

# Advice to Kings

Five hundred years ago, the then unemployed Niccolo Machiavelli applied to the Great Prince Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, for a job. As part of his application, he supplied a small monograph he had written on how to gain and keep power. Machiavelli sought to raise certain concerns to which all leadership must attend. In the same spirit, though with less wit, I ask you to consider this personal statement, which you have requested in support of my application for employment. I am, as I will here demonstrate, keen and ready for the challenge you offer. Were I to secure the position, I would certainly work to preserve authority and to illuminate the forces that threaten it.

Nowadays, managers of global corporations enjoy extraordinary influence, elected representatives wield ever more unfettered executive power and male privilege is unassailable. Our celebrities are worshiped as heroes, our technologists lauded as saviours. Since the defeat of Marxism and the backlash against feminism, there is no longer any serious challenge to existing structures of authority. All in all, for elites, things are going very well indeed.

Yet new and significant threats are growing in the wings. Alone, they may appear weak and irrelevant, yet as we shall here explore, there are strange and subtle processes at work which make them very hard to see, and therefore, to properly evaluate. This personal statement reviews these threats, and argues that those in authority should, as a matter of some urgency, try to overcome the perceptual barriers that conceal them. Doing so, it is here suggested, will at once make authority better able to defend itself and more effective in its practices.

Here, then, I attempt to illustrate the contribution I would make were I to occupy the position for which I am applying. I begin, if I may, by showing that the preservation of authority turns not so much on maintaining power as it does on *how* that power is perceived. Authority, I show, is power that *looks good*. Our first task, therefore, is to illuminate, briefly and simply, the relation between authority and perception. The second is to reveal, *to authority*, that which cannot be seen.

## **Reasons for Authority**

As decision-makers know from long trial and success, authority derives from raw power. Actually, with the greatest respect, we should notice that authority is slightly different from power; it is power that has reasons in its support, reasons why it should be recognised as right. If power is completely arbitrary, if there are no reasons that can be given in its defense, then we say that it is illegitimate. Of course, it does not particularly matter that power be legitimate, but it does afford some benefits. There is clear evidence, for example, that when people appreciate the reasons for the power over them, they work more effectively, show greater commitment and make their valuable local knowledge available for the benefit of others. They also require lower enforcement costs. Where there are good reasons for power, therefore, they should be articulated, loud and often.

Historically, elites have appealed to a well thumbed list of reasons to justify their authority. When questioned, they have made appeal to the will of God, to tradition and claimed themselves to be superior beings. All have been seriously discredited and are no longer sufficient to secure the willing acquiescence of citizens.

Far better is to assert that authority insures effectiveness. Effectiveness is an excellent reason for power. The claim that power is legitimate because it works, because it delivers, is a strong reason indeed. Intuitively, we all think that effective organisation requires authority. By appealing to this intuition, authority can claim to be necessary, natural and legitimate.

We should, however, be mindful of some minor difficulties with this approach. Effectiveness cannot be the sole criteria upon which we base our decisions, for on its own, it justifies all manner of absurdities. There might, for example, be clear gains available for one half of the human population if we were to conduct a cull of the other, though this hardly makes such an action legitimate. History offers many lessons in the folly of merely using superior power, and not bothering with reasons for its support. Such complacency has often been the beginning of the end for groups of elite decision-makers.

The appeal to effectiveness works particularly well when it is used alongside a new kind of reason, one that has only become available in the last hundred years or

so, one we might loosely call democracy. Democracy holds that the legitimacy of authority derives from the free agreement of the people, and that individuals should have an equal say in decisions that affect them. In a world of conflict, cultural diversity and fragmenting values, it is astonishing how many of us agree that democracy provides an excellent justification for authority. Even the most absurd and tin-pot dictator has learned to claim the legitimacy of the ballot box. We should note, however, and I mention this only in passing, that democracy is a rather dangerous reason to give for power, for it can, as we shall see, prove hard to control.

In the liberal democracies, we have learned to use both these devices to legitimate elite retention of decision-making power. Authority is legitimate, we hold, where it delivers effective decisions and secures the agreement of the public. In this way, democratic governments make a kind of dual appeal: they say that there simply must be a technocratic elite to make difficult and effective decisions, and they say that, as best they can, they will consult the people as to who should constitute this elite.

