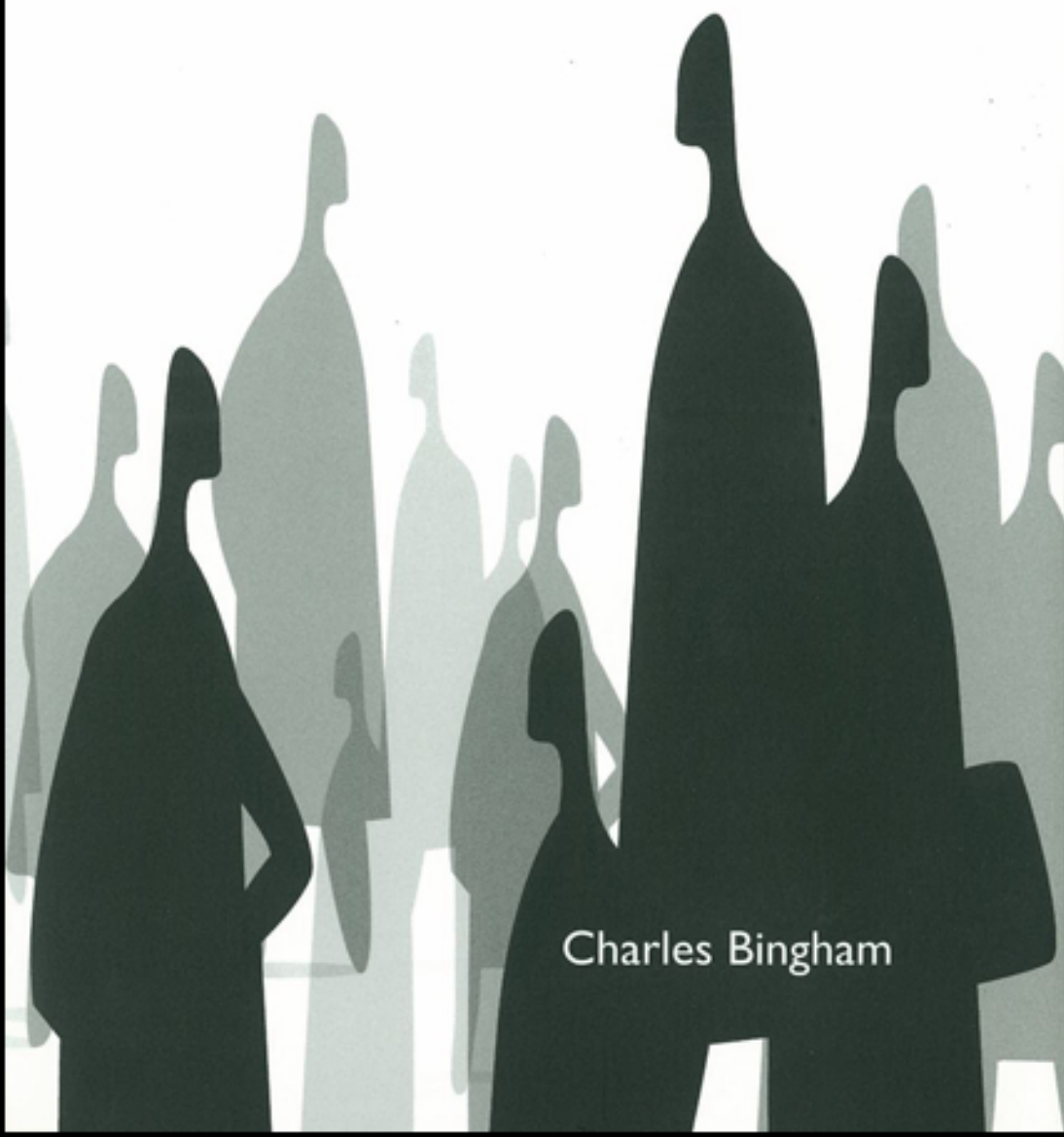


Authority Is Relational

Rethinking Educational Empowerment



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Rethinking Educational Empowerment

CHARLES BINGHAM

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Introduction

Authority Is Relational

I have been a university professor for quite a few years now. I still can't let my students out of class early. I continue to keep them in class until the last scheduled minute, but that is not necessarily what I *want* to be doing. Why do I say that I "still" cannot let them out early? Because I hope to let them out early some day. I would truly like to let them out early, but I have an aversion to doing so.

