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978-1-107-03873-8 - Crisis of Authority: Politics, Trust, and Truth-Telling in Freud and Foucault

Nancy Luxon

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## Crisis of Authority

### *Politics, Trust, and Truth-Telling in Freud and Foucault*

*Crisis of Authority* analyzes the practices that bind authority, trust, and truthfulness in contemporary theory and politics in order to address the question how can individuals make ethical judgments about power and politics?

Drawing on newly available archival materials, Nancy Luxon locates two models for such practices – in Sigmund Freud’s writings on psychoanalytic technique and in Michel Foucault’s unpublished lectures on the ancient ethical practices of “fearless speech,” or *parrhesia*. Luxon argues that the dynamics provoked by the figures of psychoanalyst and truth-teller are central to this process. Her account offers both a more supple understanding of the modern ethical subject and new insights into political authority and authorship.

Nancy Luxon is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. She has also published several articles based on her archival research at the Foucault archives in Caen and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Moritz von Schwind’s *The Prisoner’s Dream* (1836) illustrates the common misunderstanding of psychoanalytic liberation as a fantasy of prison escape from unfulfilled desires. This misunderstanding is not entirely ill-placed. After all, a reproduction of this painting opened Sigmund Freud’s *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, and he briefly referred to the painting when lecturing on wish-fulfillment. That slippage from liberty to liberation is common even in contemporary thought. In a 1980 interview, Michel Foucault said, “If I accepted the picture of power that is frequently adopted, namely that it’s something horrible and repressive for the individual, it’s clear that preventing a child from scribbling on the walls would be an unbearable tyranny.” He continues, less expectedly, to say, “But that’s not it: I say that power is a relation. A relation in which one guides the behavior of others. And there’s no reason why this manner of guiding the behavior of others should not ultimately have results which are positive, valuable, interesting, and so on.” In the pages that follow, I will argue that we should rethink ethical cultivation along similar lines. I argue that liberty requires a confrontation with authority, even as it (somewhat paradoxically) revises and engages the very terms on which that authority is understood. The book closes with a gesture toward frame-breaking – the activity of breaking existing narrative frames of political events so as to involve audiences in the authorship of new ones. The cover image, Picasso’s *Child Playing with a Truck*, nicely invites such a reading. Confined to the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, the child’s play initially appears confined by the suffocating presence of culture in the form of heavily patterned wallpaper. And yet the issue from the child’s activity of play lightly creeps upward and offers the beginnings of a new “frame” for the painting. The heavy, yet intangible, presence of culture and its authority may condition play. But authority does not over-write it.

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NANCY LUXON

*University of Minnesota*



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*For Karen and Crisi*

*Without whom, nothing*

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## Preface

Contemporary social and political theory has reached an impasse about a problem that once seemed straightforward: how can individuals make ethical judgments about power and politics? Inevitably such a question bears on subjectivity and self-formation. It also requires rethinking authorship and authority, so as to understand how such individuals can both author and ground their political judgments. To engage the question just posed, this book concentrates on three sets of overlapping practices and relationships – the relation to self, to others, and to truth-telling – shared by Freud and Foucault. I argue, first, that the dynamics of the Freudian psychoanalytic and Foucauldian parrhesiastic relationships are surprisingly similar. Each is modeled on a pedagogical encounter with a relationship to authority; trust and truth-telling arise as a product of this relationship, rather than being a precondition for entering into it. Second, I argue that psychoanalysis specifies the psychology necessary to sustain these relationships as they are adapted for more explicitly political practices. If political engagement is difficult to begin and even harder to sustain, then psychoanalysis can account for the motivation to initiate that engagement and the ability to endure the uncertainties that threaten to derail it. Finally, reading Freud against Foucault suggests that by deepening the practices of trust and truth-telling so scarce in contemporary politics, individuals can, despite their vulnerabilities, become more agentic.

My third claim carries with it the highest stakes. That I should turn to those thinkers considered to be architects of a contemporary “hermeneutics of suspicion” initially is counter-intuitive. But this choice of thinkers also speaks to the need to revalorize – to *transvalorize* – those practices, experiences, and modes of reflection already circulating through politics.