This is no more than to recognise two simple facts. First, that capitalism is an irresistible, inescapable and impatient God, that there will be no revolution, and that even if there was, history clearly illustrates that it would seriously curtail our freedom to consume. Second, no matter how heartwarming the idea of democracy, we must be realistic. The people cannot rule themselves. They need authority and crave leadership.

## **Perceptions of Authority**

The principle vehicle by which authority co-ordinates collective action is through hierarchic organisations. Here, effectiveness is achieved by centralising decision-making so that the organisational structure comes to resemble a series of branches off a central trunk. Tasks are divided up, standardised, and then undertaken by individuals in particular bands of status. Bureaucratic procedures govern all activities so that individuals become interchangeable. The gain in effectiveness afforded by hierarchical institutions derives, therefore, from a *simplification* of information exchange and a concentration of decision-making power. It is precisely by *reducing* communication that centralised authority delivers effectiveness.

Though democracy, as a way of legitimating power, has spread widely over the last century, it has not yet undermined our basic belief that authority is necessary, indeed inescapable, for the effective co-ordination of collective action. Doing well, succeeding; these are still seen to require leadership and hierarchy. As we are so often told, when people *do* act together without authority, they are always disorganised and ineffective, and sometimes vicious and fanatical. We thus, despite being democrats, hold hard to the belief that having too many people involved in decision making results in a significant loss of effectiveness.

Of central importance to authority, then, is its perception as *necessary*. Power is better looking and more widely accepted when it can make appeal to a variety of good reasons, but necessity must be among them. It is, for example, this essential equation, between effectiveness and authority, which allows governments to claim legitimacy, even in the face of widespread apathy and an alienated populace. Similarly, the people permit elected representatives to exercise excessive power, and to enjoy special privileges, only because they believe that running the country *necessitates* a centralised technocratic elite. Though we live in a democracy, we still hold that leadership and authority are natural and necessary, that effectiveness is only achieved by centralised power and that communication within organisations must be severely limited lest it get rapidly out of control.

Exile, I have come to discover, as did Machiavelli, has a special kind of silence. Each morning it awaits me, and in the evening I sit with it in my room. This is a silence that first takes away money, then public space, then other people. It is a stern teacher, endlessly patient and inscrutable, unceasing in its discipline. It has taught me that the complex relation between authority and perception does not confine itself to subordinates. It also affects those who actually hold power.

### **Perceptions *by* Authority**

A recurrent problem for managers, politicians and elite administrators generally, is that they are unable to see the bottom of the systems they are running. This often results in a gradual loss of information about the effects of their actions, an inability to access

local knowledge held by subordinates, spiraling enforcement costs and, finally, the invisibility of subordinate capacities.

To address this perceptual difficulty, those in authority devise endless and ornate stratagems to improve the quality of communication between the bottom and the top of organisations. Examples range from suggestion boxes to worker involvement initiatives and from focus groups to internet chat sessions with politicians. Perhaps most telling of all is the vast array of methods devised by organisational development consultants to improve vertical communication within firms. In initiatives like 'deskless management' and 'management by walking around', we see concerted efforts to address what amounts to a recurrent difficulty: authority is blind to the very thing over which it has power.

Not knowing what is happening at the bottom is partly due to a systematic deceit widely practiced by subordinates. In the face of power, people hide and conceal their actions. When they can get away with it, they drag their feet and engage in petty acts of sabotage. Though they appear obedient, they in fact seek to undermine authority whenever they can, and to do so in carefully hidden ways. This is why people gather together in small groups around coffee machines and in other spaces that are unsupervised. This is why they ridicule those in authority and ostracise those who are promoted to it.

Another source of perceptual failure which affects those in authority derives from the tendency of organisations to develop extremely powerful and self-reinforcing internal cultures. As we are promoted up through the hierarchical structures of an organisation, we gradually absorb its way of thinking, becoming at last a kind of centaur: part human, part institution. Imperceptibly, we internalise the norms, expectations and categories of the institution and grow ever more convinced that its ends and methods are good. At last, the hierarchy in which we work appears to us as natural, effective and necessary. It is precisely this tendency toward a self-reinforcing internal culture that makes it so hard to change the practices of failing organisations.