It is not hard to pinpoint my aversion. It comes from the years prior to my role as a university professor, years during which I taught in high school and junior high school classrooms. My experience as a teacher during these early years was marked, as I assume many school-teachers' experience has been, by an insistence on watching the clock, and by making every minute count. Authority figures at schools where I worked would insist on timeliness. Principals and assistant principals would remind us teachers to use every minute of class time. Messages such as, "Teachers, do not let your students into the halls until the bell has rung," could be heard daily over school loudspeakers.

In addition to being told to keep our students busy for every minute of each class, we were also told to keep ourselves busy until the last minute of the school day. We were warned, during faculty meetings, not to leave the school premises until the last school bell sounded. At one school where I worked, the windows of the principal's office looked out, strategically, onto the faculty parking lot. The principal could easily tell whose car was gone before three o'clock and whose was not. This principal would give the whole faculty stern warnings when the parking lot was beginning to look "too empty" at the end of the school day.

I once asked a colleague at my university if he has the same hesitance to letting students out of class early. To my surprise, he told me that he lets his students out of class early if the class discussion gets to a low

point. He said he considered the end of the class period not to be a set time; rather, class closure should reflect the pedagogical aims of the instructor. If learning has ceased, class time should be over. I on the other hand seem to have issues with time. It is clear to me that the authority structure in which I was apprenticed has gotten under my skin.

So I do still worry about classroom time “on task.” But what interests me about these worries goes further. There is more to say than “this thing called authority has gotten under my skin.” Indeed, the usual way of talking about authority is to say that authority is some “thing” to which we *succumb*. Yet, while my retentive tendencies are indeed a way of succumbing to intercom announcements and to the watchful eyes of principals, I find this simplistic understanding of my ingrained habits to be impoverished in many ways. While it might be true that one succumbs to authority, it is also true that authority operates in ways that need *not* be explained along the lines of domination and acquiescence to one who “has” this “thing” called authority. While it may be true that my current classroom practices *can* be seen as a matter of acquiescing to the authority of former administrators, it is also true that my current habits can be described in another way that is more fruitful. What interests me about my worries with time is the fact that these worries can also be understood as a matter of *relation*.

As a teacher, I seem to have gotten used to a certain *relation* to authority. I tend to relate to my students in the same way that I am used to relating to the authority figures I have answered to before. Authority, I would say, is not as much a matter of control (how my own authority figures have controlled me, how I control my students as an authority figure myself) as it is a matter of the relation that has been established between authority figures and myself, between me and my students. To break with past authority figures in this case would entail a certain defiance on my part, yes. But that defiance would not be simply “saying no to power.” That defiance is more profoundly a willingness to change the sorts of *relations* that I am used to. To continue to be influenced by authority would be to continue with a relation that I have gotten used to. To act differently would be to change a relation to which I have become accustomed.

The aim of this book is to think about authority in terms of relation. It is my aim to look at scenarios of authority in ways that problematize, augment, and redefine prevalent notions of how authority works. For, current educational conceptions of authority assume that authority is primarily a thing that people have, a thing that is wielded by individuals who are in positions of power. Scholarly renditions and folk notions of authority alike thing-ify authority and describe it as a substance that is possessed by people in power who, in turn, use that

thing, that authority, over others who are not in power.¹ Thus, it is common to hear statements such as, “That person has a lot of authority because she is a teacher,” or, “Unfortunately I do not have much authority since I am only a student.” Authority is usually construed as a possession to which one who lacks power either succumbs or does not succumb. In contrast, if we understand authority as a relation (as opposed to a thing), then an entirely new set of questions emerges. An entirely new sort of analysis is called for. Tired analyses of authority as a “thing” have outlived their usefulness.

