a function—that can be fulfilled. Terms like a position of authority, or "the authorities," betray the extent to which we can only understand authority in functional terms. The mystery raised by Lorrain Daston as to the now lost meaning of paradigm as rule, and not as its opposition (Daston 2022, pp. 8), is not merely analogous to the eclipse of authority, but belongs to one and the same constellation. As emerges from Daston's study of rules, the capacities associated with learning from example (discretion) are inseparable from structures of authority, such as monasteries (Daston 2022, pp. 41-44). To learn the lessons of the paradigmatic exemplar is the other side of the coin, which could also be described as learning to respect authorities. Both aspects belong to, depend on, and reinforce a medium of tradition.

6. Finally, authority is grounded in the law insofar as it is both given and transcendent, a medium in which society is constituted rather than itself a constituted, man-made order. This is what distinguishes it from tyranny, according to Arendt:

> even the most draconic authoritarian government is bound by laws. Its acts are tested by a code which was made either not by man at all, as in the case of the law of nature or God's commandments or the platonic ideas, or at least not by those actually in power. The source of authority in authoritarian government is always a force external and superior to its own power; it is always this source, this external force which transcends the political realm, from which authorities derive their "authority," that is, their legitimacy, and against which their power can be checked. (Arendt 1961, p. 97)

The law is operative in an authoritarian structure, insofar as it is precisely not a function anyone can master, that is, precisely

insofar as the law has no human author, and no human can place themselves in the position of its author.

Authority, Old and New

Although Arendt never quite fully spells it out, there is an intimate link between the topic of her most famous book, totalitarianism, and the topic of one of her most famous standalone essays, authority. While these two political concepts are in many ways diametrically opposed, both occupy a space that the major opposition in western political thought, between legitimate rule and rule by force, seems to deny.

> Instead of saying that totalitarian government is unprecedented, we could also say that it has exploded the very alternative on which all definitions of the essence of government have been based in political philosophy, that is the alternative between lawful and lawless government, between arbitrary and legitimate power. It defies, it is true, all positive laws …, but It operates neither without guidance of law nor is it arbitrary, for it claims to obey strictly those laws of nature or of history from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring … It is the monstrous, yet seemingly unanswerable claim of totalitarian rule that, far from being "lawless" it goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to those suprahuman forces than any government ever was before, and that far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody's vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of history or the law of nature. (Arendt 1998, p. 461)

Totalitarianism is neither tyranny, the rule of one against all, nor is it democratically legitimate, the rule of the many against one, and the very same can be said of authority as explored by Arendt, which is undoubtedly legitimate, although its source

of legitimacy is certainly one that transcends the polity and its freedom. There is an implicit thesis that emerges when we bring together Arendt's reflections on totalitarianism and her reflections on authority: totalitarianism lays claim to a direct contact with the transcendent, mysterious source of authority. We might say that in its modern blend of legitimate and illegitimate rule, of lawlessness and law, totalitarianism comes to occupy the logical space left open by the absence of authority. In a way, much of the horror of totalitarianism is attributed by Arendt to its coming to assume the *function* of authority.

What about contemporary, new authoritarianism? Arendt's account so far helps us appreciate the extent to which our new authoritarianism is structured as an anti-authoritarianism. If the unwritten law for Arendt, is—we could say, as such, as unwritten—what serves as the ultimate standard of any authority figure, what are we to make of a Trump or Netanyahu, who are precisely capable of attaining authority and garnering legitimacy by means of transgressing these very unwritten laws? New authoritarianism, it would seem, lays no claim to a "higher law," say, the laws of nature, as in pseudo biological racism, or history, as in communist interpretations of the laws of materialist dialectics governing the historical process. Instead, it makes direct contact with the unwritten law underlying authority, by calling attention to its elusive, implicit presence, and rebelling against it.

Authority as described by Arendt is one, historically significant way of making the mystery of language – the fact that it always already precedes us, that it is the medium in which we are individuated – legitimate. The new modality of authority, on the contrary, is premised on the illegitimacy of anything we are called upon to take on trust. Do your own research! is the injunction of the internet conspiracy theorists, their version of Kant's dare to know! The new authoritarian leader appears as the one who exposes the false pretense of the established institutions and norms

on which we rely. Rather than participating in the ceremonial mystery of authority, new authority figures appear to be radically anti-ceremonial, tearing down all the symbolic facades of power.

The Censor, the King, and the Pen

In the classical modality of authority, the figure of authority, say the king, gives body (figure) to the unwritten law that authorizes him, but he is not its source. In his Seminar II, to which we shall return, Lacan gives this dimension of the "the law in so far as it is not understood" in his words, a psychoanalytic name: censorship.

> By definition, no one is taken to be ignorant of the law, but it is never understood, for no one can grasp it in its entirety. The primitive who is caught up in the laws of kinship, of alliance, of the exchange of women, never has, even if he is very learned, a complete vision of what it is in this totality of the law that has a hold over him… That is censorship. It is the law in so far it is not understood. (Lacan 1991, p. 127).

Lacan's point about censorship is subtle and can be easily missed. Censorship turns an impossibility into a prohibition. The law has an unknowable, unwritten dimension. In order to become full subjects of the law, censorship forbids us from admitting something everybody knows all too well. In this way, censorship "symbolizes," by means of prohibition, what is structurally impossible in the law. What is untotalizable about the law, its unsayable, unknowable dimension, is totalized by isolating special well-known things and making them forbidden from discourse. This is one way in which to understand the strange feature of "taboo," noted by Freud, its reference to both the prohibited, terrifying thing and the prohibition itself. (Freud 1950, p. 21) By making something "taboo," we isolate the areas of discourse that we are to circumvent, so as not to encounter head

on what, in discourse, is for us thing-like, non-discursive in its effect—sheer opacity. Lacan makes his point by means of a rather humoristic—and strangely current—example, in which the law forbids us from saying that the king of England is an idiot under penalty of death by beheading.

