Salvatore Di Piazza

Believe, obey, fight

ABSTRACT

The article takes its cue from the Fascist motto 'Believe, obey, fight', interpreting it as a formula that condenses a grammar of blind or irresponsible obedience. Through a reinterpretation of the motto in the light of classical Greek vocabulary, the essay highlights the structural link between faith (*pistis*) and obedience (*peithesthai*), showing how the nature of belief—oscillating between reasoned adherence and unreflective reliance—structurally determines the quality and type of obedience. In the second part, the analysis focuses mainly on the functions that make *Amtssprache*, the bureaucratic language, the linguistic practice that most effectively promotes blind obedience: obscuring and distancing; automating; building loyalty.

KEYWORDS

(ENG) Obedience; Fanaticism; Faith; *Amtssprache.*

SALVATORE DI PIAZZA[1]

Believe, obey, fight

> . . . There is a placard on the office wall that says, My loyalty is my honour and my honour is my loyalty. Strive. Obey. JUST BELIEVE! And I find it highly suggestive that our word for ideal obedience – Kadavergehorsam – has a corpse in it (which is doubly curious, because cadavers are the most refractory things on earth). The duteousness of the corpse. The conformity of the corpse. Here at the KL, in the cremas, in the pits: they're dead. But then so are we, we who obey . . .
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> M. Amis, *The zone of interest*

1. Semantic affinities

The fascist motto 'Believe, obey, fight' is one of the most effective propaganda slogans of 20th-century Italian politics. An asyndetic sequence of three verbs in the infinitive form, used with an imperative valence, which loomed stark and hammering on buildings, posters and magazines in Mussolini's Italy. What appears to be a simple political slogan, however, is at the same time a formula capable of condensing a veritable grammar of subjugation and obedience, revealing a profound interweaving that integrates faith, subordination and mobilisation. It is precisely this intertwining that we propose to analyse here – going beyond the specific case of Italian fascism, however – in order to

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identify some of the main mechanisms that contribute to forging blind or irresponsible obedience. This motto suits our purposes well, especially if we adopt a small stratagem – namely, if we try to read it through the eyes of an intellectual from ancient Greece. Classical Greek, in fact, establishes a very strong link between 'believing' and 'obeying' based on a common semantic root, which is lost in English.

In the Greek lexicon, the verb commonly translated as 'to believe' is *pisteuein*, which possesses a significant polysemy: it can refer both to a belief grounded in evidence and arguments deemed persuasive, and to an attitude of adherence that is less argumentative and more unreflective. This semantic ambivalence is not secondary, since it signals the constitutive tension between believing as a reasoned and motivated act and believing as unconditional trust.

A similar complexity characterises the verb normally translated as 'to obey', namely *peithesthai*, a verb in the middle-passive form that likely preceded, chronologically, the emergence of the active form, *peithein*, used with the meaning of 'to persuade'[2] . Obeying, from the Greek perspective, therefore involves allowing oneself to be persuaded to the point of accepting another's will as binding[3] , so that obedience appears to take the form of a sort of internalised persuasion, even assuming – in some cases – the form of fanatical adherence[4] . The two verbs therefore belong to a single conceptual family that falls within the broad semantic field of the root *peith-*, which revolves around the notion of persuasion and the related notion of trust. Another term connected to these two is *pistis*, the *nomen actionis* of *pisteuein,* which can mean proof, belief, persuasion, trust, but also – and this is the translation found, for example, in the Gospels – faith.

In light of this, it is not surprising that an analysis of the phenomenon of obedience – and in particular of blind obedience – becomes clearer when considered alongside a reflection on the mechanisms of belief, which in turn intersects with the religious sphere, that is, the realm in which *pistis* is often exemplarily understood and perceived as a form of belief so solid and constitutive as

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[2] E. BENVENISTE, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes, tome 1 : Economie, parenté, société*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1969, p. 115. The most comprehensive overview of *peithein* is probably still that of G.M. PEPE, *Studies in Peitho*, PhD thesis, Princeton University, Princeton 1966.

[3] It is no coincidence, in fact, that Homer's use of *peitho* derivatives highlights how such terms describe structurally asymmetrical relationships, in which a dominant subject directs, guides, or even determines the behaviour of the dominated.

[4] On the link between obedience and persuasion, see S. GRIMAUDO, *Obbedienza e persuasione:due modelli della relazione medico-paziente nella Grecia antica'*, in 'Ὅρμος. Ricerche di Storia Antica', n.s. 6, 2014, pp. 35–47.

to encourage — if not even determine — faithful obedience[5] . Upon closer reflection, after all, 'believe, obey, fight' is a motto that could also fit perfectly within the realm of religion: here too, in fact, as well as in the political sphere, faith produces obedience and together they generate potential energy, capable of being translated into kinetic energy, that is, into the capacity for action, for struggle, in defence of that creed.

