

OBS: Work in Progress!

Hej!

Det här är ett *mycket prelimenärt* utkast till en introduktion (och delar av ett första kapitel) till min avhandling. Den första delen är en skissartad bild av empirin och det som följer sedan är några mer djuplodade diskussioner där jag försöker få grepp om den övergripande forskningsfrågan. I nuläget är jag inte säker på att alla delar ska vara med/eller hur de hänger samman – och det är också något jag gärna diskuterar under seminariet. I min presentation kommer jag att fokusera mer på det empiriska underlaget (det saknas en del här) och beskriva den övergripande situationen mer ingående med speciellt fokus på StratCom och EU.

Jag är väldigt tacksam för alla kommentarer, förslag och idéer som har att göra med hur frågan bäst kan angripas!

Allt gott,

Hedvig

The Paradox of Obedience: Political Authority in an Inverted World

Hedvig Ördén

I. CHANGING MINDS

Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.

UNESCO Preamble to the Constitution, 1946¹.

The above quote is part of an online introduction for the newly-founded NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom). According to their webpage, the contemporary developments of ‘globalisation’ and ‘interconnectivity’ have created a world where “reverence of the people at the top now competes with new social leaders” (StratCom 2016. my emphasis). This *‘inverted world*, in turn, is an existence characterised by disruption and fragility on the political level. What is more, the remedy, we are told, consists of winning the hearts and minds of the interspersed global audience through ‘strategic communication.’ In a series of open-access information videos, the importance of top-down messaging in this new political environment is outlined. The first clip features two individuals portrayed in profile, their heads consisting of turning cog-wheels, while a speaker-voice informs viewers about the basics of human interaction. In the second clip, strategic communication beams out to an audience entirely consisting of stylized brains while the process is described as “transmitting and receiving information *from one brain to another*” (StratCom 2016. my emphasis.).

Political communication is here conceived of as an almost *physical* pursuit; the mind, in itself, appears to hold the answer to the preservation of peace. But how are we to understand this presumed relationship between political stability and matters of the mind? And what does it *mean* to turn to the individual mind for answers to political questions? NATO is not the only actor to turn towards the human brain for answers to the perceived challenges of today’s political situation. Another example is the defence

¹ The quote appears in StratCom’s official documents outlining their mission.

sector which is increasingly embracing, and looking for ways to counter, deception in the form of psychological operations (PsyOps) and information operations (InfoOps) under the new heading of ‘hybrid warfare.’² Within the EU, furthermore, policy organisations such as the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) are pointing to political mind-change through the use of strategic counter-narratives in order to combat contemporary problems of radicalisation and terrorism (RAN@ 2012). Finally, on a national level, educational practitioners are emphasising the importance of fostering qualities like ‘critical thinking’ in order to counter violent extremism (see, for instance: Rose 2015). But what are they hoping for?

The aim of this thesis is to explore political authority as a matter of the mind. How do we imagine individual judgement in a time of weakened political authority? What is our judgement expected to *do*? While taking empirical examples, policy proposals and research within the field of security studies as a point of departure for exploration, this is a work situated within the field of political philosophy. The aim is thus not to give a comprehensive picture of neither current nor historical discussions on the topic; rather, the idea is to tease out some of the underlying assumptions around which such discussions evolve. In other words, instead of asking whether counter-narratives, information operations, or critical thinking work the way *intended*, I will ask what such ideas *presuppose*.

² Both concepts are linked to the idea of *hybrid warfare*, i.e.: “campaigns that combine low level conventional and special operations; offensive cyber and space actions; and psychological operations that use social and traditional media to influence popular perception and international opinion”(IISS 2015).

II. THE PARADOX OF OBEDIENCE

How can we understand the issue that StratCom is trying to solve? In the below, I will outline a discussion on the topic of *political authority* and show how it is related to the contemporary examples above.

In ‘How is Political Authority Possible’ Peter Winch argues that one of the core problems of political authority is and continues to be this: “How can the commander’s *will* be the subject’s *reason* for acting?” (2002: 23. my emphasis) How can the one become the other? Furthermore, in an interpretation of Winch’s text, Olli Lagerspetz refers to this problem as ‘the paradox of obedience.’ Spelled out, it goes something like this: “How is the concept of *voluntary obedience* possible³?” (Lagerspetz x: 4. my emphasis.) Indeed, the phrase itself appears to be a contradiction in terms. At the core of it, the matter has to do with the more general conceptual problem of how authority can be reconciled with rationality. For, strictly speaking, as rational individuals, we should have the ability to account for our actions. As G.E.M. Anscombe describes in *Intention* (1957), the rational act⁴ is intimately linked to the question ‘Why?’ In other words, we should be able to, so to speak, give reasons for our actions. We should be able to say: “I did this because x” or “I did this because y.” Another way of phrasing it is to say that an act must “*have significance*” for the individual in question (Anscombe 1957: 23. Orig. emphasis.). It must be *meaningful* to someone. Nevertheless, and this is the core problem in relation to the question of political authority according to Winch’s reading, if we act on the will of the commander – if we act on *someone else’s will* – this undermines the above-described understanding of rationality altogether. Because, rather than accounting for our actions, we would have to say “I did it because he told me so!” And this, of course, is rarely accepted as a proper reason, even in the best of times.⁵ So how do we solve this central issue of politics?