> If it is forbidden to say that the king of England is an idiot, under pain of having one's head cut off, one will not say it, and in consequence of this sole fact, one will be led into not saying a great many other things—that is to say, everything which reveals the glaring reality that the king of England is an idiot… the subject of the king of England has many reasons for wanting to express things which have a most direct relation with the fact that the king of England is an idiot. Let us say it passes into his dreams… the subject dreams that he has his head cut off. (Lacan 1991, p. 128)

Censorship forbids us, that is, from making explicit what everybody knows, what can only be alluded to, hinted at, expressed indirectly, a driver of subtle subversion—that, underneath the crown, there is a human being just like us, more or less an idiot. He is merely fulfilling a function. To make the mechanics of authority explicit is tantamount to sacrilege—it points out the constructed, arbitrary structure of rule. To admit this is taboo. Making public what everybody knows involves a strange "reflective" twist. It transforms that which "everybody knows" into something which "everybody knows that everybody knows." It discloses an open secret. From this point on, you may go on ignoring it, but, you are, as it were, explicitly implicated in the act of censorship. The subject of such open secrets is a figure of the "big other," as dubbed by Slavoj Žižek, the other supposed to believe, the subject whose innocence must be protected. To bypass censorship is to make the "innocent" other aware of what everybody else already knows.

What interests Lacan in censorship is its productive function. The forbidden statement incites much psychic activity in the subjects of this king of England, and censorship appears by

means of their dreams: being unable to say that the king is an idiot, the subject dreams that he has his head cut off. So, where are we now? Everyone is allowed, indeed incited, to say that the king of England is an idiot. It even seems to be inscribed into the ceremony of coronation—in a video that went viral, in the days leading to the coronation of Charles the III, we all had to watch Charles get annoyed at a pen, like him, failing to fulfill his one and only function—to produce a signature!

We are ceremoniously anti-ceremonial. Furthermore, we now have kings, authority figures, that ceaselessly display their idiocy, making themselves utterly immune to such ridicule. Not only immune—the more they are mocked, the stronger they seem to get. Has censorship been lifted? Are we no longer under the influence of the unwritten law, the law insofar as it is not understood? Does it no longer have a hold on us? We can mock the king, and the king makes a mockery of himself, but we still dream—now more than ever—that our heads have been cut off. Our fantasy of being seized by blind mechanisms of power, being headless subjects, is the clearest sign that censorship is more powerful than ever at the very moment it seems to have disappeared. It is within this dream that we need to search for what could be called the censorship of censorship.

From Substance to Network

We have seen, on Arendt's part, that authority is occluded by functionality. Now let us turn to look at how things appear from the other side, as it were, from the side of the domain of intelligibility of functionality, namely, technology. Philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon describes the technical mentality (and technical being) as juxtaposed to the rationale of religion, like figure to ground.

> Technicity appears as a structure that resolves an incompatibility: it specializes the figural functions, while religions on their side specialize the functions of ground; the original magical universe, which is rich in potentials, structures itself by splitting in two. (Simondon 2017, p. 169)

Simondon's juxtaposition, or bifurcation to use his terms, of technology and religion, it might be noted, is taken by him to be more primitive than the bifurcation between theory and practice. What he terms "magic" is his attempt to capture the primordial ground of intelligibility, "before" the seemingly primordial distinction between figure and ground, without automatically falling into the trap of "the night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black" (Hegel 2018, §16), that is, a situation in which no significant difference can emerge. According to Simondon's account, in the magical phase of being, technology and religion are conjoined. Magic, for Simondon, is both religious technology and technological religion. This primal unity of technology and religion in magic is brought up by Simondon in his account of the centrality of singular points in space, such as mountain tops, in which there is a meeting between human and cosmic powers (Simondon 2017, pp. 180-1). And so, Simondon's magical phase is emphatically pre-historical. It is a present that can have no before and no after. In it, space and time form privileged sites of conversion, where human, finite agency and the cosmic absolute come together. While concentrated in such privileged sites, it is unclear how such an ultimately flat ontology can allow for transformative events, for moments that introduce a gap between "before" and "after," to introduce a significant tear in the fabric of space and time thus woven together. Nonetheless, rather inexplicably, this "magical" phase bifurcates, as it cannot sustain the polarity it holds together, and the primal bifurcation is that between religion, which seeks to grasp things in their super-phenomenal totality, that is, it inquires after the ground of being, and technology, which seeks

to grasp things in their phenomenal partiality. Technology thus arises as functional to its core, and in bifurcation with religion.

> A mode of knowledge sui generis, that essentially uses the analogical transfer and the paradigm, and founds itself on the discovery of common modes of functioning—or of regimes of operation—in otherwise different orders of reality that are chosen just as well from the living or the inert as from the human or the non-human. (Simondon 2012, p. 1)

If authority is effaced by the functional view, then it is precisely technology, or the technical mentality that does the effacing. Consider the two postulates Simondon offers for the technological mentality:

> 1. The subjects are relatively detachable from the whole of which they are a part.
> 2. If one wants to understand a being completely, one must study it by considering it in its entelechy, and not in its inactivity or its static state. (Simondon 2012, pp. 3-4)

If authority belongs to a substantial whole, technology is what tears it apart. If authority is to be grasped as pure virtuality, technology is all about actualization. If authority preserves and sacralizes the past, technology finds its end in the open-ended future, it has to materialize itself in ever more concrete form. It is, so to speak, that which understands its own being as developmental, as that which, beginning abstractly, must find in development its concrete existence (Simondon 2017, pp. 25-29). Simondon develops a full-blown philosophical account of technical objects, which hinges on the realization of the fundamentally de-essentializing nature of the technical, its pure functionality. To paraphrase Heidegger, Simondon's point can be summed up by the slogan: "the essence of technology is (to demonstrate that) nothing (is) essential." If authority belongs to a sacralizing intelligibility,

technology is its direct opposite, desacralizing everything, stripping it down to its function. In terms of the distinction made famous by Kant, technology is the mother of understanding, and authority the mother of reason. Understanding analyzes and tears apart, whereas reason demands that things should be brought together into a comprehensible—if uncomprehended—totality.