What we shall attempt to demonstrate is that, to foster forms of unthinking, blind or irresponsible obedience, two preferred strategies, often intertwined, are at work:

1) the construction of a trust-based relationship of an almost fideistic kind with authority, in which the subject progressively renounces their own evaluative autonomy;

2) the use of language that encourages automated behavioural patterns, which reduce the need for judgement and transform obedience into a conditioned response to specific stimuli.

2. *The risks of* pistis, *the risks of obedience*

The link between *pistis* (trust/faith) and *peithesthai* (obedience) is best understood by starting with the common ambivalent structure that runs through both concepts: in both cases, there is a positive aspect and a (potentially) negative one. In *pistis* there is always at stake a gesture of *entrusting* on the part of the subject toward someone or something else, whether it be a creed, an institution, or an authority.. However, the form that this entrusting takes varies considerably between the two poles of trust and faith, and from this variation arise very different modes of obedience. The more the act of *pistis* is oriented towards the pole of trust, the more the dimension of risk in this act remains alive; thus, those who entrust themselves do so knowing that the other may disappoint or fail, and it is precisely this awareness that prompts caution, calculation and continuous evaluation. Trust generates a form of *reflective* entrustment, which does not negate criticism but integrates it as part of the relationship. From it may arise a responsible obedience, capable of subordinating itself without losing the possibility of revision or dissent.

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[5] It is worth noting that this is not the only possible interpretation of obedience in a religious context (see, for example, R. BULTMANN, *Jesus and the Word*, New York 1934, who insists on the necessity of inner consent on the part of the believer for there to be genuine obedience). We refer here above all to the way in which religious belief is understood. Emblematic of this is, for example, Canetti's assertion that 'it is customary to regard the faithful as sheep and to praise them for their submissiveness' (E. CANETTI, *Crowds and Power*, Continuum, New York 1981, p. 25). For a more detailed analysis of religious *pistis*, we refer the reader to S. DI PIAZZA, C. MARIAN, *'Πίστις is said in many ways'*, in 'Graeco-Latina Brunensia', no. 2, 2023, pp. 49–65.

Conversely, the more the act of *pistis* leans towards the pole of faith, the more it tends to suspend the perception of risk: surrender is rooted in certainty rather than in verification, producing a form of obedience that is potentially blind, since the absence of perceived risk renders the exercise of judgement superfluous. In this shift of *pistis* from trust to faith, we can see how a principle of cohesion can, in the absence of adequate counterbalances, become a mechanism capable of reducing the critical autonomy of individuals. If, therefore, a certain measure of *pistis* is vital for a community, precisely because it creates cohesion and facilitates interpersonal and hierarchical relationships, an excess of *pistis*, in the same way, can instead lead to a dysfunction in the functioning of social structures and hierarchical relationships.

The same can be said of obedience, which has no positive or negative value in itself[6]. Here too, community life could not be sustained without forms of coordination of action that inevitably require acts of obedience. As Arendt reminds us, '[o]bedience is a political virtue of the first order, and without it no body politic could survive[7]. The crucial question is therefore not *whether* to obey, but *how* and *under what conditions* to obey. Obedience can be a factor of stability, cooperation and institutional trust; or, if based on a faith that neutralises the perception of risk and limits, it can become fertile ground for political and moral irresponsibility. Furthermore, the dynamics of trust are never irreversible. The fluidity of the trust/faith relationship allows for conversions, ruptures and renegotiations; what today appears as irrevocable faith may tomorrow be reinterpreted as cautious trust, and what today is vigilant trust may harden into dogmatic faith.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the political and ethical quality of obedience depends on the type of trust that underpins it. Where trust prevails as an acknowledgement of risk, obedience retains a critical and responsible character; where faith that erases risk dominates, it tends to transform into irresponsible obedience. Obedience, therefore, is a complex phenomenon to be understood in the light of the various forms of *pistis*: only a dynamic balance between trust and faith allows a community to build its cohesion without sacrificing the critical capacity of its members.

3. The ideological background of obedience

Blind obedience thus stands out against a background of meaning within which the concrete order is situated. The construction of such an ideological background—a system of pre-reflective

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[6] On this point, see also J.-L. NANCY, *Tu vas obéir!*, Bayard, Paris 2021.

[7] H. ARENDT, *Responsibility and Judgement*, Schocken Books, New York 2003, p. 46.

beliefs that defines what appears legitimate, necessary, or obvious—is the real device that shapes the willingness to obey. T The more this background is internalized and left unexamined, the more obedience becomes automated: not so much and not only because the will or the capacity for judgment diminish, but because they are reoriented upstream, in the very act through which the subject interprets the world and their own position within it. To put it in Milgram's terms, 'ideological justification is vital in obtaining *willing* obedience, for it permits the person to see his behavior as serving a desirable end'[8] : authority does not need to coerce, because it operates through the symbolic architecture that renders its commands plausible and legitimate. Hence his hypothesis that the destructive behaviour of German citizens under Nazism – an exemplary case with respect to the theme of irresponsible obedience – was the result of a prolonged internalisation of authority, achieved 'through relatively long processes of indoctrination'[9] , capable of transforming the very structure of moral perception. What is internalised, in fact, is not the content of the command, but the principle of its validity; and once that principle is taken as self-evident, criticism is not suppressed: it simply does not arise. It is here that Wittgenstein's metaphor of the river-bed offers a decisive clarification: every practice, including obedience, depends on a set of underlying beliefs that are not subject to verification, but constitute the very condition of verification, just as the river-bed is the backdrop that allows the water to flow.