CURRENT CONCEPTIONS OF AUTHORITY AS SUBSTANCE: THE PROGRESSIVE, THE TRADITIONAL, THE CRITICAL

Take, for example, recent scholarly debate about educational authority. Such debate over authority usually ends up in an impasse precisely because it treats authority as such a “thing.” On one hand, progressivists hold that authority is best dealt with by giving it up.² In progressive camps of educational thought, it is assumed that authority is harmful to the student. It is thought that the more authority a teacher has, the less chance the student will have to gain autonomy or agency. In the context of progressive education, one hears such things as, “How can we share authority with our students?” “How can we try not to be authority figures in classrooms?” and “She is a very personable teacher; she really doesn’t flaunt her authority.”

The traditional argument, on the other hand, holds that authority must be embraced. Traditionalists contend that authority is a moral good that comes when one acquires knowledge and institutional responsibility. Following this line of thought, a teacher is a beneficent authority figure because of what she knows, because of her classroom role in loco parentis. The traditional argument asks us to recognize that some folks are in a position to help others.³ Can authority be wrong if it is employed in a thoughtful manner? Authority, following this traditionalist logic, is completely acceptable as long as one uses one’s authority to help those who are not in authority. By using one’s authority, one can cultivate the capacities of those who are themselves not yet authority figures.

Against the backdrop of a progressive rejection of authority and the traditional acceptance, the critical argument maintains that authority *must* be used, but only for the purposes of teaching for social justice.⁴ The critical argument suggests a qualified use of authority. It is qualified in that it does not embrace authority per se, but embraces only the authority of those who speak for social justice. So unlike the traditional perspective that advocates the practical necessity of the various versions of educational authority (personal, institutional, scientific, cultural,

etc.), the critical perspective encourages only those versions of authority that promote freedom and social change. And unlike progressive perspectives, the critical perspective does not assume that the use of authority is somehow *naturally* at odds with social justice. The critical argument advocates the use of authority when teaching for human freedom is at stake.

Progressives argue against authority. Traditionalists embrace it. Criticalists embrace it at certain times. Granted, these are stereotyped positions that I have laid out, it is certainly true that these positions tend to treat authority as a “thing.” These three positions consider authority to be a sort of zero-sum commodity. It is said that the more authority one person has, the less another person has, that authority is a substance to be rejected or embraced, a thing that is either bad or good. I am not saying that these three positions do not offer important insights into the use and abuse of authority. Certainly, each of these positions makes some sense in their respective rejection, embrace, and qualified embrace of authority *as substance*. Yet, when these positions are taken, I am struck by the extent to which each is hamstrung by the assumptions they make about the thing-ified nature of authority. Certainly, if authority were a thing, then I would have to agree with the critical perspective. Yet, it is my contention that authority is in fact not a thing. It is a relation.

Let me say it again: These three positions, as well as most prevalent explanations of authority, make a fairly primitive ontological presumption regarding authority. They presume that authority is a thing. According to these sorts of explanations, the same mistake is made that a folk-meteorologist might make if he or she were to assume that wind is itself a substance. To be sure, one can take the position that wind is a substance in and of itself. And to the extent that one takes that position, it might even make sense to wonder if more wind is a good or bad thing. It might make sense to wonder if we should try to stop the wind on certain occasions, or if we should try to increase the wind on other occasions. Yet, from a more sophisticated, more accurate position, one should understand that wind is in fact a movement of air. It is a movement of air that exists in relation to the differing temperatures of various land masses and bodies of water. It exists in relation to differences in atmospheric pressures. The wind exists only in relation to other circumstances. With a more sophisticated understanding of the wind, there is no meteorological sense in the endeavor to create more wind, or to create less wind. There is only sense in asking how the wind acts in relation to different events.