This is why Simondon conceives of the network—what he has in mind is a power grid, but also communication networks—as the highest realization of the inessential nature of the technical. Indeed, without explicitly avowing it, it seems evident that in the technical network Simondon detects a new, perhaps higher phase of the primordially lost magic.

> It is the standardization of the subsets, the industrial possibility of the production of separate pieces that are all alike, that allows for the creation of networks … it is not a question here of the rape of nature or of the victory of the human being over the elements, because in fact it is the natural structures themselves that serve as the attachment point for the network that is being developed; the relay points of the Hertzian 'cables', for example, rejoin with the high sites of ancient sacredness above the valleys and the seas. Here, the technical mentality successfully completes itself and rejoins nature by turning itself into a thought-network, into the material and conceptual synthesis of particularity and concentration, individuality and collectivity—because the entire force of the network is available in each one of its points, and its mazes are woven together with those of the world, in the concrete and the particular. (Simondon 2012, p. 9)

And so, we arrive at our first, possible definition of the network, from the standpoint of the philosophy of technology: The network is precisely a way to realize (in the dual sense of the term) the part-whole relation in a non-organic, insubstantial way. Neither the part nor the whole are substances, only their reticular relation, whose primary aim is to prevent them from stabilizing

into anything resembling the philosophical notion of substance. From substance to network, if you will. Ultimately, for Simondon, the network is the way in which virtuality is actualized as such, paradoxical as this must be. To make this more readily graspable, let us look at how Simondon describes the ideal (i.e. fully realized or concrete) technical object:

> The essential lies in this: in order for an object to allow for the development of the technical mentality and to be chosen by it, the object itself needs to be of a reticular structure. […] If one imagines an object that, instead of being closed, offers parts that are conceived as being as close to indestructible as possible, and others by contrast… [with] a very high capacity to adjust each usage, one obtains an open object that can be completed, improved, maintained in the state of perpetual actuality… The postindustrial technical object is the unity of two layers of reality—a layer that is as stable and permanent as possible, which adheres to the user and is made to last, and a layer that can be perpetually replaced, changed, renewed, because it is made up of elements that are all similar, impersonal, mass produced by industry and distributed by all the networks of exchange. (Ibid., p. 12)

This is quite a striking description of the smartphone, especially considering its author passed away in 1989. The point is that it is through participation in this network that the technical object always remains contemporary to its use, always new. A perfected technical object is a concrete manifestation of the network, and the network is actualized virtuality, a system for perpetual entelechy. Of course, this leaves out not only the way such functionality itself functions symbolically (Baudrillard 1996, pp. 110-113) but also the ontological radicality of this realization, or what drives us towards such a realization (Kremnitzer 2022, pp. 148-9), not to mention the question of our addictive relation to these little gadgets, the manner in which we enjoy them, and the perverse content they seem to engender, but we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Before we move on to Lacan, let us explicitly address the major theoretical challenge we have stumbled upon here. In speaking about authority, we found ourselves talking about a certain relation to our linguistic being, our being in language, the way it always precedes us, and is unknown by us. And while speaking about technology, we were made aware of the radically de-essentializing, disruptive effect of technology, perhaps culminating in the medium in which we find ourselves today. When it comes to inquiries about language and media, there seems to be something akin to the famous uncertainty principle in physics: the more one focuses on the effects of historically particular technical media, the less one is capable of grasping mediation as such, namely language, and vice versa.

We might get a little aid here from Marshall McLuhan, best known for his oft quoted and mostly misunderstood slogan: "The medium is the message."

> In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message … the instance of the electric light may prove illuminating in this connection. The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the "content" of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph … when the light is used for brain surgery or night baseball [it] is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the "content" of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that "the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the "content" of any new medium blinds us to the

character of the medium … the electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no "content." And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. (McLuhan 1994, pp. 7-9)

McLuhan is not known for the clarity of his argumentation, and so it is easy to miss the full significance of what is here postulated. What is at stake is nothing short of the very distinction between a medium and a mean. We may therefore reconstruct his argument and pick up a few crucial points: A medium is not to be understood as a specific use of technology, a specialized function, say, a 'means of communication'. The medium is what emerges in the gap between the use of a technology, its function, what he calls content, and the message, we might say its significance—the way it reshapes our very "groundwork," the way we associate and act. The difficulty in studying media, the reason why McLuhan quite rightly argues that we mostly fail to study it, is precisely that the medium is an entity of the gap between our intentional use of things, as a means to ends, which is the viewpoint of technology—but also, mind you, of power—and what happens to us, the way we are, in our very activity, inscribed in a medium we cannot quite be cognizant of.

For our purposes here, what matters is the striking resemblance between McLuhan's account of media and Arendt's analysis of authority, as the groundwork and flipside of functionality. But it also adds a significant twist to it. In itself, the medium is totally transparent, indeed, a matter of indifference, and it can only come to view when covered over by content, in its very eclipse, as it were. We need only add, as Lacan does, that this also pertains to our natural language.

As Lacan puts it apropos of the terms we used above of figure and ground; both are, as it were, manifestations of the gap: "Where is the background? Is it absent? No. Rupture, split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge—just as the cry does not stand

against a background of silence, but on the contrary, makes the silence emerge as silence" (Lacan 1978, p. 26).