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Contemporary critiques of power have played an urgent and necessary role in diagnosing how the fact of human plurality has taken the political form of persistent inequalities. From the 1970s to the early 1990s, contemporary political and social theory in the United States has been pre-occupied with questions about macro-processes related to state-formation, capitalism and its excesses, and cultural systems of meaning. The importance of these critiques in exploring the disjunctures between our political efforts and their historical effects cannot be underestimated. Nonetheless, these theories captured a period and a politics characterized by over-steadiness and over-stabilization. Some sixty years after the defining experience of World War Two, the political arena appears to be less one of over-steadiness than one of paralysis, be it the result of uncertainty, apathy, or withdrawal. In the face of so many political possibilities and obligations, it becomes hard for individuals to be motivated by any *one*. This paralysis is only exacerbated by a power that has become so omnipresent as to be dissipated and diffuse. It becomes possible to say anything – or nothing – with impunity precisely because words no longer touch on the core of power. In turning to “practices,” I seek to think specifically and concretely about those interactions that can move beyond these subjectively experienced uncertainties and diffuse political power.

The turn to practices is broadly visible across both political theory and political science. By the 1990s, inquiry in the Anglo-American world into broad, macro-level questions had gradually morphed into the study and practice of identity politics. Broadly, the language of “practices” captured the movement from collective to personal concerns as well as from theory to embodied action.<sup>1</sup> It emphasized activity and process

<sup>1</sup> Political theory does not have an acknowledged “practice turn” that is discussed in its literature; questions of theory and practice have been at the heart of political thinking at least since Plato. Nonetheless, the language of practices has gained special salience in several key debates. It is most recognizable in the contrast of rule-bound ethics with those that are virtue- or practice-based. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). The language is also associated with ordinary language theory and the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and those who write alongside them. Linda Zerilli has used “practices” as a bridge between ordinary language practice and feminist practices; likewise it can be found in the work of Shoshana Felman: Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). And finally, as I discuss at greater length in Chapter 1, there is a burgeoning literature on ancient and contemporary “practices of the self.” John Rajchman offers a good gloss on philosophy’s turn to ethics and ethical practice. See John Rajchman, “Ethics after Foucault” *Social Text* 13/14 (1986): 165–83.

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over *telos*. The need for greater understanding as to how such practices might be adopted and leveraged in the service of self-transformation is evident. If western politics has become one of apathy, then our political practices have become practices of *disengagement* – of circumscribing our attachments to the smallest justifiable terrain. Turning to practices as the source for engagement, then, must be more than changing the terms of contract so as to jolt persons into action. To generate engagement, practices must redirect affective investment, they must be adequately reciprocal so as to ride out uncertainties and generate trust, and they must be dense enough to sustain broader frameworks of meaning. Indeed, to bolster the claim that these practices demonstrate the necessary intensity (one at once personal and political), they are often described as “like a therapy”<sup>2</sup> or offering the “sensitive therapy” of friendship,<sup>3</sup> and they occasionally acquire a pedagogical tinge. In reaching for this language, scholars of such bent seek to characterize the intense relationships that are at once personal and political, intimate and critical, local and meaning-laden.

Different periods and places have invoked different practices toward different ends: the ancient Greeks and Romans drew on different modes for “care of the self”; the Judeo-Christian tradition relied on an ascetics of self-renunciation; the early moderns spoke in terms of “soul-direction.” These earlier vocabularies and practices no longer suffice for the contemporary western world. We need a framework of meaning that can speak to the invasion of uncertainty and doubt into the public realm, one that comes with the loss of external doctrines of authority such as nature, custom, religion, and tradition. Such a framework must be equal to the task, in Foucault’s words, of cultivating “a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty.”<sup>4</sup> To function, this interpretive framework must be able to draw on practices in trust and truth-telling, practices that would sustain the efforts of political community to authorize its deeds. In various ways, political theorists have long turned to Freud and Foucault, independently of one another, to address this challenge. As Richard Rorty has noted, we have long been “in the stage of suspecting that *something* is going to have to change in our old ways of speaking,

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophic Investigations*, 2nd edition, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), §133d.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Norris uses this phrase to describe the work of Stanley Cavell in his Introduction to *The Claim to Community*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, p. 319.

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but not yet knowing *what*.”<sup>5</sup> Psychoanalytic and parrhesiastic practices offer a context and a vocabulary in which to change these old ways of speaking.

