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BETWEEN POWER AND REBELLION: RETHINKING AUTHORITY

Entre poder e rebelião: repensar a autoridade
Resumo

Um dos principais objectivos deste escrito é dissociar e desembaraçar os conceitos de autoridade e poder à luz das insurreiçãos medievais e lutas na ciudade de Milão e, além disso, compreender na dimensão ambivalente e ambígua da autoridade. Ao analisar estes fatos históricos, vou tentar mostrar que a autoridade não pertence sempre ou necessariamente ao governo ou que somente pode ser um instrumento deste. De fato, é mais interessante explorar o outro lado desta questão: como o uso da autoridade pôde devenir um instrumento de contrapoder. Neste sentido, vou examinar como e porquê algumas rebeliões contestaram o poder não apenas combatendo a autoridade oficial mas reivindicando uma alternativa. Ou seja, como e porquê a categoria de autoridade pôde tornarse uma fonte de legitimidade da insurreição.
Palavras-chave: autoridade; poder; rebelião.
Authors: Santo Ambrósio; Hannah Arendt.

Abstract

One of the main goals of this paper is to dissociate and disentangle the concepts of power and authority in light of the late medieval insurrections and fights in the *commune* of Milan and, then, to comprehend the ambivalent and ambiguous dimension of authority. Analyzing these historical events, I will try to show that authority does not always or necessarily belong to the government, nor can it only be an instrument of this one. In fact, it is more interesting to explore the other side of this question: how the usage of authority could become an instrument of counter-power. In this sense, I will examine how and why some rebellions challenged the power basing their claims not only on an attack against the official authority but vindicating an alternative one. That is, how and why the category of authority could turn into the source of legitimacy for insurrection.

Keywords: Authority; power; rebellion.

Authors: Saint Ambrose; Hannah Arendt.

The problem of authority

In recent times, the concept of authority has increasingly been considered as tantamount to power and even to authoritarianism. The question of power has attracted so much attention in recent decades that it has overshadowed other issues, such as the question of authority and its political, philosophical and historical specificity[1]. In the past authority carried a certain dimension that has been obliterated and such oblivion has impoverished the current political vocabulary and the way we understand politics. The spread of the confusion between power and authority favoured a tendency to observe and interpret political phenomena exclusively from the language and frame of power that I intend to put into question in this text.

I do not have time in these pages to display in depth what and how authority has been understood in the past[2]. As with many other words, the history of this concept is full of important semantic changes, distortions, interpretations, confusions, contradictions and political appropriations. In fact, author-

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[1] I have proposed a rereading of the concept of authority in Straehle, E., «Algunas claves para una relectura de la autoridad», *Las torres de Lucca. Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política,* 7 (2015) 171-207.

[2] Some books have provided a historical outline of the concept of authority. For example, Lincoln, B., *Authority: construction and corrosion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994; Mendel, G., *Une histoire de l'autorité: permanences et variations*, La Découverte, Paris 2002; Preterossi, G., *Autoridad*, Nueva Visión, Buenos Aires 2003; Furedi, F. *Authority: a Sociological History*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2013.

ity has often been a politicized and instrumentalized concept, narrowly interwoven with the corresponding political conflicts and interests. On the other hand, institutions of power have often been tempted and have attempted to present themselves also as institutions of authority. It is, therefore, very complicated or almost impossible to clearly dissociate or disentangle the concepts power and authority.

As is well known, the origin of this distinction is to be found in the Ancient Roman Republic. In those times, the *potestas* needed the support and the cooperation of the *auctoritas*[3]. While power was officially exerted by the magistracy of the consuls (in principle on behalf of the people), the siege of *auctoritas* was situated at the institution of Senate. This institution, whose name is etymologically connected to the words «senescence» and «senior», was widely considered as the accredited and respected voice of tradition. The *auctoritas* revealed that the power had to always foster an approach with the other parts of the republic. The spirit of the republic lied in this agreement between its different sections and collectives (only when there was such agreement the *res publica* was truly *publica*) and authority was the power that could or could not authorize the acts or even the institution of power.