The background is not anterior to the discontinuity of the gap, but a product of it. It is only with the cry—something that breaks the silence, and stands out as the primordial signifier without a signified—that silence is made present precisely as a dense medium, the palpable presence of the unspoken, the unspeakable. Here Lacan takes us one important step beyond McLuhan—if indeed the content of a medium is always another medium, then the content of speech, our natural medium, is silence as a medium, the presence of absence—or the unconscious. The medium as such, in its purity, is the gap between the lines, so to speak, the erotization of signification, the sense that something lurks in the background behind what is presented to us. This would be the zero point of intuition, the sense for sense.

What is important to note at this point, however, is the reversal that took place between the functional, or technical, and authority, reminiscent of Benjamin's famed opening thesis on history, the puppet and the dwarf. In that famed parable, Benjamin suggests that the seemingly automated puppet "historical materialism" would win consistently, as long as the ugly dwarf secretly operating it, namely "theology," was kept out of sight (Benjamin, 2006, 389). The power of the parable has much to do with the way in which it reverses the standard relations between technology and religion, where industrial technology replaces and renders superfluous religion, by reinserting religion as the very invisible "driver" of the machine's automatism.

In Arendt's account, authority had to veil functionality, above all, its own. Had we known how it works, so to speak, the magic would have been gone. And maybe it has. McLuhan offers his intervention at a point in which, on the contrary, functionality is foregrounded, and it is the media effect, the background structuring of our life, that is veiled by it.

In traditional authority, the eternal past of time immemorial is sacralized, and change is either absorbed by it or denied. In a technologically mediated environment; change is foregrounded and preservation of the past loses its internal rationale, and so the repetition that precedes us, so to speak, acquires instead the form of haunting insistence. As Joan Copjec put it:

> Modernity was founded on a definitive break with the authority of our ancestors, who were no longer conceived as the ground for our actions or beliefs. And yet this effective undermining of their authority confronted us with another difficulty; it is as if in rendering our ancestors fallible we had transformed the past from the repository of their already accomplished deeds and discovered truths into a kind of holding cell of all that was unactualized and unthought. The desire of our ancestors and thus the virtual past, the past that had never come to pass, or was not yet finished, weighed disturbingly on us, pressing itself on our attention. (Copjec 2007, p. 65)

One primary function of tradition is the social organization of involuntary memory: festive days are collective occasions for the evocation of the mythical past—the form of signification that the past takes, precisely insofar as it eludes articulation. As tradition loosens its hold, we are faced, individually, with the burden of the mythological, virtual past, which is why modernity is so often theorized in the context of the affect of anxiety.

> The break instituted by modernity did not cause the past to become effectively dead to us, its retreat turned out to be modal (that is, it became a matter of the virtual, not actual past) rather than total. We were thus not left simply alone in a cloistral present cut off from our ancestors, but found ourselves alone with something that did not clearly manifest itself. Anxiety is this feeling of being anchored to an alien self from which we are unable to separate ourselves nor to assume as our own, of being connected to a past that, insofar as it had not happened, was impossible to shed. Our implication in the past was thus deepened. For, while formerly a subject's ties to her

past were strictly binding, they were experienced as external, as of the order of simple constraint. One had to submit to a destiny one did not elect and often experienced as unjust. But one could rail against one's destiny, curse one's fate. With modernity this is no longer possible. The 'god of destiny' is now dead and we no longer inherit the debts of our ancestors, but become that debt. We cannot distance ourselves efficiently from the past to be able to curse the fate it hands us, but must, as Lacan put it, bear as jouissance the injustice that horrifies us. (Ibid, p. 66)

We might say that in modernity we are progressively faced with the unwritten law—a term which historically has been translated to both custom, tradition, and natural law—as such, that is, as unwritten, hauntingly present in its virtual, unrealized modality. Differently put, traditional authority is a way to give a legitimate, indeed, central, cultural place to (primary) repression. Primary repression is the emergence of the very space of repression, structurally preceding any repressed content (Freud 1953). It is, in this context, the very marking of an alien territory, extimate to the self. There is a knowledge the subject does not possesses that is vital, crucial, to their very being. One way of describing a traditional way of life would be to say that in it, one attributes to tradition and its authority figures that very absent knowledge. It is, say, what the gods know, what we might get echoes of via their messengers, and through the mediation of those trained in reading their signs. With modernity, repression is repressed—it is precisely by knowing full well how things function that we are effectively mystified as to their effect on us. And so, one dramatic consequence of this redoubled repression, or redoubled censorship, is the transformation of our relation to anxiety. It is as if the idea of censorship has become more terrifying for us than any terrifying content deserving of censorship. We can accept, maybe even welcome, the most terrifying reality, so long as we can consider it known by us, uncensored. Hence the appeal of transgressive authority figures—in their transgression, they expose the

myriad of unwritten rules governing the public space of political appearances. There is a strange enjoyment that accompanies our witnessing of such behavior. It comforts us by confirming our worst expectations and bringing them into the open.[4]

Does this not equally describe the reversal in the relation between power and authority? More explicitly than anyone else, Foucault advanced the notion of "technologies of power," often pitted against older, symbolic models of authorization. According to this understanding, the modern modality of power is technological. Power in modern societies has no center, and is very much understood as a sort of headless "instrumentality," a machine producing effects. While the process described by Foucault is real and of the highest significance, the problem is that this theoretical framework fails to account for the manner in which authority insists, precisely as that which is veiled by the very open, decentralized mechanisms of power. The message ingrained in the very manifestation of power. Authority, we have said following Arendt, is a thing of the past. But precisely as such, under modern conditions its mode of appearance is that of the return of the repressed: forgotten, but not gone. Foregrounding technology should not lead us to think of authority as historically outdated, but rather to consider its modes of insistence.