Authoritarian regimes operate precisely at this deep level, through pervasive propaganda techniques, transforming belief into an unreflective act, reinforcing *pistis* in its fideistic aspect, and neutralising any possibility that the established order might be perceived as problematic. In this way, it is not necessary to control every individual behaviour: it suffices to control the interpretative framework within which behaviours acquire meaning. The obedience that results is not merely execution, but the manifestation of a symbolic horizon that renders the question of why one should obey superfluous, since the self-evidence of obedience has been produced at the level of the mindset, even before that of action.

4. Obedience and fanaticism

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[8] S. MILGRAM, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, Tavistock Publications Ltd, London p. 142. See also C. BROWNING, *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland*, Harper Collins, New York 1992, pp. 176–184.

[9] S. MILGRAM, *Obedience to Authority*, op. cit., p. 176.

From this perspective, the next – and most radical – step in the production of obedience is fanaticism, understood as an extreme form of belief that eliminates the critical distance between subject and authority. On this point, the observations of Viktor Klemperer are indispensable; the German Jewish philologist, in *The Language of the Third Reich.*, collects and analyses the changes the German language underwent during the Nazi years, which we have already noted as one of the paradigmatic cases to which our observations apply. Among the transformations that strike him most and on which he dwells at length is that relating to the connotation and use of the adjective *fanatisch*: whilst '[p]rior to the Third Reich no one would have thought of using the word 'fanatical' in a positive sense[10] , very soon, during the years of the rise of Hitler's regime, it took on a distinctly positive meaning. The explanation is simple, in Klemperer's view: the Führer, he observes, could not confine himself to leading; '[i]t is merely that a leader also needs people to lead, those on whose unconditional obedience he can rely'[11] , and such absolute obedience was linguistically encapsulated in the adverb 'blindly', a key word of the LTI, no less recurrent than 'fanatical'. Ideal obedience is that which precedes thought, for 'to carry out an order blindly I mustn't even begin to think about it'[12] : reflection, in fact, introduces a pause that may give rise to scruples, criticism and ultimately refusal of the order. Fanaticism responds precisely to this political need: to erase the interval between command and execution. For this reason, writes Klemperer, '[T]he basic principle underlying all military training lies in the inculcation of a series of automated movements and actions', so that the individual reacts to the command like a machine to an external impulse. It is therefore not an accident, but a systematic strategy: 'national Socialism is founded on fanaticism, and trains people to be fanatical by all possible means'[13] . The etymology of *fanaticus*, derived from *fanum*, meaning a sacred place or temple, is already highly revealing, referring to a state of religious inspiration or possession: the fanatic is one who acts as if inspired and commanded by a higher power, removing his own behaviour from critical evaluation[14] .

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[10] V. KLEMPERER, *The Language of the Third Reich. LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii:a Philologist's notebook*, Bloomsbury, London 2000, p. 61.

[11] *Ivi.,* p. 156.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Ivi., p. 62.

[14] Klemperer, again, as a staunch Enlightenment thinker, observes how the *LTI* systematically favours everything that is instinct, feeling and immediacy, setting it against intellect and reflection: after 20 July 1944, Goebbels was able to explain the attempt on the Führer's life as the result of 'eclipsing of instinctual forces by those of a diabolical intellect', implicitly celebrating a human model that reacts without thinking, like 'herd of rams' that follows the chief ram even if he jumps into the sea (ivi, p. 246).

Even from the perspective of linguistic register – and not merely content – the LTI seeks to produce *religious* followers of Nazism and the Führer. Klemperer observes, in fact, that, reading the instructions provided by Hitler himself in *Mein Kampf* on how to influence the masses, 'are left in no doubt as to the deliberate nature of the seduction which lies behind the adoption of this pious, ecclesiastical register'[15] . The vocabulary, syntax and tone of Nazi propaganda intentionally replicate the forms of preaching and liturgy. It is also in this sense that the LTI, at its most intense moments, becomes – as Klemperer further writes – a 'language of faith'[16] . Political language does not describe reality nor discuss it, but sacralizes it, placing the Führer and his command in a sphere removed from verification and criticism. The order is thus not perceived as a contingent directive, but as an expression of an almost transcendent necessity. The recourse to religious-ecclesiastical language is therefore not ornamental, but functional to the production of blind obedience: by transforming politics into a secularised form of worship, it stabilises fanaticism as a permanent disposition and renders obedience not only a duty, but an inner obligation, since it is founded on a belief that precedes and neutralises judgement.

