

WHAT IS AN AUTHOR ?

QU'EST-CE QU'UN AUTEUR ?



WORKSHOP

21 & 22 November 2025

SciencesPo

 COLUMBIA | ALLIANCE



Workshop:

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What is an author?

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Dates:

21 November 2025, 2:00pm-6:30pm

22 November 2025, 9:00am-1:30pm

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Place:

Room K.011, Sciences Po, 1 place Saint Thomas d'Aquin, 75007 Paris

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Speakers:

Jimena Canales (Harvard University), Martin Giraudeau (Sciences Po), Frédéric Graber (CNRS-EHESS), Matthew L. Jones (Princeton University), Kara Keeling (USC Dornsife), Vincent Lépinay (Sciences Po), Celia Lury (University of Warwick), Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli (UCLA), Thomas Scheffer (Goethe University Frankfurt), Katrin Trüstedt (ZfL Berlin)

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URL:

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-droit/en/events/what-is-an-author/>

Schedule:

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Friday 21 November

13:00-14:00 *Lunch*

14:00-14:45 Katrin Trüstedt (ZfL Berlin): Who can speak, for whom?

14:50-15:35 Frédéric Graber (CNRS-EHESS): Anonymity and history. The author-function in the history of science and technology

15:40-16:25 Jimena Canales (Harvard University): What is *not* an author? Understanding the divide between the sciences and the humanities through a study of the 'reading' of measurement instruments

16:25-17:55 *Break*

17:55-17:40 Kara Keeling (University of Southern California): Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur de la Black Radical Tradition ? (*title tbc*)

17:45-18:30 Celia Lury (University of Warwick): "What matters who is speaking?" or Can 'people like you' be an author?

20:00 *Dinner*

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Saturday 22 November

09:00-09:45 Thomas Scheffer (Goethe University Frankfurt): Some (still authorized) notes on the collapse of political discourse including its authorship

09:50-10:35 Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli (UCLA): Who authors the deepfake?

10:40-11:25 Matthew L. Jones (Princeton University): Co-optation and romanticism: the critique of authorship and generative AI

11:25-12:55 *Break*

12:55-12:40 Martin Giraudeau & Vincent Lépinay (Sciences Po): Author-date: a system of echoing references

12:45-13:30 Martin Giraudeau (Sciences Po): The Author and Company: On the business writings of Beaumarchais

13:30 *Lunch*

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Intent:

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Although Michel Foucault's essay on the question What is an author? was written half a century ago, it is still as vital, engaging, and thought-provoking as it was when it first appeared. It continues to inform scholarship across a wide range of disciplines: law, philosophy, literature and book history, history of science, and social studies of science. At last count, the English translation alone had 13,215 Google Scholar citations and the effect is not diminishing; What is an author? received more citations in 2020 than it did in 2010.

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The object of this workshop, however, is not to celebrate the success of the essay but to intensify its generative potential, and to do so by situating it in relation to technological, political, and cultural developments that have unfolded since its publication. Conversations and disputes over the knowledge-power nexus, textual authority and modes of individuation are now very different from those that were taking place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is impossible today to pose the question What is an author? without having in mind theories and politics of race and gender that have emerged since that period (some inspired by Foucault's work), or without noticing the turn in critical theory that provincializes Foucault's essentially European perspective. Similarly, it is obvious that the medial apparatuses within which something like an author function can take shape have changed quite considerably, producing diverse effects: new forms of authorial surveillance, anonymity and obfuscation; the emergence of social media and the platformed author; the shading of the author function into other modes of individuation such as branding; the development of digital publication and peer-to-peer dissemination; the emergence of authorial algorithms; the quantification of an author's work through metrics; and so on.