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[4] We could consider in this context the subtle, yet crucial difference between the two examples provided by Octave Manoni in his famous essay on disavowal. The Hopi go through a terrifying experience—at first confronted by evil spirits, then realizing those very spirits were portrayed by their relatives. The outcome is communitas, in the anthropological sense: they take on the role of deceivers, assuming the duty of scaring their own children into the bonds of community. The story of Casanova is quite different—what terrifies him is the discovery that pretending (to possess magical powers) does not really protect him from the "effects of the signifier," from the magic of symbolic castration.

Lacan: Between Science and Authority

From the very beginning and until the end of his teaching, Lacan was constantly, and explicitly struggling to position himself precisely in light of the tension we have discussed above, under the terms of authority and technology. Psychoanalysis, as he understood it, is a technique, with serious, deep commitments to science, one indeed that Lacan does much to formalize, and yet it has an author, and one Lacan sees himself committed to augment, to borrow Arendt's language.

Famously, seminar II includes a stand-alone lecture given by Lacan on psychoanalysis and cybernetics. Lacan was well aware of the tremendous stakes raised by what was then known as cybernetics (Liu 2010). In the seminar, Lacan articulates what he takes to be the common ground of cybernetics and psychoanalysis, namely why, that is, cybernetics should be of interest to those, like him, committed to a psychoanalytic framework.

> Why are we so astonished by these machines? It may have something to do with the difficulties Freud encountered. Because cybernetics also stems from a reaction of astonishment at rediscovering that this human language works almost by itself, seemingly to outwit us. (Lacan 1988, p. 119)

Both cybernetics and psychoanalysis stem from the astonishment that human language presents itself as working by itself—almost. What will advance Lacan's thinking here is what looks like rhetorical flourishes—the "almost," which allows one to pay attention rather to its malfunctions, and the way such an encounter with language seems designed to outwit us, that is, the game of temptation and deception integral to our being in language, its erotic dimension.

One way to condense the lesson emerging from Lacan in this seminar and subsequent ones is to say that science and authority are divided by a common object, for which we might propose

the catchy name of knowledge without knowers, the mode of knowledge that has the unwritten law as its object. Notions like structure, system, and network, are ways to describe a phenomenon that behaves as if it was purposefully organized, as if it knew what it was doing. Lacan's term for this is "knowledge in the real." Even if we suspend or even preclude the possibility of their intelligent design by an external subject, that is, the notion of an author, the word "self" seems to impose itself in their description: they are self-organizing, self-regulating, etc. Only they do not have a self; or do they? No doubt, it is the fascination with this question that is in no small part responsible for our current forays into artificial intelligence. Can something lifeless, of our own creation, become like us? And if so, will it prove to have gained the mysterious spark of life, or will it prove that we never had it to begin with?

As a first—very problematic, as we shall soon see—approximation, we could say that authority, for which psychoanalysis proposes the name "transference," as understood by Lacan, is a way to view this knowledge without knowers—it would be better to say "with without," to mark the positive aspect of that which is missing—from within, as something we are primordially entangled in, caught in the web as it were, whereas techno-science is a way to view it from without.

As to the first, consider the following definition of the unconscious, proposed by Lacan in Seminar II:

> The unconscious is the discourse of the other…not the discourse of the abstract other, the other in the dyad, of my correspondent, nor even my slave, it is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce… (pp. 89-90)

We are inscribed in the circuit as a domain of fate, encountering a certain insistence from the past, which we are bound to repeat.

Note that the discourse of the father, the inscription in a chain of tradition, is already presented by Lacan as one way in which we might be inscribed within the network of signifiers, one way in which we might inscribe ourselves in language, one way to subjectify the fact that "everything is always there."

It is precisely Lacan's "functionalization" of language, him viewing it as a network, that allows him later, in Seminar XI, to condense the primary inscription within a network of signifiers—or primary repression—with the formula: a signifier represents the subject to another signifier, which Lacan will never tire of repeating. He was justifiably proud of it—the formula captures the co-emergence of a split subject or a subject of the unconscious and a quasi-totalized network, a language that "almost" functions by itself, and also points to the erotic nature of our inscription within a network, the troubled relation we have with what supports us in the symbolic, the master as a signifier, that incites us to language by its very mysterious nature, suggesting to us that somewhere, behind our backs as it were, lies the knowledge we are missing, the knowledge that would make us whole.

And so Lacan pushes a "functional" view all the way back, to describe the emergence of a speaking subject. At the same time, Lacan is acutely aware of the ways in which electronic, indeed, digital media, which he sees as a realization or materialization of the symbolic alters in a fundamental way our "native" inscription within language.

> [T]he entire movement of the theory converges on a binary symbol, on the fact that anything can be written in terms of 0 and 1. What else is needed before what we call cybernetics can appear in the world? (p. 300)

Here he emerges as an indispensable resource for pondering the technologically realized network, the internet. In his aforementioned lecture on cybernetics and psychoanalysis, Lacan presents the function of the symbolic, as he will do again and again,

with reference to the door. As he puts it in the lecture, what makes the door symbolic is that: "[t]here is an asymmetry between the opening and the closing… the door is a real symbol, the symbol par excellence, that symbol in which man is passing" (p. 302).