5. *Cadaverous obedience*

An extreme expression of this suspension of judgement and responsibility is what the German language encapsulates in the term *Kadavergehorsam*, literally 'cadaverous obedience'. Adolf Eichmann, the *quintessential* model of the bureaucrat who blindly obeys the criminal orders of his superiors, cited this term during one of the interrogations at his trial in Jerusalem[17] , to vividly describe the kind of obedience that arises from a complete renunciation of critical thought.

Come to think of it, '*Kadavergehorsam*' is an oxymoron, juxtaposing the idea of obedience – which presupposes an acting subject – with that which, by definition, is devoid of will. And yet, precisely for this reason, the corpse represents the paradigm of perfect obedience: it does not argue, it does not hesitate, it offers no resistance. Nothing, more than a dead body, expresses a total consent that cannot be otherwise, because it maintains no distance between command and execution. The genealogy of this image does not originate in Nazism, but has its roots in religious tradition, with which, once again, the theme of obedience is intertwined. St Ignatius of Loyola, in *The Constitutions*

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[15] Ivi, p. 115.

[16] Ivi, p. 113.

[17] H. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin, London 2006 [1963], p. 135.

of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms, prescribes for the members of the order a docile and total obedience, exhorting them to renounce 'with blind obedience any contrary opinion and judgment' and to allow themselves to be guided by the superior 'as if he were a lifeless body (*perinde ac cadaver*), which allows itself to be carried to any place and treated in any way'[18] . A similar formula is already found in Francis of Assisi, who *'assimilavit perfectum obedientem corpori mortuo'*[19] . In both cases, the metaphor of the corpse indicates the highest degree of renunciation of autonomous judgement, theologically justified as entrustment to God. In the Nazi context, of course, this figure undergoes a radical secularisation: faith becomes secular, the deity is the Führer. *Kadavergehorsam* thus marks the extreme point of the process analysed thus far: from the internalization of authority to the language of faith, up to the reduction of the moral agent to a mere executor, in whom consent is no longer a decision but a permanent condition of absolute passivity. The human being who becomes a corpse, a body without will.

6. The Amtssprache

Once again, Eichmann allows us to introduce another element that we consider crucial to understanding the mechanisms of blind obedience: the role of the *Amtssprache*, the bureaucratic language. During the trial, when asked to clarify the meaning of the expression *'kontra geben'* which he had used, Eichmann showed a clear difficulty in expressing himself outside standardised formulas; aware of a limitation which he himself attributed to a sort of aphasia, he ended up justifying himself with a statement as simple as it was revealing: *'Amtssprache ist meine einzige Sprache'*[20] . This statement should not be interpreted as a mere individual idiosyncrasy, but as a symptom of a broader process of the bureaucratisation of thought, in which language does not merely describe action, but structures its meaning in advance and neutralises critical evaluation.

Bureaucratic language denotes, on the one hand, the register characteristic of rigidly hierarchical organisational structures – such as administrative and military ones – and, on the other, the linguistic means through which the state articulates its communicative relationship with citizens.

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[18] IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms*, edited J. W. Padberg, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, § 547.

[19] *Speculum Perfectionis*, ch. 48, in *Fonti francescane*, edited by E. Menestò and S. Brufani, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 1996.

[20] 'Officialese is my only language', H. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, op. cit., p. 48.

Particularly in the first case, but by extension also in the second, bureaucratic language appears to operate along three complementary axes:

- it obscures, preventing a critical assessment of the content;
- it automatizes, inducing standardised responses;
- it fosters loyalty, consolidating the relationship of dependence on authority.

7. The language that obscures

First and foremost, bureaucratic language obscures and, precisely for this reason, creates distance: impersonal phrasing, technical circumlocutions, abbreviations and the systematic use of abstract or euphemistic nouns produce a structural distance between words and reality, making it difficult to establish causal links and attribute individual responsibility. Action is thus described as an administrative event, as a procedural step, rather than as a human act endowed with moral effects. In this way, language does not explicitly deny the possibility of criticism, but renders it impracticable: what is not clearly understandable cannot easily be judged. Linguistic opacification therefore acts as a form of preventive neutralization of dissent, since it removes the contents from discussion even before it can take place. It is in this direction that some observations by Marcuse prove illuminating, which—although developed within a critical tradition directed at technological and capitalist society—clarify a more general mechanism. With regard to abbreviations, the 'mutilated words' of which Klemperer also speaks, such as NATO, UN, USSR, GDR, Marcuse identifies a sort of '"cunning of Reason" -the abbreviation may help to repress undesired questions. […]. The meaning is fixed, doctored, loaded. Once it has become an official vocable, constantly repeated in general usage, "sanctioned" by the intellectuals, it has lost all cognitive value […]. This language, which constantly imposes images, militates against the development and expression of concepts. In its immediacy and directness, it impedes conceptual thinking […] – the functionalized, abridged and unified language is the language of one-dimensional thought.'[21] . Opacity is therefore not a side effect but a function: what is reduced to an acronym or to a standardized formula becomes difficult to question, thereby escaping critical evaluation. And this, ultimately, is the characteristic of the one-dimensional man: not the inability to think in an absolute sense, but the structural impossibility of thinking *otherwise*. Functionalised and abridged language does not eliminate thought, but rigidly delimits its horizon; what is lost is not intelligence, but the second dimension of