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Our object in inviting a sustained and multi-perspectival reflection on What is an author? is not to bring the text 'up

to date' by expanding and adapting its argument. Nor do we expect our contributors necessarily to engage closely or exegetically with the text itself, though reflections of this kind are of course very welcome. The call is for reflections which take up and re-pose the question of authorship in the broad and generative terms that Foucault posed it. Which, in other words, identify an 'effect' whose conditions lie in the articulation of epistemes, techniques, practices or political configurations that are of broad cultural significance. So we anticipate figures of authorship that might be very different from those analyzed by Foucault, and which might emerge from very different domains, strata or 'worlds'.

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Abstracts:

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Jimena Canales (Harvard University)

What is *not* an author? Understanding the divide between the sciences and the humanities through a study of the “reading” of measurement instruments

The philosopher Michel Foucault, in his seminal essay “What is an Author?” (1969) includes scientists as “initiators of discursive practices” using the examples of Galileo and Newton. In his account, scientists hold a unique status with the typology of discourse since investigations into their role as authors are circumscribed in a manner that does not affect the content of their authorial productions. “A study of Galileo’s works could alter our knowledge of the history, but not of the science.” This essay analyzes how scientists obtained such a status within the ecosystem of modern authorship through the development of scientific instrumentation, such as dials and indicators, that reduced complex phenomena (time, temperature, pressure, etc.) to numbers. The use and pervasiveness of those instruments from the nineteenth century to the present gave rise to the non-discursive social relations underpinning modern technological societies. By including the development and use of these instruments in the history of science this essay proposes to study the reduction of hermeneutical spaces undertaken by the “initiators of non-discursive practices” that cannot be traced to a single inventor. Such a development culminated with the prevalence of “users” designated by “usernames” characteristic of a social media ecosystem where traditional forms of écriture are now primed for replacement with AI-author hybrids.

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Martin Giraudeau (Sciences Po)

The Author and Company: On the business writings of Beaumarchais

In his conference on “What is an author?” (1969), Michel Foucault asked what counts as the works of an author. Taking the example of his editing of Friedrich Nietzsche, he raised the question of the need to include, within the author’s complete works, archival documents such as receipts from the

dry cleaner's - "*les notes de blanchisserie*." The question was rhetorical, however: Foucault only asked it to show that, of course, such texts were of a different nature - they were not authored texts; perhaps not even part of a period's "discourse." In this paper, I consider the bearing of the notion of the author on business writings, by looking at the case of Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais's entrepreneurial, commercial, and financial texts: not exactly dry cleaner's notes, but not poetry, theatre scripts, or novels either. Prior studies have looked at the connections between prose and profit in Beaumarchais, based on the fact that he is considered *the* inventor of modern copyright and that he ran, with the *Société littéraire typographie de Kehl*, what was the largest European printing house in the 1780s. But Beaumarchais was also busy with other businesses, apparently detached from the literary world. He was, with his mentor Pâris-Duverney, involved in slave trade and bullion ventures in the 1760s; he ran a massive commercial operation shipping weapons, ammunition, and people to support the insurgents in the American Revolutionary War, and then attempted to do the same with shipments of rifles from Holland in the French Revolution; he was also a leading investor in the Compagnie des eaux de Paris and the Dupont de Nemours company. Some of his contemporaries in fact considered him as more of a businessperson than a true literary author, and it took a good century for him to be instated as the 'national author' he eventually became, and remains, in France. I argue here, however, that Beaumarchais's business writings, which represent the bulk of his distributed archive and for instance include investment prospectuses, commercial correspondence, account books, or company memoirs and reports, cannot be entirely opposed to or even detached from his other writings. I explore the multiple functions that the notion of the author performed in their production and reception, and thus in their effectiveness as business documents. In the light of these forms of authorship, I finally reconsider the forms of more classically literary authorship in Beaumarchais's works, as well as those of business authorship in other historical settings - i.e., beyond this particular moment of late 18th century France, when business discourse sometimes flew from the quill of (in)famous literary authors like Beaumarchais.