We can read this as a condensed version of themes that Lacan will later elaborate upon: our entrance to the symbolic has to do with it being more closed than open, so to speak, the way in which its closing is what makes the idea of an opening alluring. This is also a way to invoke the mythical, or existential dimension of the symbolic, its function as a trial which alters us.[5]

And yet, something in the emerging technology, which makes the game of presence and absence into its prime operator, seems to transfer the symbolic from the terrain of the human sciences, which Lacan calls the science of conjecture, into the realm of technoscience, thereby altering it radically:

> Once it has become possible … to construct an enclosure, that is to say a circuit, so that something passes when it is closed, and doesn't when it is open, that is when the science of the conjuncture passes into the realm of realization of cybernetics. (p. 302)

There is much to be said about this dense paragraph, and the lecture to which it belongs, but for now let us only take from it another possible definition of the network: a network is that which opens by closing and closes by opening. In that respect, the web

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[5] This is one dimension in which Simondon seems to have incorporated the lessons of psychoanalysis, without explicitly avowing it. In his ambitious book on individuation as a process, Simondon proposes what looks like an intensification of the drama of individuation from one domain of being to the next. Human social and psychic life is a higher domain of life in his account, precisely because of the high degree of tension held together in the co-articulation of the social and psychological. The preindividual mutates in human life to the transindividual, an extimate domain (neither transcendent nor imannent), which each individual must confront in a singularly mythical trial. (Simondon 2020, pp. 313-314)

is structured like the unconscious (Lacan, 1978, 143). But it in its strange structure, it also crosses paths with the fraught subject known to social studies as the "masses," or "crowds."

Crowds and Power: The Two Faces of the Masses

The discourse around the term "crowd," which garnered considerable theoretical attention at the turn of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, directed the focus of sociological thought toward the ostensibly threatening and disorganized facets of "the people," the amorphous, mythical apparition of the political subject.

As Giorgio Agamben had pointed out, in many European languages, the word for "people" has a double and often contradictory meaning (1998, p. 176). On the one hand, "the people" denotes the sovereign body of citizens, the collective that forms the polity, as in "we the people." On the other hand, "people" denotes the popular masses, the rabble, the shapeless crowd devoid of political or social order that constitutes a main threat to the moral order. The "people" thus denotes two opposing concepts in terms of legitimacy: on the one hand, the people are the polity from which the political system draws its meaning, the subject in whose name political leaders are able to govern. On the other hand, the people are that hard-to-pinpoint segment of the population that has abandoned the official values of the polity and endangered its stability.

It is worthwhile to note that, at the same time that anthropology began to move away from the image of the "savage" as underdeveloped and wild, and began to study, precisely, the unwritten laws of "primitive people", that something like a collective "savagery," a new barbarism, had made its impression at the very heart and center of modern, urban life, in the figure of the "crowd." The notion of the "crowd" was rejected, yet subtly integrated by

mainstream sociological theory in notions such as Durkheim's effervescences, the "magical" bond of the social (Borch 2012, pp. 70-78). It is as if the "primal," which has disappeared from "undeveloped" cultures, whose citizens are now no longer treated as lawless "savages," has returned at the very heart of modern, urban life. As Fredric Jameson noted long ago, it took the "real abstraction" of custom as an effective medium for organizing the lives of Europeans, for the abstract notion of the social to appear as an object to be studied scientifically (Jameson 1976, p. 12).

Gustave Le Bon became a pioneer in the field when he pointed to what seemed to be psychological traits unique to the crowd: it was not a mere collection of individuals, as Le Bon suggested, fused into a unity with its own, unique psychology (Le Bon 2001, p. 2).When we study the crowd as a subject with its own personality and psychology, we see that there is a unique element of freedom in the crowd, despite, or perhaps because of its threatening nature—the freedom from individuality (ibid, 4). It is perhaps no accident that the very same Le Bon saw himself as the true originator of the mass-energy equivalence, made so consequential by Einstein's equations (Le Bon 1909, Jammer 2009, p. 72). In the psychology of the crowd, what Le Bon detects is profoundly analogous to nuclear fission—the explosive surplus energy derived from the release of the energy invested in holding the unit together. Elias Canetti captured this transformation best in his book *Crowds and Power*:

> There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown… All the distances which men create around themselves are dictated by this fear. They shut themselves in houses which no-one may enter, and only there feel some measure of security… It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. That is the only situation in which the fear changes into its opposite… As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch. Ideally, all are equal there; no distinctions count, not even that of sex. The man pressed against him is

the same as himself. He feels him as he feels himself. Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body. (1978, pp. 15-6)

The crowd frees the person from their individuality, from the partitions erected between their private space and whatever is external and foreign to it. That is the source of both its charm and its horror. But the same goes for the collective. The crowd is distinguished from all other modes of collectivity. It is the potential energy released when the energy invested in containing the social unit erupts. Canetti begins his analysis by distinguishing between the "open crowd" and the "closed crowd," even though it might be more accurate to term them the "opening crowd" and the "closing crowd." The former's intention is set on removing boundaries, while the latter aims to erect and preserve them:

> The natural crowd is the open crowd; there are no limits whatever to its growth; it does not recognize houses, doors or locks and those who shut themselves in are suspect… In its spontaneous form it is a sensitive thing. The openness which enables it to grow is, at the same time, its danger… The closed crowd renounces growth and puts the stress on permanence… It establishes itself by accepting its limitation. It creates a space for itself which it will fill. This space can be compared to a vessel into which liquid is being poured and whose capacity is known. The entrances to this space are limited in number, and only these entrances can be used; the boundary is respected whether it consists of stone, of solid wall, or of some special act of acceptance, or entrance fee. (Ibid., pp. 16-17)

Canetti here distinguishes between two orders of social organization. The natural order is that of the open crowd, and therefore, its domestication, in the form of the closed crowd, can only be partial. Of course, the appeal of the open crowd, which according to Canetti is the desire to overcome the barriers at the foundation of social life, raises questions about the precedence of this kind of organization: without boundaries and barriers, what is

there for it to open or remove? Since the open crowd is described as a kind of anti-cultural drive, an impulse to remove the partitions put up by culture, it presupposes the existence of these partitions. What Cannetti puts forth here is a notion of pre-individual social substance, which predates any individuated subject by definition, the primordial, mythological "soup" from which individuation arises and to which it returns (even if such a primordial ground is retroactively projected by the individual).