Being in authority therefore changes the way we see. To understand how it is that 'power corrupts,' how new governments shed their promises, how organisations can target and attack minority groups, is to understand the extremely subtle and

powerful ways in which organisational membership distorts our perceptions. When we plead with a centaur in a uniform, whether at the ticket barrier or at the end of a gun, we try to appeal to his human side. But the organisational side is strong. It truly believes its authority is necessary, and that its own interests are the interests of all. It was the *American* philosopher John Dewey, not I, who said, "All special privilege limits the outlook of those who possess it."

Whatever their cause, such perceptual failures significantly weaken the capacity of those in authority to preserve their power. Being blind to any form of effective organisation other than hierarchy prevents the adequate assessment of forces which might threaten or resist. An important result of this blindness is that elites are always surprised when subordinates finally do rebel. Such eruptions, whether they take the form of riots, mutinies, rebellions or terrorist attacks, all too often catch authority napping. Recently, multi-national corporations such as Shell, Monsanto and Nike have all been seriously challenged by forces that were, until they appeared, entirely invisible. We saw just this occur with the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the demonstrations at Seattle, Genoa and more. When we hear police spokespeople and government press officers allude to oxymoronic 'anarchist ring-leaders', we know we are in the presence of significant perceptual failure. In any struggle over power, such blindness is not recommended. If you cannot see what is going on around you, you lose. Such perceptual constraint is, therefore, of some significant concern.

## **Changing Perceptions**

Thankfully, most of us still believe that a deeper and more participatory democracy is unrealistic, and so can be easily persuaded that the involvement of the populace in governance should be minimised. Yet it is precisely here, at the level of our most fundamental organisational assumptions, that authority now confronts its gravest challenge.

There is much evidence, all of it provided by scholars *other* than myself, of a general degeneration of reasons to support authority. These other scholars have suggested that elites are suffering from a progressive undermining of national sovereignty by global capital, from the repeated corruption and foolishness of elected

representatives and from the often farcical bureaucratic inefficiencies of both private and public sector organisations. This is nowhere more apparent than in the extraordinary growth of political cynicism that currently grips the liberal democracies. No matter how hard governments try to increase voter turnout, for example, the people show an implacable disinterest. Authority must now withstand an endless questioning, a corrosive collective humour and almost no respect at all.

Not only are perceptions of authority changing, but there is now significant experimentation with different ways of achieving organisational effectiveness. Social science now confronts a veritable forest fire of democracy and participation. Geographers, planners, political scientists and sociologists are exploring new ways to involve people in decision-making. At the same time, democratic theorists call for more active citizens, local authority officers design new institutional forms whereby public deliberation can be increased, service providers seek to involve their users, management scientists study networks and flattened hierarchies and those in development studies implement participatory initiatives – often funded by international aid programmes. Similarly, many western governments are attempting to increase the participation of their own citizens by using new technologies, by devolving power to local authorities and by adjusting their electoral systems. In public administration there is much talk of the “learning organisation,” in business, of “creative teams;” while among voluntary groups it is termed “user involvement.”

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, political protest is now taking on new organisational forms. Here we see the rejection of vanguard revolutionary parties, and an increased use of direct action, anti-institutional methods, leaderless protests and the creative use of information technology. It is clear that while the populace are unmoved by formal politics, they remain capable of mobilisation, especially where politics reaches down into the spaces of their everyday lives.

As yet, of course, these various initiatives have played the democratic card to little effect. Indeed, most have been easily diverted into mere consultation rather than decision-making, and towards cultural and legislative gestures rather than political and economic alternatives. Also, elites have so far proven extraordinarily adept at taking on the language of participation without in any way restructuring their organisations. This

imitation of being interested in ordinary people has been exemplary, and has proven especially effective where elite actors can persuade themselves of their own good intentions. Yet playing the democracy card, is always a dangerous thing to do. It is a word with meanings that are hard to control. It could even be taken back, as it were, and used as a weapon by subordinates.