Ideally speaking, in those times authority was a kind of different power which did not need to resort to violence. Its most important feature was that, unlike power, authority did not depend on itself but on others. According to the philosopher Hannah Arendt, what defines authority is that it always demands obedience but also precludes the use of external means of coercion or violence[4]. Unlike power, this obedience cannot be forced or imposed and must be allowed or accepted. But, therefore, other people can also deny or reject authority. Authority stands ultimately on the recognition of other people and in fact encompasses a wide range of different factors such as prestige, respect, recognition, legitimacy, deference, ascendancy, trust, influence, consent, wisdom and

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[3] Good works about the Roman concept of *auctoritas* can be found in MAGDELAIN, A., *Jus imperium Auctoritas: études de droit romain*, École française de Rome, Rome 1990; DOMINGO, R., *Auctoritas*, Ariel, Barcelone 1999; and CLEMENTE, A. I., *La auctoritas romana*, Dykinson, Madrid 2014. See also MOATTI, C., *La raison de Rome: naissance de l'esprit critique à la fin de la République* (II-I siècle avant Jésus-Christ), Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1997.

[4] ARENDT, H., «What is Authority?», in *Between Past and Future: eight exercises in political thought*, Penguin, New York 2006, p. 93. According to the historian Karl Galinsky, «Genuine *auctoritas* is based on this kind of mutuality and cannot be mandated (…). *Auctoritas* is something that is granted not by statute but by the esteem of one's fellow citizens. It is acquired less by inheritance, although belonging to an influential family or group is accompanied by some degree of *auctoritas,* than by an individual's superior record of judgment and achievement», GALINSKY, K., *Augustan culture: an interpretative introduction*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1996, p. 14.

so on. It is important to note that at that time *auctoritas* was mainly seen as a positive concept, one which was etymologically connected to words such as *augere* (which originally means «to promote, to increase, to make something grow or to set in motion»), *auctor*, *augurare* or *augustus*. For this reason, this last word was chosen for its meaning and its linguistic connection with the concept of *auctoritas* as the name of the first Roman emperor, Augustus[5].

The importance of this separation between power and authority can be seen in the classical and well-known sentence «*Cum potestas in populo, auctoritas in senatu sit*» («while the power resides in the people, authority rests with the Senate»)[6]. According to this Roman meaning, authority was actually an ambivalent and ambiguous concept; it was a kind of power which could strengthen or undermine a government's power and one of its main functions was to protect the republic from the misuse of power, guaranteeing the permanence and the stability of the Roman foundation. An act of *potestas* without the endorsement of the *auctoritas* of the Senate was always regarded as a perilous risk, because it could cause the opposition and indignation of the Senate or the citizenry. In this sense, the German historian Theodor Mommsen commented that authority was more than a piece of advice but less than a command; it was a piece of advice which could not be safely ignored[7]. An act of power not endowed with authority could be interpreted by the people as an arbitrary, despotic or tyrannical act that could put at risk the survival of Republic's spirit. Thus, the citizenry could feel legitimated to oppose or disobey the decisions taken by this power. Authority, in this sense, was like a different kind of power, acting as a sort of symbolic, spiritual, validating or legitimating force.

Without authority, power was widely seen as a naked or despotic power devoid of authority and legitimacy. Therefore, authority appears to be an external instance which reveals the indigent character and the ineradicable incompleteness of power. A power without authority, sustained only on itself or on the means of violence, is insufficient and it is condemned to be disobeyed, contested, challenged and finally overthrown in the future. Insofar as it aims to present itself as legitimate and intends to avoid conflicts, power cannot withdraw into itself and requires the endowment of authority.

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[5] For this question, see MACKAY, C. S., *The Breakdown of Roman Republic: from Oligarchy to Empire*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2009; and SYME, R. *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988.

[6] CICERO, M. T., *De legibus*, 3, 28.

[7] MOMMSEN, T. *Römisches Staatsrecht*, S. Hirzel, Leipzig 1888, pp. 1034-1039.