Perhaps this is why for Freud, the distinction between the crowd and the organized group, a distinction analogous to Canetti's open and closed crowds, is smaller than we would like to imagine. In his essay on group psychology, Freud disputes the sharpness of the distinction between the wild, or open, and the civilized crowds: "groups of the first kind stand in the same sort of relation to those of the second as a high but choppy sea to a ground swell" (Freud 1949, p. 26).

What Canetti likens to a dynamic, formless liquid and the receptacle that aims to contain it, Freud compares to another vast liquid mass—the ocean. The formations of crowds are like waves breaking on the beach; although it is their visible power that makes an impression on the onlookers, this power is only a pale expression of their underlying power, the power of the deep currents—the permanent if elusive "substance" of the social order. As if he had intuited the mass-energy equivalence implied in mass psychology, where other observers see disorder, Freud sees an expression of the most primordial elements of order. What explodes in the crowd is the same power that, under normal conditions, holds the social unit together.

Freud makes an illuminating remark in this context in his essay about group psychology. Not only are the members of the group themselves not released from inhibitions, their inhibitions are in fact what make them a group (Freud, Group Psychology, pp. 91-2). The crowd, in contrast to its common reputation, is not deprived of restraint; on the contrary, it becomes a crowd because

of its collective inhibitions. Only the leader is free of restraint; the crowd is only following his commands. We will recall that Freud sees the group as the reincarnation of the prehistoric "primal horde," that is to say, the early—or primordial—structure of society. The paradox of our era is that this deep underlying reality, the primal structure of control, becomes invisible precisely because it is no longer underlying—it is out in the open for all to see and, as such, everyone looks past it. The changes that have taken places in the media, in the lines demarcating the private and public spaces, in the boundaries between the legitimate and the obscene, have brought this foundational element to the surface: the "liberation" brought about by the transgressive leader is in fact testimony of ongoing subjugation. The formula is: "the more we are prohibited, the more he is allowed."

This is also why, where others see a leaderless mass, Freud sees an expression of a deep yearning for the worst kind of leader, a leader in the image of the primal father Freud outlined in *Totem and Taboo*. Even the "spontaneous," "ephemeral" crowd is not really without leadership. Quite the contrary. The unique identification mechanism Freud describes in his essay, explains the complex relationship between the masses and the liberated leader—a leader unfettered by inhibition. Freud describes identification with the transgressive leader as a process by which "the individual gives up his ego ideal and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader" (ibid., p. 102). In other words, the leader directly embodies the "commonness" of the masses, their (at least potential) lack of boundaries formed through the leader's uninhibited behavior. This behavior, in turn, leads the crowd to live up to the transgressiveness attributed to it through the power of "suggestion," the Freudian equivalent of Tarde's "imitation" (ibid, pp. 99-100). What Canetti, and others like him, see as spontaneous and leaderless manifestations, Freud perceives in terms of a complex mechanism of identification, driven by the transgressive elements of the masses. He sees evidence of this in

the contrary phenomenon—the panic that seizes a truly leaderless crowd, which ultimately leads to its dispersion (ibid, pp. 45-6). A rallying crowd, even one that is wild and riled up, according to Freud, is always under some form of leadership, even if it is but an idea of leadership (the way that Jesus is the leader of the Church).

Freud does not pass up the opportunity to remind his readers of the fragility of their independence, and of the arrogance of their self-image as individuals who are distinct from the crowd, protected behind ironclad doors and steeped in self-consciousness. Nevertheless, Freud also admits that the same primeval human characteristic that serves as the focal point of his essay—the elimination of the self in favor of an uninhibited leader—is equally characteristic of the transient crowd. The crowd that Canetti terms "open," is for Freud only a surface manifestation of primordial structures of control. However, it is a temporary, fleeting manifestation. It would appear, in light of this fundamental contradiction, that a profound transformation must take place in the transition from the transient to the permanent crowd, a transition that allows for the emergence of an open-closed crowd, a stable or semi-stable transgressive group. This transformation, the emergence of stable masses bearing the characteristics of the transient, as well as the global nature of the phenomenon, calls for an examination of the changes that have taken place in the public arena, and in particular, the changes in the media landscape.

Opening Medium, Closing Medium: The Crowd between Television and the Internet

While Canetti's distinction between two kinds of crowds may not be entirely convincing with respect to its original object, it might be useful in describing the difference between types of media. Indeed, in the spirit of Canetti's distinction between open and closed crowds, Noam Yuran offers a distinction between television and the internet in terms of their social significance.

Television, argues Yuran, drawing on Durkheim, is a sacred space, because it splits humanity into two: those who are on television, and those who can only watch it from the outside. Crossing this boundary constitutes a dramatic transformation, akin to crossing the line between the sacred and the profane. One may say that being on television is a way to differentiate and extricate oneself from the anonymous crowd of television viewers. The internet, on the other hand, does not offer this same kind of polarized division of reality. In Yuran's words, "the spatial structure of the Internet does not allow for holiness, because the web does not divide reality into two. Unlike television, the Internet does not provide the possibility of distinguishing the inside from the outside" (Yuran 2019, p. 70).

Yuran proposes a media-oriented analysis of a difference expressed in everyday speech, the fact that, unlike television, you can never be "on the Internet." Unlike a broadcast, a term containing the idea that "everyone" is watching the same thing at the same time, a kind of tribal gathering at the bonfire, one might say, the internet does not have a center from which content is broadcast and to which our collective gaze is turned; in the same way, the internet does not guarantee a space of shared meaning. On the other hand, it is also impossible to be completely off the internet. In other words, the internet appears to be the medium of rumors. The rumor is an archaic model of viral propagation, which online replaces the centralized model of the broadcast. As Mladen Dolar explains, rumors are able to spread wildly due to the fact that there is no need to internalize them: we do not have to believe the rumor in order to pass it on. We can even explicitly disbelieve it and still spread it ("I don't believe it of course, but I heard that…") (Dolar 2021, pp. 144-5).