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[21] H. MARCUSE, *One-Dimensional Man*, Routledge, New York 2006 [1964], pp. 97-98.

thought—that of negation, of critical distance, of the imagination of alternatives. In such a context, the administered world does not appear as a contingent historical construct, but as a natural and inevitable order, to which one adapts rather than adheres.

Already in Weber's typology of the bureaucrat (particularly the high-level bureaucrat) the decisive traits emerged that are later found in the prototype of the desk killer: 'technical expertise, obedience, the implementation of policies with the same diligence as if they conformed to one's most profound convictions, the predominence of functional reason or Zweckrationalitat to the exclusion of reflective judgement or qualitative reason, 'thoughtlessness', and the impoverishment of language and the inability to speak in anything but 'Officialise'.'[22].

Opacification and moral detachment therefore go hand in hand, since – and this is one of the points on which Arendt places the greatest emphasis – morality finds its foundation in the capacity for thought and in the reflective judgement that derives from it, without which it would not be possible to formulate judgements about what is good and what is evil, what is just and what is unjust. If it is true that '[c]lichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; the difference in Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all'[23]. According to the German philosopher, 'officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliche. […]. The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.'[24]. It is precisely this lack of *ethical imagination* – of putting oneself in another's shoes, of imagining the consequences of one's own actions – that bureaucratic language tends to atrophy. To distance oneself here means to neutralise: administrative jargon does not deny good and evil, but renders them irrelevant, replacing moral judgement with procedural correctness and producing subjects who do not choose, but function.

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[22] A. MILCHMAN, A. ROSENBERG, *Hannah Arendt and the Etiology of the Desk Killer: The Holocaust as Portent*, in 'History of European Ideas', vol. 15, nos. 1–3, 1992, pp. 213–226. Interesting observations in line with these can be found in S. FELMAN, *Theaters of Justice: Arendt in Jerusalem, the Eichmann Trial, and the Redefinition of Legal Meaning in the Wake of the Holocaust*, in 'Critical Inquiry', vol. 27, 2001, pp. 201–238.

[23] H. ARENDT, *Responsibility and Judgment*, op. cit., p. 160.

[24] H. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, op. cit., pp. 48–49. On this point, see also M. GORDON, *'Arendt and Conrad on the Banality of Evil: Some Implications for* Education', in 'Journal of Thought', vol. 34, no. 2, Summer 1999, pp. 15–30.

8. The language that automatizes

Secondly, bureaucratic language automatizes. It tends to reduce communicative interaction to a sequence of predictable, codified, repeatable responses. Forms, standard phrases and predefined categories do not require deliberation, but recognition and application. Those who speak or write in this register are not called upon to form a judgement, but to select the correct option from a given repertoire. Automation concerns not only the execution of the action, but the cognitive process itself: one learns to respond according to fixed patterns, to think in boxes, to translate complex situations into administrative categories. In this sense, language does not accompany the action, but precedes and determines it, transforming obedience into an almost reflexive response, devoid of internal friction. Once again, the case of the language of the Third Reich exemplifies these elements: 'everyone should be an automaton in the hand of his superior and leader, and at the same time he should also be the one who presses the button to activate the automatons under his own control. This construction disguises universal enslavement and depersonalization, and explains the excessive number of LTI expressions lifted from the realm of technology, the mass of mechanizing words […]. [T]he explicit mechanization of the individual himself is left up to the LTI. Its most characteristic, and probably also earliest, creation in this field is 'gleich-schalten {to force into line}'. you can see and hear the button at work which forces people – not institutions and impersonal authorities – to adopt the same, uniform attitude and movements"[25] .

9. The language that fosters loyalty

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[25] V. KLEMPERER. The Language of the Third Reich, op. cit., pp. 157–159. This process of mechanisation (including) through language in Hitler's Germany perhaps finds its ruthlessly perfect realisation in the organisation of the concentration camps. As Todorov observes, '[t]he inmates were not the only ones to undergo the process of depersonalization. In the totalitarian system, and especially in the camps, the guards tended toward this same condition, although they reached it by a different route. The goal of the system was to transform everyone into a cog in a vast machine and thus to deprive them of their will. […] the former guards typically fall back on the principle of obedience as their excuse […]. [I]t is clear that the demand for blind obedience,. the need to have each person see himself as a mere cog in a machine, is highly characteristic of the totalitarian system […]. Someone who only follows orders is no longer a person' (T. TODOROV, *Facing the Extreme*, Holt Paperbacks, New York 1997, pp. 165–166). For further discussion of these aspects, we refer the reader to S. DI PIAZZA, *'La lingua alla prova del* lager', in M. DI FIGLIA AND D. TONONI (eds.), 'Tempo e Shoah. Politiche dell'oblio e forme testimoniali', Palermo University Press, Palermo 2020, pp. 79–97.