³ By many, it is referred to as the question of *consent*. However, Lagerspetz’ phrasing...xxx

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⁵ Modify slightly

In traditional social contract theory⁶ the solution is to outline a suitable context as well as a number of reasons to obey, thought to be universal within the circumstances. To use Winch's own example, in Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), obedience⁷ on the part of the political subject provides security in the face of fear, self-gain in the face of almost-certain loss, the possibility of justice in the face of anarchy, and so on. Alas, presented with such (no doubt compelling) reasons, Hobbes' rational subject readily enters into a social contract which he is bound to forever.⁸ Hence, it seems that, whenever we encounter the paradox of obedience, we are inclined to ask questions like: *Why* should you obey? What are the *reasons* for obeying⁹? And, furthermore, we are inclined to presume that an act of obedience grounded in individual reason, at a certain point in time, has the potential to be projected into the future: Once convinced, we have no reason to question our decision. Nevertheless, it might be worth asking what it actually *means* to think of political authority in this manner; to link it to the list of compelling reasons. Winch points out that it is easy to assume that authority must ultimately "*spring from the individual wills of the subjects*" (2002: 24. orig emphasis.). After all, the point for discussion is legitimate political authority and, indeed, there would be no ground for the paradox of obedience if an individual is forced to obey. Nevertheless, if we return to Anscombe's statement that the reasons for an action should "*have significance*" to the subject in question, it is clear that this can be interpreted in several ways. Either, we can say that the *reasons*, in themselves, *make sense* to someone (and, in an Hobbesian fashion, good reasons could thus be supplied in order to get someone's *will* moving in a certain direction); or, alternatively, it can be argued that we *make sense* of something *through* reasons which *go along* with our actions (as a, sort of, a meaningful description of the question 'Why?'). If it is the latter, *voluntary obedience* or *consent* cannot possibly be understood in any eternal sense, since it is grounded in a form of *practical rationality*. It is something that we *do*.

⁶ And, as Winch underlines, the same fundamental position is repeated by contemporary theorists like Rawls and Nozick (1990: 235).

⁷ Worth mentioning here is that the form of obedience discussed should here be regarded – not as oppression – but as standing "in contrast to" oppression (Lagerspetz referring to Weil X:19-20).

⁸ Except for some exceptional situations. For instance, Hobbes mentions threat to one's life.

⁹ Thus indicating that obedience is still limited.

II.

Now, it seems that this topsy-turvy contemporary existence gives rise to quite a specific set of problems in relation to political authority. Indeed, the *inverted world* described by StratCom is clearly a *fragile* place to make politics. What is more, it is a situation which appears to call for certain interventions. Arguably, what we have at hand might be described as a case of *weak* political authority. But how can we understand such a thing?

In order to highlight this question further, we might return to Winch. For, the benefit of Winch's argument in relation to the overarching question of *voluntary obedience* is to ask why the paradox appears *in the first place*. Furthermore, he does this by unearthing the presumptions that go unchallenged within the Hobbesian social contract tradition and shows that, without these, the contradiction itself would disappear. Because, as underlined by Lagerspetz: is it not true to say that the *paradox of obedience* only arises if the starting-point is “*absence* of any commitment on the part of the individual”? (x: x. my emphasis.) Indeed, there would be no case for such a dilemma if we *already* are bound to some form of authority from the very outset, if consent *belongs to us* as part of our way of life. That is: if obedience, so to speak, is inherently tied to an *undisputed certainty*.

These two positions have different implications for what we take to be weak political authority. From the Hobbesian viewpoint, an explanation of this contemporary state would be that we lack sufficiently good reasons (or the *knowledge of* such reasons) to account for our obedience. And, speaking somewhat simplistically, an *inverted world* could be, as it were, *reverted* by means of the appropriate and timely delivery of good arguments. Indeed, this is one way of understanding StratCom's mission of teaching strategic communication skills in order to reach global political stability. The same idea of sovereignty-by-communication is visible in a report by Chatham House (2011). According to the influential think tank, we are not “doomed to wait for terrorist attacks, expensive wars or failed negotiations”, but can avoid disaster by delivering a range of

good arguments through coherent and consistent communication (Chatham House 2011: x). In fact: “The place of the state at the centre of life is itself dependent on communications, which by extension reinforce the state system upon which all national strategy is predicated” (2011: 21). Nevertheless, if political authority, instead, is thought of as grounded in *practical reason* – if it is something that we *do* – this would require, from the very outset, what Winch refers to as a recognition of “the authority of others that is *primitive*” (Winch 1990: 236. orig. emphasis). For, the question of “what is ‘reasonable’ cannot be characterized independently of the *content* of certain pivotal ‘judgements’” (1990: 235. orig. emphasis.). From this perspective we need *something else* – a fundamental acceptance, a *certainty*, that has to be in place for reasons to make sense at all. Consequently, rather than being the *outcome* of a specific situation, authority would make up the very *condition* for the possibility of making an argument.