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Author-date: a system of echoing references

What is the relation between the 'author-date system' – also known as 'parenthetical referencing' or 'the Harvard system' – and the author function theorized by Foucault? Foucault's own references in the published version of the 1969 SFP talk are scarce: they do not come in author-date format, as he only names names, not texts; and they pertain to literature and philosophy, or are those of illustrious early-modern scientists – they are references from the humanities. Author-date suits the printed word better than the spoken one: it is a complex textual echo system, whereby the body of a text itself can send the reader to an end-of-text reference list, which itself sends them to a world of other authored texts out there, for instance in a library, possibly through a catalogue also organized in author-date format, and back. These sequences of calling and echoing operate within a broad arrangement that involves journals and books, publishers and printing houses, libraries and librarians, trained or habituated writers and readers, etc. It raises a variety of practical issues, as when a classical book has gone through so many editions over the years that it blurs the reference, or when a text is claimed by a leaderless collective. Techniques from the printing industry, and more recently technologies such as reference management software, have greatly facilitated the practical resolution of these challenges, and the overall functioning of the 'system.' As a consequence, author-date protectively encapsulates each work of an author in a little crystallized form, a little formulaic case of letters and numbers that is neither entirely lower nor upper-case, embedded in the body of the text and shaping its visual appearance, to some extent like the antique Egyptian cartouche did for the name of a god or pharaoh, allowing immediate recognition, evocation, and circulation. The author-date system also orders the career of an author along a series of dates, assuming along the way that too many references of the same author cannot come from the same year – the reference de référence being the single authored book. As a same author-date accretes through citations in countable other texts, it becomes an instrument of academic credit collection, and evaluation, for the author. If the author's name can rise through these calls and echoes, the same cannot be said of their texts, whose titles and contents author-date stands in

for – and thus pushes back in the distance. However consequential it may be, the author-date system however appears as the fragile product of specific and temporary forms of (20th century) scientific publishing. Arising in the late 19th century, it seems to be fading away nowadays in the centers of the academic world where it initially appeared, with many English-language natural science journals switching to superscript numbered referencing styles – pushing the references further back yet, and with them the author's name.

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Frédéric Graber (CNRS-EHESS)

Anonymity and history. The author-function in the history of science and technology

This paper aims to revisit Foucault's two texts on the notion of author-function from a history of science and technology perspective, focusing on two points: the place of anonymity and history. Anonymity appears in both texts with quite different meanings—the unknown author, ordinary discourse—but it is mainly used to distinguish the author-function from scientific discourse, in what is presented as a historical transformation: literature moves from anonymity to authorship, while science abandons essential references to classical authors to produce quasi-anonymous texts, in which the author ultimately matters less than the subject. This opposition-transformation deserves to be nuanced, because the anonymization that took place from the 18th Century onwards in the natural sciences was primarily rhetorical: the new emphasis on verifiability and replicability, and the erasure of the author that this seems to imply, was coupled with an emphasis on novelty and innovation, which valued the authors of science and justified their activity. It is therefore less a question of opposition than of tension between two contradictory principles: anonymity (of truth) and authorship (of innovations). This is quite coherent with the idea that the author-function has something to do with names, but not necessarily with the persons behind these names. Foucault also introduces a second distinction between the author-function and the natural sciences, based on the place of history: he claims that the "return to" exists less in the practice of science than in the history of science. This temporal dimension in the author-function, which Foucault merely points out, highlights the dynamic dimension of this tension between

anonymity and authorship. After a general presentation of these themes, the paper will focus mainly on examples taken from the history of civil engineering in 19th-Century France.

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Matthew L. Jones (Princeton University)

Co-optation and romanticism: the critique of authorship and generative AI

Writers and visual artists have reacted strongly to the training of generative models on their production; to no small extent, this response invokes traditional conceptions of romantic authorship bound to strong commitments to expansive intellectual property protections. In contrast, the litigation strategies, regulatory approach and even practice of drawing upon creative works invokes explicitly and implicitly critiques of authorship and intellectual property, much in the wake of Foucault's underscoring of the historicity of the modern author. Given how quickly critique is coopted today, how strategically to articulate it? What pressure do the character of large language models put on understandings of discourse in the wake of Foucault.