This book thus has two goals. The first is to analyze the multiple, overlapping relationships that bind practices in trust, truth-telling, and authority together. The insight gained enables us to evaluate these relationships’ pedagogical aim: to enable late moderns to develop their authorial capacities so as to engage with contemporary political authority. If we moderns must authorize and legitimate our own authoritative claims as a political community, then these relationships teach us to make and defend claims intrinsic to self- and political governance. By engaging the practices that underlie political authority, this book thus speaks to a classic problem of political theory. I argue that authority derives from a risky exchange modeled on that between educator and student, one that prepares for a no less dynamic exchange between rulers and ruled. As two of the intellectual minds most responsible for shaping the thought and politics of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault offer a compelling starting point for such a project. To Western society, Freud has contributed the model of the mind that shapes both popular consciousness of self-identity as well as the institutionalization of that identity in law, politics, and other areas. For his part, Foucault has articulated most clearly the doubts and uncertainties associated with the exercise of power, and indeed the pervasiveness of power throughout politics and society. As diagnosticians of modern western culture, Freud and Foucault also had a deeply practical bent. Their own interest in practices was motivated by the vulnerabilities they witnessed when working with patients (Freud) and prisoners (Foucault), and reflecting on the difficulties besetting agency. Each scholar attends to the psychological and political dimensions of personhood crucial to projects of political subjectivity and agency. Neither Freud nor Foucault denies the force, fortunate or not, of absolute moral claims and principles. Instead, they teach their readers how these moral values raise local, particular problems, problems that are no less worthy of being attended to for their failure to be transcendent. No cure, then, but care.

At the same time (and second), this book is not a pallid retreat to reformism. It is not content to rattle the bars of the modern liberal, capitalist cage and to say that the best we can hope for is to muddle along.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, “Freud, Morality and Hermeneutics,” *New Literary History* 12(1): 177–85, 177.

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Instead it seeks to scaffold these practices into an interpretive architecture that can guide political engagements. Toward this end, it first analyzes how the interpretive framework symbolized by this cage has become entrenched; then, how the political and ethical practices that support both have become eviscerated; and finally, how we might use this “hollowing out” to move away from diagnostic and therapeutic moments toward something more generative. Where much of the work on “practices of the self” has developed an aesthetic project around the “arts of living,” the present book seeks a more clearly political context for projects of self-cultivation. Aesthetic projects are not divorced from politics. Their political force relies on their ability to return to politics from an embodied experience so as to tell a new story about old hierarchies in a way that can compel innovative political response. My project seeks exactly this effect. In turning to the unusual sites of psychoanalysis and “fearless speech” (*parrhesia*), I acknowledge that these spaces unavoidably bear the traces of broader political and cultural structures. The dynamics of these spaces, however, seek to make their inhabitants more self-reflexive about these structures, their effects, and any accompanying uncertainties.

Moving beyond the failures of liberal politics cannot only be a question of interpretation; it will also require tremendous change to political, social, and especially economic structures. Addressing those structures lies beyond the scope of this book. The marker of the post-liberal age is that we have come to subjectivize our ethical responses to structural problems (by framing in terms of identity the questions: What is to be done? How ought I to act?). If so, then we need to begin with where we are. We need to begin with those practices – at once personal and collective, subjective and political – that might move us past those vulnerabilities that threaten agency. And so I turn to the language of authorship and authority for the architecture of a “way out.”

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The frontispiece is Moritz von Schwind's *The Prisoner's Dream* (1836). Source: Schack-Galerie, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen/ Art Resource, NY. This image was also the frontispiece to Freud's *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Permission granted by Art Resource.



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The cover image is Pablo Picasso's *Child Playing with Truck* (1953). From Musée Picasso, Paris, France; Photo Credit: RMN-Grand Palais/Gérard Blot/Art Resource, NY. Permission granted by the Picasso Administration/ARS.

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Abbreviations

In the pages that follow, certain texts are cited frequently. The references to these standard, scholarly editions have been shortened.

CT	<i>Courage of the Truth</i>
DE I	<i>Dits et Écrits, volume I (French edition)</i>
DE II	<i>Dits et Écrits, volume II (French edition)</i>
GS	<i>Government of the Self and Others</i>
HS I	<i>History of Sexuality, volume I</i>
SE	<i>Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud</i>