The danger arises when democracy is no longer seen as an institutional and hierarchic organisational form, but instead, begins to recover its rather older meaning: as a personal ethics and a way of interacting and working with others that is critical of elite power. In this critical mode, democracy shows a marked tendency to opportunistically exploit new political and economic conditions, and to flood into spaces vacated by elite failure. The widespread reappearance of this kind of democracy suggests that the equation between authority and effectiveness is increasingly unsafe. Indeed, many now openly question the necessity of hierarchy for effective decision-making. What contemporary anti-institutionalists are doing is nothing other than exploiting the increase in effectiveness which follows the involvement of more people in the making of decisions, the flattening of hierarchies and the genuine dispersal of power. They therefore threaten our most sacred of organisational assumptions. If the effectiveness of collective action might, in fact, be enhanced by *reducing* authority, then it may be that the very perception which once lent authority its finest reason is now being called into question.

Those concerned to preserve authority must, therefore, urgently shift their attention to analysing this threat. The use of ridicule, stereotyping, draconian legislation to limit civil rights, dirty tricks, infiltration and organised violence against the anti-institutionalists are all very well, and certainly, elites should be applauded for developing innovative and subtle methods by which to retain centralised control over decentralised structures. But, if we are to stand up and protect our organisational assumptions, we must better understand the enemy.

## **New Organisational Forms**

Current experimentation with new forms of organisation do not espouse an idealistic claim that *all* authority is wrong. Instead, the challenge amounts to suggesting that

authority is not the *only* way that effectiveness can be achieved in organisations. It claims that less hierarchical, less bureaucratic and less centralised structures of control can also be effective.

In fact, research in organisational science now distinguishes between three kinds of organisational form. Though usually mixed in practice, each can be seen to co-ordinate collective action in different ways. In the beginning there was hierarchy, and we have here been exploring the manner by which this form delivers effectiveness. Following the great bourgeois revolutions, in which absolute power was first called into question, decision-makers have come to appreciate an additional organisational form, that of the market. A market is at once a decentralised and highly effective way of co-ordinating collective action. Indeed, it is precisely the dispersal of knowledge and motivation within a market, here splintered into the heads of every producer and consumer, which accounts for its extraordinary responsiveness. Individuals compete against each other, and communicate not with words but via the mechanism of price. This results in a kind of “spontaneous order,” one achieved as if by an “invisible hand.”

For each method of co-ordination, there are areas where it works well and others where it does not. As the history of Soviet planning shows, the use of hierarchy as a method of co-ordinating the economy involves a significant loss of effectiveness. Similarly, a market might be good at producing mobile phones, but not so good at providing care to one’s aging grandmother. Suffice it to say that the market is an effective way of co-ordinating action, particularly within the economy, and that it achieves this end by virtue of its decentralised structure.

The third way is by networks. A network is an informal, neural-like, web of interconnected nodes, usually of some horizontal complexity but with very little vertical structure above it. This is, in fact, the way most collective action is co-ordinated in our everyday lives. Though there are inequalities of power within such networks, particularly, for example, within the family, authority and hierarchy are not *required* for a network to function. Where there is effective co-ordination by a network, this is not due to rules, nor to hierarchy, nor even to competition. What provides for effectiveness is the willing agreement of individuals and their adherence to a common concern. This

is not to say that their common orientation makes them all the same. Disagreement is an important source of knowledge and can be good for effectiveness. Machiavelli argued that the vitality of Rome derived from its many conflicts, and it is precisely when networks are bubbling that they work best and pose the greatest threat.

When, for example, we observe the spread of a rumour, we are witnessing the extraordinary effectiveness of networks. Information can spread through them with surprising rapidity. This mode of action co-ordination is used by guerrilla armies, by mass political demonstrations and by what can often be almost instantaneous popular rejections of certain consumer products. The structural similarity between networks and the internet goes some way toward explaining the innovative use of such technology by groups using this form of action co-ordination.

Importantly, networks do not rely on centralised control. Indeed, it is precisely the looseness of their structure that allows for independent initiative and the use of local knowledge. Where a hierarchy makes its gain in effectiveness by simplifying decision-making and constraining the exchange of information, networks co-ordinate by virtue of their complexity. Rather than a tree-like structure with a central trunk, they resemble crab grass, their small green shoots in fact supported by a thick mat of interconnected roots concealed beneath the ground. Using all available media through which to communicate, they are able to reap the benefits of discussion and considered judgment, unhampered by bureaucracy and hierarchy. This is why they are unpredictable and dangerous to those in authority.