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This interpretation of authority survived the fall of Rome and was present during the Middle Ages[8]. In that era the acknowledged site of authority (although actually not the only one), was the Catholic Church and its most important representative was the Pope of Rome[9]. The Popes appealed repeatedly to the so-called Gelasian doctrine of the two Powers of Swords, developed by the Pope Gelasius I in the letter *Duo sunt* (written in 494). This doctrine proclaimed the difference between the *potestas*, the secular temporal word, and the *auctoritas*, the priestly spiritual one, confirming in this way the indigent and dependent character of power.

Numerous medieval theologians and thinkers held more or less the same view, among them such prestigious figures as John of Salisbury or Thomas Aquinas. The well-known adage of the archbishop Isidore of Seville – «*rex eris si recte facies, si non facias non eris*» («you will be a king, if you act rightly; if you do not, you will not») – was recurrently quoted to legitimize the so-called *ius resistentiae*, the right to resist the tyrant, during the Middle Ages and still at the beginning of modern times[10]. A government without this support of authority was considered a government against natural law and against the spirit of the Christian religion. For this reason, it deserved to be overthrown. In connection to this the historian Aron Gurevich has written the following lines:

> Nowhere in the Middle Ages can we find any trace of a special state law: the ruler must uphold the existing law and act in accordance with it (…). Intentional transgression of the law by the ruler deprives him of the legal bases of his power, and liberates the subjects from their oath to him. The subjects are also called upon to uphold the law even against the ruler if he has broken it. The obli-

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[8] For this question, see Muldoon, J., «*Auctoritas, potestas* and world order», in R. Figueira (ed.), *Plenitude of power: the Doctrines and Exercise of Authority in the Middle Ages: Essays in Memory of Robert Louis Benson*, Ashgate, Burlington 2006, pp. 125-139; Pennington, K., *The Prince and the Law, 1200-1600*, University California Press, Berkeley 1993; Ullmann, W., *Principles of Government and Politics in the middle Ages*, Methuen, London 1974; and Weckmann, L., *El pensamiento politico medieval y los orígenes del derecho internacinal*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico 1993.

[9] As is known, thinkers such as Marsilius of Padua or William of Ockham dared to challenge the papal authority or, rather, his aspiration to the *plenitudo potestatis*. Another important (and forgotten) figure is the conciliarist theologian John of Segovia.

[10] The best studies on medieval protest are: Hilton, R., *Bond men made free: medieval peasant movements and the English rising of 1381*, Methuen, London 1977; Mollat, M. – Wolff, Ph., *Les Révolutions populaires en Europe aux XIVe et XVe siècles*, Flammarion, Paris 1993; and Cohn, S. K., *Lust for Liberty: the politics of social revolt in medieval Revolt, 1200-1425*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2008.

gation to uphold the law does not derive from any treaty or agreement but from the concept of the universal power of the law to which all men are subject[11].

It is interesting to observe the continuity, so to speak, of this dimension existing in the Roman *auctoritas* and how, many centuries later, some protests, insurrections and rebellions appealed explicitly or implicitly to the Roman meaning of republic and authority, particularly in medieval Italy; for instance, in the revolt headed by Cola di Rienzo in Rome in 1347, which pretended to restore the ancient Roman Republic[12]. Furthermore, as the historian Edward Peters noted, it has to be underlined that not only a *rex iniquus* or *tyrannus*, a criminal or tyrannical ruler, could be deposed, but also a *rex inutilis*, a useless or inadequate ruler, because of his negligence (*negligentia*), his idleness (*desidia*) or his pusillanimity[13]. In these cases, a king was not deprived of his royal dignity but only of the governance of the realm. The lost of authority was not only related to the field of religion and, even during the Middle Ages, it could be associated with political causes.