Winch’s discussion can be compared to Wittgenstein’s exploration of the question of ‘doubt’ in *On Certainty* (1969). At one point he states that: “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything” because doubting “itself presupposes certainty” (Wittgenstein 1969: §115). While this statement might seem like nothing more than a linguistic truism, Wittgenstein’s observation – if taken seriously – would have important implications for a wide range of topics related to the constitution and re-constitution of political authority. For, if we accept that the good argument does not *bring about* political mind-change but is rather a description of change *ex post facto*, how, then, should political authority be understood? And, furthermore, if we attempt to *dissolve* rather than to *solve* the paradox of obedience by foregrounding the primitive acceptance of authority – how can we describe a situation when such an authority appears to go unrecognised? What might we appeal to, then? And *is* this even authority? In short: what does the quest for political authority *look like*, in an *inverted world*?

Texten nedan är förslag på en början på kapitel I. Den är med här som en hint om hur jag tänker mig fortsättningen.

CHAPTER I:

JUDGEMENT AND MISJUDGEMENT

The question of judgement is elusive. We might intuitively think that we know what it means to judge. Still, when we start to seriously probe the concept, the complexity of the subject matter starts to unfold. In the below, I will give an overview of the Kantian approach to judgement and, following this, the question of political judgement and, also, a potential misjudgement of judgement, as forwarded by Hannah Arendt (among others). The purpose here is not to give an all-encompassing description of the various takes on judgement that have developed within in philosophical history; but to give a brief overview of the concept in order to outline how it is relevant in relation to the set of topics outlined in the above. So, what does it mean to judge?

Taking as a starting-point Kant's third *Critique*, Arendt introduces a version of *political judgement* on aesthetic grounds in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1992) and *The Life of the Mind* (1978).¹⁰ The background to her take on the topic goes back to the Jerusalem trials of Adolf Eichmann. An underlying question, for Arendt, is how to *judge* Eichmann; but also the judgement *of* Eichmann. Is it possible to hold Eichmann *responsible* for his actions, when those same actions were perfectly legal at the time? To do so requires that he could have acted *differently*; in fact, completely out of line with the situation he found himself in. Arendt approaches this conundrum of judgement through a rather peculiar quote by Old Cato: "The victorious cause pleased the gods,

¹⁰ Both books were posthumously published. *The Life of the Mind* only contains fragments of her discussion on judgement; it was meant to be a trilogy where the last, unwritten part, was titled *Judgement*. Arendt only finished *Willing and Thinking*.

but the defeated one pleases Cato” (Arendt 1978: x). The point is to make a distinction between an *eternal* point of view of the gods and the *worldly* perspective of the individual human being. On the basis of this distinction Arendt dismisses the idea of *pre-given principles* for human action and, instead, re-interprets Kant’s third *Critique* as his ‘real’ political philosophy. Political judgement, Arendt argues, should be modelled on Kantian *reflective* judgement. Universal rules, such as those employed in scientific judgments, cannot be used to judge human action. In other words, since Arendtian politics is grounded in action which necessarily takes place in the *present* and within a *plurality*¹¹), all political decision-making must involve judging particulars for which there can be no universals under which they can be subsumed by a process of logical demonstration. Only by taking potential others into account through our shared ‘common sense’ can we practice proper political judgement.

In the postscript to *Thinking*¹² (1978), Arendt underlines that the problem of judgement is “of some relevance to a whole set of problems by which modern thought is haunted, especially to the problem of theory and practice” (1992: 4). To illustrate what is at stake here, we might revisit Isaiah Berlin’s eloquent comments in the essay *On Political Judgement* (1996). Comparing the *knowledge* of politics to that in science, Berlin asks: “What is this knowledge? [...] Are there really laws to be discovered, rules to be learned?” (1996: 26). The argument forwarded by Berlin can be compared to the implications of the Kantian distinctions presented above. For, the overarching topic of how to conceive of judgement has more far-reaching implications than a discussion on pre-given principles for human action (or not).

In a prosaic moment, Berlin illustrates the problem of confusing different forms of judgement with that of developing “a theory for tea-testing” (Berlin 1996: x). It should be obvious to everyone (perhaps especially to the English audience that Berlin addresses) that this is simply something we would not and should not do. Similarly, the

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specific version¹³ of bad political judgement introduced by Berlin: “consist not in *failing* to apply the methods of natural science, but, on the contrary, in *over-applying them*” (Berlin 1996: x. my italics). Likewise, in Arendt’s opinion, Adolf Eichmann’s main problem was not a lack of cognitive power as such. Rather, it was the application of a view *sub specie aeternitatis* to human affairs which made him blind to the idea of personal responsibility. The question of that specific kind of individual judgement did not arise in the first place. What is illustrated by Berlin and highlighted by Arendt, then, is not just the idea of political judgement but the much more fundamental query of the possible *misjudgement of judgement*. But can there *be* a misjudgement of judgement? What are the assumptions leading to such a conclusion?

¹³ Of course, there are several; this is but one version of bad judgement in politics.