

Do we all have free  
and equal access to  
authority?



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Do we all have free and equal access to authority? Discuss on the basis of Weber's concept of legitimate authority.

Many feel in a greater or lesser extent a kind of hate to authority, no wonder least because external impositions often seem unfair to us. The truth is that we all like the feeling of having power. Nevertheless, the vision we have of occidental democracies about political authority has gotten worse. People have the feeling that power corrupts and that politicians only seek to remain in power because that power only benefits themselves. It can be said that nowadays, many people find political authority to be hypocrite, a self-interested activity. Reasons abound, mainly because in part it is true.

Furthermore, the acceptance of power it is an essential principle of legitimacy, which is what gives stability to political systems. In addition to this, legitimacy makes us question why do some give orders and command while others obey. But what is truly the meaning of power? Although the concept of power is one of the most used in literature, philosophy and social sciences, the truth is that no one can really give a precise definition of it, and those who try, they rarely agree on its meaning.

However, Max Weber who is one of the founding thinkers of sociology, defines power as " the ability of an individual or group to achieve their own goals or aims when others are trying to prevent them from realising them". He identifies power as being either authoritative or coercive. Authoritative power means it is legitimate and that is effective because those who are subject to power do so with consent. In contrast, coercive power is gotten

through threatening others. Meaning that someone is forced to do something against their wishes.

Weber points out three types of domination to which corresponds a different form of legitimacy and, therefore, of authority. All the authorities are legitimate since they have explicit and implicit consent of the governed.

- Traditional authority: “ power is handed down hereditary lines, giving families or social entities like families the right to rule by virtue of their ancestors or divine right. People are loyal to the rulers because of culture and a belief that they are ‘ pre-ordained’ or that they are dependent on the ruler for access to resources or land as in feudalism.” (Hague, Harrop & Bresslin, 1992)
- Charismatic authority: “ resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him.” (Max Weber)
- Legal-rational authority: “ it can be defined as a bureaucratic authority, where power is legitimized by legally enacted rules and regulations such as governments. People follow a set of principles rather than a leader. Legal-Rationalism is good at limiting the powers of government through a constitution.” (Hague, Harrop & Bresslin, 1992)

Alternatively, power without domination is maintained above all by the different forms of coercion (physical and psychic) that its holders try to apply to the individual. What is more, without the collaboration of those who obey (of an important part of them) the domination does not work correctly.

Knowing what power is based on Weber's concept of legitimate authority, do we all have free and equal access to authority?

Us as individuals don't have free and equal access to authority, it is restricted. Firstly, because we know that in traditional authority, the people that adhered to it is because they are invested in the past and feel obligated to perpetuate it. The legitimacy of the monarchs' power started long time ago, and people respect it and are loyal to it simply because it is said that "it has always been like that." It comes from unwritten rules that are maintained over the time and it does not change or evolve. In fact, Weber (1958) states: "The creation of new law opposite traditional norms is deemed impossible in principle." Additionally, it is the stability of social order that is accepted and it is not rational because it is conservative and all social changes imply breaking with traditions. Examples of traditional authority are hereditary monarchies, Roman Catholic Church and Tibetan Buddhism.

However, traditional authority can be linked with race, class and gender because there is no equality between these. For instance, in almost every society, there are distinctions between men and women. Men are more likely to be privileged and are more likely to hold roles of authority. Similarly, it is more easy to win respect if you belong to a dominant racial group or an upper class family. Moreover, the negative aspects of this authority are the lack of freedom of opportunity among the dominated individuals, inequalities in rights and that individuals are subject to the will of the monarch.

Firstly, racial discrimination has always been present in our lives. According to Young Scot, racism is "prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed

against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior." Some people think that there are skin colours or ethnicities that imply inferiority or superiority of one person over another. Although it might seem ridiculous, specially in our modern society, racism persists because it is a way to use the power of the dominant groups that are in the highest hierarchy in society. This is used to pressure and segregate against smaller and more vulnerable groups.

Secondly, inequalities between the genders exist in our present-day.

Although gender equality is considered a human right, we still can see the inequality in the world we are living in. In addition to this, girls and women represent half of the world's population. According to a study by researchers in the University at Buffalo School of Management " only 26% of women hold a high authority position". However, nowadays, the vast majority of leaders are men. People naturally assume men are competent leaders, and women have to work harder to get to the same positions. For instance, as stated by Puller (2009) some studies have documented that " equally qualified females are consistently rated lower than their male counterparts when being considered for employment or for managerial positions."