Thirdly, bureaucratic language fosters loyalty. Precisely because it obscures and automatizes, it helps to consolidate a relationship of dependence on the authority that issues and legitimises it. The *Amtssprache* presents itself as neutral, objective and technically necessary. However, this apparent neutrality produces a peculiar form of externally directed trust: one relies on authority not because one considers it morally just, but because one perceives it as competent and inevitable. In this way, loyalty is not the result of a conscious choice, but the effect of a linguistic habit that stabilises the relationship of subordination. Bureaucratic loyalty is all the more effective the less it is explicitly addressed: the individual does not perceive themselves as obedient, but as a mere executor of procedures, whilst authority evades personal responsibility by presenting itself as an impersonal entity. This dynamic of loyalty operates not only through abstraction and standardisation, but also through a ritualistic and almost *hypnotic* dimension of language. In this sense, bureaucratic jargon shares with religious language precisely the same ritual structure: the repetition of formulas, abbreviations and acronyms produces familiarity, habituation and adherence, fostering the construction of automated mental habits, as seen previously.

Taken together, these three vectors demonstrate how bureaucratic language is not merely a technical tool, but a mechanism for governing behaviour. It is no coincidence that the *Amtssprache* was one of the main vehicles of Nazi propaganda, gradually absorbed not only by administrative bodies but also by everyday language, until it became a shared expressive framework. As Klemperer observes, the lexical poverty and syntactic monotony of the language are not accidental flaws, but instruments of domination: language produces mental habits, and the repetition of abstract and impersonal formulas fosters a veritable aphasia of thought, making it increasingly difficult to articulate a judgement that is not already provided for by the system.

10. The language of bureaucracy and the language of faith

In this sense, its functioning – albeit from a different perspective – exhibits a profound structural affinity with the 'language of faith' analysed by Klemperer, with which it converges for the purpose of the production of obedience. The language of faith operates through sacralisation: the command is imbued with an aura of higher necessity and adherence takes the form of conversion. The *Amtssprache*, by contrast, does not mobilise religious symbols or collective emotions, but presents itself as neutral, technical, impersonal; and yet it is precisely this apparent neutrality that constitutes its strength. If the former suspends judgement because it renders it sacrilegious, the latter suspends it

because it renders it superfluous. In both cases, what is lost is not the agent's intelligence, but the need to judge: in the first case because the truth is already given, in the second because the decision has already been made elsewhere, incorporated into the procedure.

The difference therefore concerns form, not outcome. Where the language of faith produces obedience through the absolutisation of the command, the *Amtssprache* produces it through its depersonalisation; where the former requires an act of belief, the latter induces an act of conformity. But both converge on the same result: transforming obedience from a deliberative practice into a heterodirected practice, as we were saying, in which the subject is not called upon to evaluate the content of the action, but rather to recognise the validity of the source – be it the Führer, the law, the office or the procedure. In this sense, the language of faith and bureaucratic language are not alternatives, but complementary registers of the same apparatus of power: the former prepares total adherence, the latter ensures its daily reproducibility, making obedience not only possible, but normal.

11. The bureaucrat and the fanatic

There is one point that remains ambiguous with respect to the framework we have outlined so far: does the bureaucrat who obeys blindly and irresponsibly do so out of fanaticism and ideology, or out of a cold sense of duty? Obviously there is no single answer, but once again the case of Eichmann can be useful in outlining at least one possible interpretation. According to Arendt, Eichmann seems to have acted less as a Nazi fanatic than as a cold bureaucrat with a rigid and pervasive sense of duty. There is a passage in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in which the German philosopher reconstructs the motivations given by the defendant regarding his exceptional loyalty to Hitler, which can be summarised in the phrase: 'the Führer's words had the force of law (*Führerworte haben Gesetzeskraft*)'[26] . For this reason, he had never asked for a written order from Hitler, as he had, on the other hand, done in the case of orders coming from Himmler, whose illegality must presumably have been obvious to him, as such a request seems to indicate. Arendt comments: '[t]o be sure, it was not merely Eichmann's conviction that Himmler was now giving "criminal" orders that determined his actions. But the personal element undoubtedly involved was not fanaticism, it was his genuine,

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[26] H. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, op. cit., p. 148. Milchman and Rosenberg share Arendt's position, arguing that visceral antisemitism was not a motivating factor in the career of Adolf Eichmann, even as it was not the key to the functioning of the desk killer as a human type in the Holocaust', A. MILCHMAN, A. ROSENBERG, *Hannah Arendt and the Etiology of the Desk Killer: The Holocaust as Portent*, op. cit., p. 216.