It is the same with authority. The common sorts of arguments either embracing or decrying authority fail to deal with the most important of all questions concerning authority, namely: How does authority work *in relation*? So I propose that we think about educational author-

ity in a way that is uncommon at present. I propose that we consider how educational authority operates. For while progressivists argue against it, while traditionalists embrace it, and while criticalists warn about using it judiciously—while these various perspectives on the ‘substance’ are being articulated, none of them look deeply into the question of *How?* To ask the question *How?* is a different matter altogether than arguing for or against. To ask *How?* is to look for models that illustrate the workings of authority as relation. In the chapters that follow, I examine a few such models.

Let me offer another example. This one was told to me by one of my university students. A university sophomore, let’s call her Julie, told the following story in class. Julie is at school to become a teacher. And, as a student who will soon be a teacher, she pays close attention to her own relationships vis-à-vis teachers so that she might learn from them habits that would benefit her own teaching. She told this story to illustrate the ways in which some university professors are sympathetic to the genuine experiences of students while some are not.

Julie had just encountered a traumatic experience. Her grandmother had passed away. She had been very close to her grandmother when she was a child, though she was separated now from her by quite a distance, having moved out of state to attend university. Julie spent a week away from school to attend the funeral and to be with her family in this time of mourning. And, as it so happened, she did not inform her professors about her absence until after she returned to school, until she was once again in attendance at the courses where she had been absent.

Julie was quite apprehensive before returning to her classes. She did not want to be seen as making excuses for the coursework she had missed, and she felt a bit guilty for not contacting her instructors earlier. But at the same time she wanted to let her professors know that she had been absent for a very legitimate reason, for an event that was much more significant than any week’s worth of lectures.

On the first day of her return, she approached her English professor after class. She told the professor the reason she did not attend the previous week’s classes. The professor acted in a very sympathetic manner. She did not say a word to Julie about the absence itself, not a word about Julie’s classwork. Rather, she asked if Julie had been close to her grandmother, to which Julie said yes. Julie told her of how they used to play card games together in her childhood. The professor also asked if Julie needed anything in order to get through this rough time. Julie and her English professor stood at the front of an empty classroom: “If there is anything I can do for you,” the professor said, “please let me know.” Julie thanked her for her kind words.

Julie contrasts this first reception to a different sort that she faced upon explaining her absence to her history professor. As in the previous class, Julie told her history professor about her absence.

The history professor said this: “Well, you know that you missed last week’s quiz don’t you?”

“Yes,” Julie responded.

“Well, you’re going to have to make that up within two days.”

“Alright,” Julie said.

“And,” her professor said, “I’ll need to have a written verification of your absence. I’ll need that note before you can actually take the make-up quiz. That’s my policy for every student no matter how extenuating the circumstances.”

Julie responded that she would do so. But as she recounted this story to me, she added a couple of details about what went through her mind as this incident unfolded. Julie explained: “As my history teacher was talking, I became so angry with her for ignoring my feelings, for being so unsympathetic. She lost all credibility in my view. After that, I refused to work hard in that class. She lost her authority as a teacher over me.”

What intrigues me about this story is a bit different than what intrigued Julie. While Julie was intrigued by the different affective relationships that were established by these two professors, I am more interested in the small detail that Julie included about the way she treated the professor who was so unsympathetic to the tragic experience she had gone through. For, as Julie explained, her instructor’s callousness caused her to discount her authority from that time forward. I am interested in this discounting because it points to an aspect of educational authority that is so often overlooked, the aspect of relation. Educational authority is generally treated as a monologic rather than a dialogic experience. It is rarely investigated with an eye to its enactment as a circuit.