We can also see this inequality in the charismatic authority of Weber. During history, there has been many male charismatic leaders, among them we find Hitler, Napoleon, Sir Winston Churchill, Jesus, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and Ronald Reagan. Now, if we compare them with the charismatic female leaders we find that there is a big difference because so few women have held dynamic positions of leadership throughout history. Two of these figures are Margaret Thatcher and Mother Theresa.

Charismatic authority can also be seen very dangerous because it produces a situation of division between the supporters of the leader and the ones that are not, showing a strong rejection towards the one who exercises power on the part of the latter. Because of that, since it is considered a power without a rational basis and it is very unstable, a revolutionary movement can be initiated by those people that do not support the leader and that also have the freedom to start the revolt.

Another reason to support the main idea is with Weber's bureaucratic theory that intertwines with legal authority. When talking about setting an organization, he believed that the most efficient way was bureaucracy. He believed that bureaucracy was better than traditional resources because in a bureaucratic organization, each individual is treated equally.

“ With a bureaucratic organization, all policies are carefully crafted and worded. They are then thoroughly distributed throughout the entire organization, and everyone is expected to follow them. Bureaucratic organizations are the strictest kind of organization in existence. They are modelled after the idea that a company should function like a machine.”  
(Nicole LaMarco, 2018)

That means that in our society, there is lack of freedom. The bureaucratic mentality follows rules that are given by the superiors, and the followers do not question anything. However, Weber does not argue that bureaucracy is the most efficient form of organization, but that is more effective than the known alternative forms of organization. He says that even simple forms of

democratic administration are unstable and likely to be in hands of the wealthy because those who work do not have time to govern.

The difference between bureaucracy and democracy is that their purpose of authority is different. On the one hand, bureaucracy is to accomplish given objectives and on the other hand, democracy's purpose is to decide common objectives. Given that, we can say that there is more freedom if there is democracy because in democracy people can freely choose their leaders.

Politics is controlled from the top by a small number of people. Weber argues that democracy changes the rules for the selection of a leader, but leaders are still selected. Democracy is "a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections. It is a government by the people, rule of the majority" (Merriam-Webster)

Nevertheless, Weber argues that democracy requires strong leadership. He stated in his *Essays in Sociology* (1946) that "In a democracy the people choose a leader in whom they trust. Then the chosen leader says, 'Now shut up and obey me.' People and party are then no longer free to interfere in his business."

Conversely, to access authority there is no need to use violence to gain power or influence. Some great examples are Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi, who are charismatic leaders that led non-violent movements for rights and equality. They both influenced a lot of people and fought injustices with love and respect. Mohandas Gandhi stated "be the change you want to see in the world." He believes we all have the potential

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for greatness and everyone is able to achieve anything, from freedom to equality.

Furthermore, nowadays, thanks to modern technology, another way to access authority is by social media. Protesters can now use their mobile phones and internet to spread their ideas to the whole world instantly, which is faster and more efficient than in the past. In these, the users of power are the citizens rather than the governments. Today, citizens find that they have power because they can exercise their will over their own leaders. Social media has radically changed activism. Years ago, it would take weeks or months to plan and organize a protest but now we have social medias such as Facebook and Twitter. According to Rachel Einwohner, a Purdue University sociology professor, “ With the rise of social media, it’s definitely a lot easier for people to mobilize more quickly and you don’t necessarily need to have one charismatic leader like Dr. King, who had almost some kind of magical quality, But you still do need some powerful message that really resonates with a lot of people.”

In conclusion, although there have been some improvements to access authority in the last decade, there is still no free and equal access to it.

With the basis of Weber’s concept of legitimate authority, we have seen that if someone wants to access traditional authority it is going to be impossible or almost impossible because this kind of authority is inherited. The authority of a monarch is seen as preordained by God and it is impossible to deny or challenge.



Additionally, we have made huge progress toward gender equality compared to the past. Despite this fact, we still need to increase diversity in leadership because men and women are equal. Some of us need to change our perspective and view women as natural as men leaders. Also, there are activities in which these gender differences should definitely not influence. What is more, there is no feminine and masculine engineering, nor a female and male nuclear physics.

In addition to this, race relations have improved a lot. Despite the racism on our society, access to authority is getting a bit easier and more and more equal and free by time. Who would have thought in the past that an African-American would become president of the United States of America?

What is more, we are somewhat free to access authority there is no need to use violence. Gandhi is a great example, and he proved that one man has the power to take an empire using ethics and intelligence. Also, thanks to the advances of technology, in our modern world we now have platforms that are a big potential and influence to drive a change and which can also revolutionize aspects of society.

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