"boundless and immoderate admiration for Hitler" (as one of the defense witnesses called it)—for the man who had made it "from lance corporal to Chancellor of the Reich". It would be idle to try to figure out which was stronger in him, his admiration for Hitler or his determination to remain a law-abiding citizen of the Third Reich when Germany was already in ruins'[27] .

Todorov also seems to be on the same wavelength – with particular reference to the higher ranks of the hierarchy:'[t]he last of the more familiar explanations, ultimately no more useful than the first two, holds that concentration camps are a direct outgrowth of ideological fanaticism. There were indeed fanatical Communists among the guards of the gulags, just as there were fanatical Nazis among the concentration camp guards, but proportionally the fanatics were no more prevalent than the sadists. The predominant type was a different sort altogether: a conformist, willing to serve whoever wielded power and more concerned with his own welfare. than with the triumph of doctrine. Up and down the ladder of power, one finds only "pragmatists" and cynics. For such men, especially after they seize power, ideology (although not irrelevant) is a pretext rather than a motive. […] Vasily Grossman remarks that "The new state did not require holy apostles, fanatic, inspired builders, faithful, devout disciples. The new state did not even require servants—just clerks" (Forever Flowing 193)'[28] .

This interpretive line, which tends to exclude fanaticism as a decisive factor in bureaucratic obedience—at least in Eichmann's case—can, however, be articulated differently. If it is true that Eichmann does not appear as an ideological fanatic in the traditional sense of the term, and if it is equally true that ideology, once power has been consolidated, can function more as an alibi than as a genuine motivation, *the* fundamental question nonetheless remains open: what makes such radical and persistent obedience possible, especially when it translates into the systematic organization of death? The decisive point here concerns not so much *what* the bureaucrat thinks, but *how* he thinks; not the content of ideology, but the ideological structure of thought. In other words, what generates obedience is not primarily adherence to a specific doctrine, but rather a form of fidelization that suspends reflection.

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[27] H. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, op. cit., pp. 148-149. She expresses a similar view in an interview with Joachim Fest: '[I] do not believe he had any particular lust for power. He was the typical bureaucrat. And a bureaucrat, if he is truly nothing more than a bureaucrat, is then a very dangerous type. Ideology, in his case, did not, I believe, play a major role [Dass er besondere Machtgelüste gehabt hat, glaube ich nicht. Er war der typische Funktionär. Und ein Funktionär, wenn er wirklich nichts anderes ist als ein Funktionär, ist wirklich ein sehr gefährlicher Herr. Die Ideologie, glaube ich, hat keine sehr große Rolle dabei gespielt. Dies scheint mir das Entscheidende]', H. ARENDT, J. Fest, *Eichmann war von empörender Dummheit: Gespräche und Briefe*, Verlag, Munchen 2011, p. 33.

[28] T. Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, op. cit., pp. 123–124.

Those who are bound by loyalty, precisely because they do not reflect on what they are loyal to, act out of habit. From this perspective, the distinction between a cold bureaucrat driven by a sense of duty in itself and a bureaucrat driven by fanaticism appears less clear-cut than some interpretations suggest. It is, in fact, problematic to think that an individual could carry out objectively evil actions by appealing solely to an abstract duty, devoid of any symbolic or emotional support. The fact that the bureaucrat acts without thinking, in the Arendtian sense of *thoughtlessness*, does not imply that he acts without being inspired by some form of faith or fundamental orientation. On the contrary, automatic action is possible precisely because it is already underpinned by a radical trust in the source of the command, which renders judgement superfluous. Eichmann is not the bureaucrat who carries out neutral tasks; he is the bureaucrat who sends specific individuals to their deaths, and to do so he must believe – at least in a structural sense – that he is carrying out the Führer's will. The implicit formula underpinning this obedience is not a reasoned moral conviction, but an act of trust: *if he wanted it, then he must have had his reasons*. Here a form of fanaticism emerges that does not coincide with doctrinal adherence, but which can be defined as fanaticism without content, a fanaticism of order and function, which requires no deep convictions but feeds on admiration, identification and – ultimately – faith. It is precisely this structure – in which the content of the action may not even be inwardly shared – that allows us to understand how it is possible to obey without morally approving of what is being done, provided one believes absolutely in the legitimacy of the one who commands.