Julie’s small detail is significant because it goes against so much educational thought. The bulk of educational thought assumes that authority is located solely in the hands of instructors. That is to say, it assumes that Julie is not a key player in the workings of authority, and that her sort of small detail is just that, small and insignificant. I contend, though, that Julie *is* a key player in the relation of authority. Because authority is a relation, there is not just one person who “has” authority and one who does not. Rather, each person is involved. Both Julie *and* her professor are involved in the relation of authority. It is my contention in this book that Julie’s experience must be listened to. Her experience shows us that there is a certain circuitry to authority. Authority gets enacted in circuits where each participant has a role to play,

where authority is not simply a monological enactment, where it takes the participation of at least two people for authority to gain purchase. It works as a circuit instead of working unidirectionally or monologically.

CONCEPTIONS OF AUTHORITY AS NONRELATIONAL: MONOLOGICAL AUTHORITY

I have mentioned current conceptions that treat authority as a substance rather than as a relation—the progressive, the traditional, and the critical conceptions. Indeed, one way to construe authority as something other than relation is to treat authority as a substance that is possessed by people. However, this understanding of authority as substance is closely related to another assumption that is made about authority: that authority is monological. To assume that authority is a thing is first to assume that it stands alone in spite of human relations. But oftentimes, there is an accompanying assumption that authority is held and applied by one person only, that it is monological. In spite of the fact that experiences such as Julie's happen all the time, an unquestioningly monological understanding of authority has dominated, and continues to dominate, many educational and noneducational accounts.

Such a monological view of authority can be traced back at least as far as its Kantian inheritance. Indeed, as evidenced in his pivotal article of 1784, entitled "What Is Enlightenment?" Immanuel Kant shows that the entire project of Western Enlightenment is grounded in a monological understanding of authority. In this article, Kant encourages his readers to have the courage *not* to rely on the authority of others. As he notes,

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] "Have courage to use your own understanding!"—that is the motto of enlightenment.⁵

According to Kant, then, authority comes at individuals from above, from the unilateral direction of one who has authority *toward* one who has none. In Kant's analysis of authority, it is up to the individual to either submit to such authority, or, to have the courage to be "mature" by using one's own reason. One must fight the authority of others by using the authority of one's own reason. In this Kantian formulation of Enlightenment, there is no mention that authority is in any way affected

by the individual's reaction to that authority. Authority may be directed at one person from another, it may be directed from an institution or tradition toward a person. But, authority remains monological in the Kantian tradition. For Kant, the best (the most "mature") way to deal with authority is to ignore it and to use one's own authority instead. Kant thus sets up a zero-sum game of authority the likes of which I have described in the context of progressive, traditional, and critical approaches to educational authority. Kant's conception of authority depends on a thing-ification of authority. And in addition, it assumes that authority works through an atomistic, monological relation between those "in" authority and those who are "faced with" authority.

In more recent educational thought, too, authority continues to be treated as a monologic entity. Interestingly, the monologic account of authority continues in full force even for thinkers who are otherwise thoroughly dialogic in their orientation to education! For example, monologic authority makes a particularly interesting appearance Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.⁶ This appearance is interesting given the fact that Freire is otherwise so successful at advocating a relational form of pedagogy. For Freire, authority is virulently monologic even at a time when there is to be reciprocity in the teacher/student relation. In Freire's dialogic education,

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it.⁷

Even as Freire advocates an education that scissors back and forth between teacher and student, authority itself remains a one-sided possession of individuals who are free.

It is actually the work of Freire that has made me the most attuned to the deeply entrenched, indeed the seemingly irrational, insistence that authority needs to be understood as monologic. His work has made me realize how important it is to redescribe authority in a relational way. Why the work of Freire? Because he protests too much. His proclamation that arguments over authority will disappear in dialogic education is just a little bit too neat. His proclamation that authority simply jumps over to the side of freedom is in fact a very obvious crack in his own well-formulated methodology, and it performs the following unfortunate maneuver: (1) Monologic education is full of authority.