There is another sense in which gossip serves as a "primal" social substance: sharing a piece of gossip is an old modality of forging intimate bonds, of enacting the minimal structure of society, as a bond between two to the exclusion of a third party.

This excluded third is a prototypical figure of the big other as the sustainer of the public sphere, an innocent agent supposed to believe, the agent for the sake of which we "keep up appearances" in public. The internet emerges as a public forum for intimate transgression.

And so, the internal logic of the rumor also defines our relationship with the medium: we hear about what happens online, whether we want to or not. Even if we are not active online ourselves, our friends' friends' friends are; even if not, we will still hear about it on television.

At this point it is useful to go back to Canetti's definition, not as a distinction between two kinds of crowds, but as a second-order distinction between two means of communication within the crowd. Television is a closed medium, or rather a closing medium, one that frames and differentiates between outside and inside. The internet, on the other hand, is an open medium, or rather an opening medium; that is to say, the internet erodes the distinction between the open crowd and the closed crowd.

Canetti's original terminology was intended to define the erosion of the distance between the private and the public in an open crowd, Freud's unstable crowd, on the point of discovering the wondrous phenomenon of the loss of the ego. Translating Canetti's thought process to means of communication allows us to add nuance to his thesis regarding the degradation of the border between the private and the public: what is eroded is not the border between the private and the public, but the border between a complete elimination of the border, the terrifying liberated mass, and a hunkering down within the border. This erosion may offer a preliminary explanation for the emergence of the semi-permanent "open" crowd, a phenomenon that various thinkers thought necessarily transient, while at the same time suggesting why such a crowd fails to provide the satisfaction of the transient open crowd.

Media Reflectivity and the Plurality of Social Media

It is a commonplace observation that a medium becomes what it is, so to speak, reaching its self-reflectivity, with the emergence of a new medium. The camera, precisely by being a superior technology, better equipped to capture reality, made painting aware of itself as a medium, propelling painting into what we today call modernism, the exploration of its means of expression: of color, shape, etc. Along similar lines, we have seen how the internet reveals to us what broadcast was—it was essentially a medium drawing a sharp, ontological line between being in it, say being on television, and watching it from outside. This is why its self-reflective moment is to be found in reality TV, shows exploring what it is to be on TV, exploring the unique media effect of television.

The network, on the contrary, has no proper inside, nor a proper outside. Its lack of interiority is made clear when we consider, for instance, that the mark of a true internet celebrity, or event, is precisely its spilling over into old media, being reported about in television and newspapers, what many today call "legacy media," and which we predominantly consume—if at all—via the internet. With Lacan we might say—to be in the circuit, is to be outside of it, and vice versa.

The internet as a medium is organized around this very problematic. We might say that both platforms and algorithms, say, the machinery of the internet, and its users, are inescapably asking themselves what is it to be in a network—they are asking this in their practice of course, not explicitly. The reason why there must be social networks in the plural is that each platform proposes a specific answer to this paradoxical being. Certainly, social networks are business ventures, aiming to make a profit. But in order to do so, they need to offer a new way of being in the network. And while what distinguishes one social network from the other is precisely their unique answer to that question, they all share this one feature of oscillation: we oscillate between

being outside of them, incapable of getting in, or inside, incapable of getting out. Social networks' infamous addictive character has everything to do with this erotic dimension. Anyone who has ever dipped their toes, so to speak, into a new social network can attest to this experience: at first, one is seduced, and repelled, precisely by the experience of being an outsider. There are unwritten rules—some social, some technical—that make it hard to become an insider. Other people will tell you—you only get it once you have so many followers (tweeter), or once you have given this much opportunity for the algorithm to study your embarrassing, unconscious preferences (TikTok). After a certain, imperceptible threshold is crossed, you have not arrived, but you are nonetheless caught. All of a sudden, it is hard to get out.

One simple way in which TV reveals itself as a medium is when we turn it on in the background—the content is clearly irrelevant, and it is the background presence that is enjoyed. Can one turn on the internet in the background? Clearly not, which goes to show that we can also never turn it off. This feature of the web, always lurking in the background, never quite there, is incarnated by the new social type produced by the internet—the creep.

If, as Foucault teaches us, the figure of the sinner mutated, in disciplinary societies, in the figure of the pervert, then certainly in our age the pervert has mutated into the creep, lurking in the background. Lurking is the way passive spectators on social networks—such as myself—are described, their suspected presence creeping everybody out. Those who cannot seem to manage to make an entrance, no doubt out of fear of creeping everybody out, serve the function of making the strange absent presence of the network appear.

The political polarization of internet culture between right wing trolls who get a kick out of offending the sensibilities of progressives who in their turn get a kick out being outraged by the trolls transgressivity (Nagle 2017) expresses, at the level of content, the medium's formal truth. It is precisely because of the

felt absence of a solid symbolic space in the sense developed by Arendt that social boundaries must be constantly transgressed and regimented. Paradoxically, we feel the pressure of the unwritten law ever more acutely, ever more confusing, the more we try to exorcise it and render it explicit.

Can these features of the network illuminate the new type of authoritarianism everywhere on the rise? As an empirical statement of fact, new authoritarian leaders seem to be masters of new media. Trump was the president of Twitter, and anyone who follows Israeli politics cannot fail to note that Netanyahu has now become the TikTok candidate, in the process of rising again to power. Should this be written off as an effective propaganda, a more effective manipulation of the medium?

The hypothesis I have begun to advance in this paper suggests a more substantive relation here. What is unique about the charisma of such figures of power, is the way they lie by means of an act of exposure. We are fascinated by their very capacity to transgress the unwritten law. In this sense, the conspiracy theorists who support them are closer to the truth than outside observers: their dear leaders do indeed uncover a secret power that lurks in the background, out of sight, only that power has no center, no author, and no substance until it is transgressed.

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