Thus, authority proved above all that power could not be exerted exclusively on its own and could not be based solely on itself. So to speak, the historical dissociation between power and authority showed that power in itself was incomplete, insufficient, limited and not absolute. By definition, power always necessitated an external (and sometimes moral, spiritual or transcendent but also popular) instance or force in order to be legitimated, acknowledged or *authorized* («authorization» being a word etymologically linked with authority). In this sense, it is possible to say that in those times power could never be truly sovereign[14]. Therefore, medieval rebellions could challenge established power by claiming their own authority above and beyond mere power. In connection to this, it is possible to say that alongside the struggle for power there was a no less important struggle for authority. In fact, both dimensions were closely interconnected. And the historical attempts to achieve a *plenitudo potestatis* (a complete or absolute power) could be contested and in the long run tended to end in failure.

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[11] Gurevich, A. J., *Categories of medieval culture*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1985, p. 168.

[12] Musto, R. L., *Apocalypse in Rome. Cola di Rienzo and the Politics of the New Age*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2003.

[13] Peters, E., *Limits of thought and power in medieval Europe*, Ashgate, Burlington 2001. He focuses this question on the interesting figure of the king Sancho II of Portugal (1223-1248).

[14] The concept of sovereignty was developed by Jean Bodin much later, in *The Six Books of the Republic* (1576).

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Saint Ambrose of Milan, a sacred figure of authority (and counter--authority)

The history of the medieval city of Milan provides a good example of the same kinds of conflicts and how the established governments of this city repeatedly attempted to absorb, dominate or even instrumentalize the dimension of authority. First of all, I must briefly summarize the city's eventful history[15].

Until the 11th Century, Milan was one of the most important cities in northern Italy and was dominated by the figure of the archbishop, who was both the political and religious master of the city. Due to political movements that strove to build a secular and republican government, in 1117 Milan evaded the rule of the archbishop and could become a municipality. Later, this *commune* took part in the Lombard League and defied the power of the German Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa, who occupied, plundered and devastated the city in 1162[16]. During this period Milan was governed by republican laws and decided to build the Palazzo della Ragione as a seat for its political self-rule.

Milan's importance and influence grew in the 13th Century and, after the battle of Desio, in 1277 the archbishop Ottone Visconti seized power, who quickly suppressed the *commune* system. Milan, like many other northern Italian cities, went the way of one-family rule and abandoned the republican model. The Visconti ushered in a period of glory and wealth and they expanded their governance to the surrounding cities and territories: among others, Bergamo, Novara, Cremona, Como, Lodi, Piacenza and Brescia. At this time, Emperor Wenceslas (1376-1400) confirmed the age of prosperity and splendour of Milan and raised the city to the dignity of a duchy one hundred years later, in 1395.

Recent research made by the historian Jane Black shows that not only did the Visconti family try to abolish the republican model of government[17]. In addition, they attempted to embrace the law and language of the Pope and the Emperor in order to legitimate their majesty, their irrevocable supremacy and their absolute superiority to the other subjects of the city. The Visconti wanted to exert plenitude of power (*plenitudo potestatis*) and, consequently,

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[15] A good introduction to the history of Milan can be found in GAMBERINI, A. (ed.), *A Companion to Late Medieval and Early Modern Milan: the distinctive features of an Italian State*, Brill, Boston 2015. See also CENGARLE, F., *Immagine di potere e prassi di governo: la politica feudale di Filippo Maria Visconti*, Viella, Rome 2006.

[16] See RACCAGNI, G., *The Lombard League (1164-1225)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

[17] BLACK, J., *Absolutism in Renaissance Milan: plenitude of power under the Visconti and the Sforza, 1329-1535,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

they asserted that they were *legibus solutus*; i.e., they declared that they were completely exempt from the law. In this sense, they also endeavour to abolish and neutralize the ancient dimension of authority, rejecting the positions that claimed that every kind of power had to be a *potestas ordinata*, a limited and restricted power.