Network organisational forms are now being adopted by corporations, fascist militia and democratic activists. While the first two can be relied upon to uphold elite rule, the third is not to be trusted. Today, anti-institutional democrats feed on the widespread adherence to democratic values and make opportunistic use of network organisational forms. As such, their questioning of authority has begun to undermine the sacred equation between effectiveness and authority, to move beyond the old revolutionary project of challenging for state power and to articulate a democratic politics of everyday life.

To recognise the capacity of networks to effectively co-ordinate is to recover a hidden world, one in which most of our collective action is in fact co-ordinated, one in

which hierarchy is either irrelevant or counterproductive. Those in authority have always struggled to perceive this world. It was just this perceptual failure that prompted the great Xerxes, Emperor of Persia, to frown, then ask his advisors how on earth democratic Athens managed to co-ordinate its activities in the absence of an absolute leader. Herodotus reports that the advisors dropped their eyes and mumbled that such a thing was, indeed, impossible. Months later, Xerxes and his huge army were defeated by a small bunch of fanatical democrats. Such a fate must not be allowed to befall our own institutions.

We have here been exploring what cannot usually be seen: that there are significant threats to authority gathering in the wings. These threats are exacerbated by a series of extremely subtle perceptual limitations which make it very difficult for those in authority to fully appreciate the dangers they pose. Again, the challenge is not a direct one, it does not counter elite power with popular power, it does not aspire to replace one centralised elite with another. Instead, it involves a shift in the way authority is itself perceived, and a willingness to contemplate other modes of effective organisation. With this cat out of the bag, authority can no longer defend itself by claiming to be the sole source of organisational effectiveness.

The preservation of authority requires power, control over the perceptions and reasons for power, and, most crucially, control over the organisational assumptions being used to understand that power. The growing threat posed to authority in the modern world is not one of force, it is one of appearances. Questioning authority, once begun, can be hard to stop. It leads first to discontent, then to a quantity and quality of resistance that is presently unimaginable. The question of authority has become an elemental clash, not of civilisations, but of organisational forms.

Finally, we should note that the new anti-institutional democrats do not reject *all* forms of authority. Instead, they hold that power should always have good reasons, that it should be strictly minimal, democratically derived and suspiciously watched. As such, the challenge they pose amounts to the demand that present forms of authority give an account of themselves, and provide some coherent explanations for their existence. Where good reasons can be given in support of power, subordinates will acquiesce. Yet where power is excessive, inexplicable, unscrutinised and stuck, they

will not. The current threat to elite rule pertains only to excessive power, and to power without reasons. It is unfortunate that this covers so much of the power exercised in our society.

## **The Future of Authority**

When we look back in history, the simple ideologies of the past appear absurd. We are amused that James I claimed to be "God's Lieutenant." We are amazed by the mindless obedience shown to the charismatic leaders of the last century. In retrospect, we can see straight through the reasons cited by power for its rule. It is more difficult to see as clearly today. Ideology is, as always, invisible. As citizens expand their questioning of authority, so do elites come to question the apparent safety of their rule.

Nowadays, those in authority must adapt themselves to conditions of growing social fragmentation, infrastructural degeneration, economic volatility and environmental damage. Yet so might they be suddenly, and surprisingly, overwhelmed by new forms of popular refusal.

Machiavelli's application for employment was in vain. Tainted by his association with the previous regime, his skills went unused, and he was left to live out the silence of his exile. The Prince Lorenzo was overthrown. It is my hope that this application will meet with rather more success.

### **Notes:**

N. Machiavelli, (1982, first published 1532) *The Prince*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

On organisational centaurs, see G. Ahrne, (1997) *Social Organisations*, London: Sage.

On tree trunks and crab grass, see G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The ideas contained in this letter are more fully, and traditionally, expounded in R. Blaug, (1998) "The Tyranny of the Visible," *Organisation*, 6/1, pp. 33-56, and (2002) "Engineering Democracy," *Political Studies*, 50/1, pp. 102-116.