(2) Authority in such a monologic education is wrong. (3) Dialogic education must replace monologic education. (4) Since dialogic education promotes freedom, authority will switch to the side of education that promotes freedom. It is as if authority is just one of those monological things that will change for the better when educational actors engage with each other in a dialogic way.

Interestingly, Freire supposes that authority remains monological, remains on one side, even when educational interactions become dialogic. He supposes that authority works monologically *against* freedom when it is oppressive, and monologically *for* freedom when it is liberatory. For Freire, the object of dialogic education is to change the nature of authority from freedom-crushing to freedom-enhancing, even while authority remains essentially monologic. In contrast to Freire, I contend that authority is always already dialogical in nature. Freire's understanding of authority is steeped in the Enlightenment tradition inaugurated by Kant even while his vision of the human person is intersubjective in ways that Kant could not have endorsed. Freire does not entertain the possibility that there could be dialogic authority. Indeed, dialogic experiences with authority such as Julie's are pushed aside even by such a dialogic educator as Freire.

SPEAKERS AND LISTENERS

At a very basic level, even during a simple exchange of words between two people, authority gets enacted in relational ways. When a person speaks, I listen. What happens when I listen? The relation of authority begins. When I listen to another, I partake in authority. I partake as I halt my own speech long enough for the other to speak. When I listen, the other does not listen but speaks instead. I listen, the other speaks. Through my listening, I enact a relation of authority. Through the other's speaking, she enacts authority as well. Authority is not a "thing" lying in wait. It is not first "possessed" by the speaker, then "used." Authority does not happen until we, the listener and speaker, enter a relation.

When I listen, I partake in the relation of authority. When another speaks, she partakes also. Neither of us "has" authority. Neither of us "succumbs" to authority. Rather, we create the relation of authority within the speaking and within the listening. The relation of authority would be incomplete without listener. It would be incomplete without the speaker. To speak to no one is to be outside of authority. To listen to no one is to be outside of authority. Authority is not present until the speaker is listened to. It is not present until the listener is spoken to. Authority comes to exist when the relation is made. Until the relation is made, authority is not yet present.

An important example of the authority relation between speaker and listener can be found in Louis Althusser's *Ideological State Apparatuses*.⁸ Althusser describes the experience of a person who is hailed by a policeman on the street, a person who is *talked to* by another who is in authority. When such a hailing takes place, it is not simply the policeman who enacts authority. Indeed, the role of the person being hailed is just as central to the enactment of authority as the role of the policeman. For what is interesting about this sort of hailing is that the policeman might be calling to *anyone* on the street when he calls out, "Hey, you there." Yet, in spite of the fact that he might be calling on just anyone, the hailing takes effect when the one who is being hailed responds by acknowledging that the anyone is *he* rather than someone else. Althusser narrates this event as follows:

There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: "Hey, you there!" One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that "it really is he" who is meant by the hailing. But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.⁹

While Althusser focuses on the ideology at work, I want to focus on the authority at work. In this example, the police man is a figure of authority. The person on the street has his back to the policeman. He does not even know for sure that the policeman is a policeman. He does not even know for sure that it is *he* who is being hailed by the policeman. Yet in spite of all of this ambiguity, the man turns around because he assumes that it is he who is being hailed. When he does turn around, he becomes "interpellated" into (quite literally, "called into") the position of being named as "you" by the policeman. Importantly, the authority of the policeman is not a preexisting authority. It is clearly not preexisting since the policeman's authority qua policeman is not known until after the man has turned around, until after the man has himself participated in the relation of authority.

Any authority that the policeman might have over the man who believes he is being called cannot have been in existence before the turn of the man. For, before that turn, it is not at all clear that it is *this* man over whom the policeman has authority. It is the turn itself that establishes the policeman's authority per se, and it is the turn itself that establishes that the policeman "has" authority over this particular man. It is in fact the man's participation in the relation of authority that