However, the Visconti themselves were aware of the risks of this kind of attempts, which were not supported by any historical or legal tradition. For this reason, they cautioned that plenitude of power should not be used habitually or flagrantly. Higher laws could be challenged, but only in the name of a good, fair or noble cause. Otherwise, it would be imprudent, dangerous and damaging for their own purposes. Arbitrary acts had to be avoided for fear of provoking serious discord and the Visconti pretended to maintain in some way the republican spirit and its ancient institutions, because they did not want to put at risk their authority and prestige. In any case, this kind of cautions did not avoid that many of their decisions were seen as partial and unfair by a large part of the population. Their justification was seen as either weak or absent and popular resistance to plenitude of power was not eliminated. In 1302, for instance, the Visconti were temporarily sacked from Milan by a revolt guided by Guido della Torre and in 1340 they suffered the conspiracy of the Pusterla. These and other events, such as the assassination of the duke Giovanni Maria Visconti in 1412, evidenced the actual fragility and the instability of their government[18].

The last duke, Filippo Maria Visconti, died without male children in 1447 and, following the end of the Visconti family, the old republic was restored and enacted, finally no more than for a period of only three years. This republic was named the Ambrosian Republic in honour of Saint Ambrose (339-397), the popular patron saint of the city of Milan and its most influential bishop, one of the most important figures of the early Christianity and of the late Roman Empire. He was one of the original doctors of the Church and he was acknowledged and revered due to his wisdom, fearlessness and personal charisma. Besides, he was also very popular as a symbol of moral independence and courage because he dared to defy and excommunicate the Roman emperor Theodosius I (379-395) for the massacre of 7.000 people at Thessalonica in 390. In part, Saint Ambrose was a prominent and exemplary figure of authority pre-

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[18] See GRILLO, P. «The long life of the Popolo of Milan. Revolts against the Visconti in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries», in S. K. COHN – F. RICCIARDELLI (eds.), *The Culture of Violence in Renaissance Italy*, Le Lettere, Florence 2012, pp. 225-240.

cisely due to his confrontations and victories against the imperial and secular power. This defiant attitude would be imitated many centuries later by many people and movements which claimed his memory and deeds.

The prominence of the figure of Saint Ambrose was so high that his memory became indispensable in all political movements in the medieval Milan in order to reinvigorate its own authority[19]. At that time, as a patron saint of the city, his historical example was constantly invoked and became one of the sources of authority of the official power. However, his memory, his deeds and his words were also used as the source and instrument of counter-power. Though counter-power movements may have fought different enemies and struggled for different goals and values, all inevitably said and claimed Saint Ambrose inspired their fight. To appeal to the saint was to transfer his moral authority to the own cause and party. Without this authority, it seemed to be impossible to launch a successful political initiative.

As the historian Patrick Boucheron has showed[20], Saint Ambrose, as *defensor civitatis* and guardian of the *ambrosiana libertate*, was situated as the authority which inspired and legitimized the goals of the republican party that in the 12th century defied the rule of the archbishop; he played the same role for the Visconti family one hundred years later, in this case in order to abolish the republican administration and to establish a personal, dynastical and antidemocratic government; finally, he fulfilled the same function in order to protect the values of the *commune* and to restore the ancient republic in 1447. For more than three centuries he was an indispensable reference point, respectively employed to challenge ecclesiastical, republican and monarchical governments (and later, obviously, to legitimate these same governments). His memory could inspire and represent both parties, the popular (*the popolari*) and the aristocratic; so to speak, he was so important that he could be an authority and a counter-authority at the same time.

Thus, to appeal to the authority of Saint Ambrose was indispensable for every political movement in the medieval Milan. I have to add that this indispensability was necessarily related to the flexibility of its meaning and the con-

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[19] There was one exception, the period between 1450 and 1466, immediately after the fall of the Ambrosian republic.