In this sense, the biblical episode of Abraham ready to sacrifice his son Isaac is particularly illuminating for understanding how obedience can be separate from moral approval of the act's content. Abraham is not presented as someone convinced of the intrinsic rightness of killing his son, nor as someone who has devised an ethical justification for the act required; on the contrary, what makes his obedience possible is the absolute certainty that following God's will, as such, is the right thing to do. 'Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!". "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you".' (Genesis 22). The radicality of the narrative does not lie in the content of the command, but in the displacement of the criterion of judgment: it is no longer the action that is evaluated, but the source of the command that is removed from all questioning. The act becomes right not because it is recognized as such, but because it is willed by one who possesses absolute authority. In this sense, the biblical narrative shows in paradigmatic form a structure of obedience in which faith does not eliminate moral conflict but suspends it, rendering the evaluation of the content irrelevant. It is precisely this structure that makes it possible to juxtapose, despite the evident differences of context, the case of Abraham with that of

Eichmann: in both cases, what makes obedience possible is not the conscious adherence to the required action, but unconditional trust in the legitimacy of the one who commands. It follows that the bureaucrat cannot be described either as a mere executor devoid of involvement, nor as a fanatic in the traditional sense of the term, that is, one driven by strong and explicitly articulated ideological convictions. Rather, he is the bearer of a form of structural fanaticism, in which faith concerns not so much what is done as the authority that commands: a faith that fully transfers the responsibility for judgment to the source of the command and that, precisely for this reason, makes possible a radical and irresponsible obedience.

12. Conclusion: doubt, persuade and (in any case) fight

We have seen how the triad of the fascist motto – *believe, obey, fight* – effectively summarises and condenses the grammar of blind and irresponsible obedience, a grammar founded on the suspension of judgement, on the external direction of action and on the naturalisation of obedience. In conclusion, we propose a counter-triad, not strictly opposed but structurally alternative, which is conceptually close to the idea of responsible obedience: to doubt, to persuade and (in any case) to fight.

Doubting is the first fundamental political gesture. Not in the paralyzing sense of absolute skepticism, but as an exercise of the faculty of judgment, as a refusal to accept a command as such, to confuse the source of the order with its justification. Everything we have analyzed—from *pistis* slipping from trust into blind faith, from the structural fanaticism of the bureaucrat to the *Amtssprache* that obscures and automatizes—shows that irresponsible obedience arises precisely where doubt is expelled as a sign of weakness or defeatism. To doubt, instead, means reopening the space of moral evaluation, restoring to human action its reflective dimension, and removing it from automatism[29] .

But doubt alone is not enough. This is why the second verb is to persuade, which here consciously replaces 'to obey', starting from the idea we expressed at the beginning, that *peithesthai* (to obey) is the middle-passive form of *peithein* (to persuade). Persuasion is to be understood here as an eminently *political* practice, which presupposes subjects capable of arguing and of being convinced. It is in this vein that we can recall the decisive passage from Plato's *Crito*: Socrates explicitly acknowledges that the law may be unjust and that, in such a case, the citizen is not simply

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[29] We are, of course, aware that automatism in obedience itself represents an extremely important element within hierarchically organized structures, but ours is obviously not an operational proposal, but a theoretical-speculative one.

bound to obey, but has the option – and in a certain sense the duty – to choose between persuading and complying. As Socrates himself points out, 'whoever considers the law to be unjust can and must persuade the lawmaker to change it' (47d)[30] . Replacing *'obey'* with *'persuade'* means shifting the focus from authority to responsibility, from command to deliberation. It is on this point that, once again, Hannah Arendt's reflections prove particularly illuminating. Arendt explicitly calls for a re-examination of our political vocabulary, observing that '[e]ven in a strictly bureaucratic organization, with its fixed hierarchical order, it would make much more sense to look upon the functioning of the "cogs" and wheels in terms of overall support for a common enterprise than in our usual terms of obedience to superiors.'[31] . Obeying a country's laws, Arendt points out, actually means supporting a particular constitution; and it is precisely this support that is withdrawn by revolutionaries and rebels. Consequently, the morally relevant question is not 'Why did you obey?', but 'Why did you give your support?'. As Arendt strongly emphasises, it would be desirable to 'eliminate this pernicious word "obedience" from our vocabulary of moral and political thought. If we think these matters through, we might regain some measure of self-confidence and even pride, that is, regain what former times called the dignity or the honor of man: not perhaps of mankind but of the status of being human' [32] .

Finally, there remains "to fight," which of the three verbs is the one that appears most charged with violence. If this verb can be salvaged, however, it is only on the condition that it be radically separated from the blind obedience that accompanied it in the fascist triad. To fight, here, does not mean to carry out orders, but to resist; not to annul judgment, but to bring it into play; not to adhere to an imposed end, but to defend a space of freedom and responsibility. In this sense, conflict is not the opposite of politics, but its extreme limit, which opens when persuasion is made impossible and doubt is systematically repressed.

The counter-triad of *doubting, persuading, fighting* promises neither salvation nor harmony. Rather, it accepts uncertainty as a constitutive condition of political life and entrusts to the exercise of judgement – always fragile, always revocable – the task of holding together individual responsibility and collective coexistence. If there is one lesson that emerges clearly from the analysis of blind obedience, it is that the danger lies not in conflict, but in its abolition; not in doubt, but in its prohibition.

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[30] On this point, see G. CORSO, *Obbedire alle leggi? La lezione di Socrate*, in 'Nuove Autonomie', no. 1, 2022, pp. 7–20.

[31] H. ARENDT, *Responsibility and Judgement*, op. cit., p. 47.

[32] Ivi*.,* pp. 48.