[20] Boucheron, P., «Palimpsestes Ambrosiens: la commune, la libérté et le saint patron», in P. Chastang (dir.), *Le passé à l'épreuve du présent. Appropriations et usages du passé du Moyen Âge à la Renaissance*, PUPS, Paris 2008. See also P. Boucheron – S. Gioanni (dir.), *La mémoire d'Ambroise de Milan. Usages politiques d'une autorité patristique en Italie (V*e-*XVIII*e *siècle),* Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 2015.

tent of its message[21]. Saint Ambrose did not represent a closed message but an open and moral one, which could be interpreted and altered in many different ways. In different times and contexts, each of these movements could project their own claims and goals to the revered Saint Ambrose, who appeared as a contradictory and complex figure. Indeed, he could play this important political role precisely because of his vagueness; his incapacity to represent anything beyond general questions and values (such as the *libertas*), which were widely accepted and shared by the citizens. This vagueness was inevitable in the context of the Middle Ages. The French theologian Alain de Lille (1128-1203), in a saying which was to become proverbial, stated for instance that «the authority has a wax nose which can be pushed in all directions»[22]. Therefore, each party was quite free to interpret and redefine the political meaning of the figure of Saint Ambrose, to adapt and distort it for their own purposes. In fact, in many cases these parties merely wished to appropriate and instrumentalize the figure and reputation of the saint patron.

In this sense, the usage of authority was not incompatible with the possibility of a revolt, but could also become a political instrument to denounce the government's absence of authority and to claim for a better one. To appeal to the authority of Saint Ambrose was a rhetorical and political strategy in order to challenge the established power and to declare its lack of authority[23]. Obviously, that is only one part of the question, because authority could also become an instrument of power in order to hide its arbitrariness and to legitimate its decisions. Authority has always been a dimension in dispute.

Hence some important conclusions can be drawn from the medieval Milan. Saint Ambrose had to appear as the source of inspiration for the discourses of power, but also for the claims or vindications of every movement that intended

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[21] Good works about the relationship between *memory* and *authority* in Saint Ambrose can be found in Boucheron, P., «La mémoire disputée: le souvenir de Saint Ambroise, enjeu des luttes politiques à Milan au XVe siècle», in *Memoria, communitas, civitas*, 55 (2003) 201-221; and Grillo, P., «*Sant'Ambrogio e la memoria della Milano tardo-imperiale durante l'età comunale*», in P. Boucheron – S. Gioanni (dir.), *La mémoire d'Ambroise de Milan. Usages politiques d'une autorité patristique en Italie (Ve-XVIIIe siècle)*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 2015, pp. 473-482. See also Carruthers, M., *The Book of Memory: a Study of Memory in medieval Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992; and Geary, P. J., *Phantoms of Remembrance. Memory and Oblivion at the End of the first Millennium*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1994.

[22] Quoted by Le Goff, J., *Medieval Civilization 400-1500*, Blackwell, Oxford 1988, p. 324.

[23] It is interesting to note that Larry Scanlon suggested in his research on the Chaucerian tradition that the figures of authority can be viewed as strategies of empowerment and appropriation. Scanlon, L., *Narrative, Authority and Power: the medieval exemplum and the Chaucerian tradition*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1994.

to challenge the government, becoming thus a kind of counter-power. Both governments and rebellions had to be supported by some kind of authority and could not act without this support. But this authority, as explained above, could be simply a different reading or interpretation of the official authority (which derived ultimately from a book as long, as heterogeneous and as full of contradictions and ambiguities as the Bible). Based on factors such as the recognition and not only on the passive obedience and submission of the people, the authority was always fragile and potentially in dispute. Thus, the rulers wished and tried but were never able to monopolize the dimension of authority, which by definition is *inappropriable* by anyone, because it is based on a recognition that ultimately depends on the acceptance or consent of others. Each citizen or group, therefore, could call the government's authority into question.

It is for this reason that the Visconti's search for the absolute power failed. They were afraid of acting despotically and they were aware that it was advisable to use plenitude of power only cautiously and prudently. They admitted implicitly that power can never be supreme, absolute, indivisible and indisputable; that power can never be based only on itself. Theoretically, the Visconti possessed a plenitude of power; *de facto*, that was no more than a legal fiction and they always were forced to consider the potential consequences of arbitrary use of power. Paradoxically, it was the very attempt to abolish and suppress the dimension of authority what precisely revealed its existence.

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