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Kara Keeling (University of Southern California)

Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur de la Black Radical Tradition ? (*title tbc*)

Michel Foucault writes in the first paragraph of his seminal essay, "What is an Author?": "Certainly, it would be worth examining how the author became individualized in a culture like ours..." With this framing, Foucault both acknowledges that his concern is with "a culture like ours" and he offers "culture" as the context in which the question "What is an Author?" finds its answer.

The English words "Black Radical Tradition" in my title gesture toward a complex confrontation between French culture and other cultures. The aural and epistemological collision of the French at the beginning of my title with the English at the end of it marks visually, on the page, a set of possibilities within The Black Radical Tradition that a certain reading of Foucault's "What is an Author" illuminates. This essay argues that the author function in The Black

Radical Tradition paves the way for a conceptualization of how "the author" figures in the contemporary digital mediascape.

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Celia Lury (Warwick University)

"What matters who is speaking?" or Can 'people like you' be an author?

In the paper 'What is an author?', Michel Foucault asks us to consider, 'What matters who is speaking?'. His account of the author function is a way to answer this question, describing as it does the ways in which the identification of an author is a means to understand how discourse is articulated on the basis of social relationships. But he also asserts that 'We can easily imagine a culture where discourse could circulate without a need for an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity'.

This paper asks 'What matters who is speaking?' in an era of 'big data'. Initially begging the question as to whether data is discourse, but drawing on Foucault's discussion of the use of personal pronouns, it considers whether 'you' or 'people like you' can be an author. Indirect speech in the first person, Foucault observes, may refer to a second or even third self, whose similarity to the author is not fixed and may undergo considerable change. In such cases the author function operates, he says, to effect the dispersion of a plurality of egos. The paper will give examples of the dispersion that takes place in the address to 'people like you' in practices of personalisation, and the relationships of 'homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilization' they involve. In considering instances such as #JesuisCharlie and #MeToo it seeks to show who or what is now filling the diverse functions of the subject as author. Finally, it uses this examination of who is speaking to consider what kind of discourse 'big data' might be, its mode of existence, circulation, valorization, attribution and appropriation.

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Who authors the deepfake?

Responding to Foucault's point about the oeuvre of an author: "The problems raised by the Oeuvre are even more difficult. Yet, at first sight, what could be more simple? A collection of texts that can be designated by the sign of a proper name. But this designation (even leaving to one side problems of attribution) is not a homogeneous function: does the name of an author designate in the same way a text that he has published under his name, a text that he has presented under a pseudonym, another found after his death in the form of an unfinished draft, and another that is merely a collection of jottings, a notebook? The establishment of a complete oeuvre presupposes a number of choices that are difficult to justify or even to formulate: is it enough to add to the texts published by the author those that he intended for publication but which remained unfinished by the fact of his death? Should one also include all his sketches and first drafts, with all their corrections and crossings out? Should one add sketches that he himself abandoned?" (Archeology of Knowledge, 23-24)

Who is the author/copyright holder of the image of a deepfake? Ironically, like any popular brand, celebrity produces its own paradox: the more successful one's branded identity, celebrity image, or personal trademark becomes, the more it approaches death, in the sense that it exhausts its value. The legal term for this dissolution of a brand is "genericness" or "genericide" but such a term has never been applied to human beings (dead or alive) or publicity itself for that matter. Genericness usually refers to a class of goods, services, performances, or images that are not eligible for patent, intellectual property, copyright, or trademark protection (as are proprietary brands), because they lack distinctiveness. For obvious reasons it is difficult to claim that any one-person (whether a celebrity or not) lacks distinction. But what do we make of the likeness of Princess Diana, when it has been so overexposed to the media that it was "surrendered" to the public domain, or that of Monroe who even declared that she belonged to the public? And who can claim authorship of AI-generated audiovisual rendition of celebrities like Elis Regina? The deepfake bears a distinct resemblance to the counterfeit brand, since it is also admittedly a fake. However, it retains some distinctiveness in its reuse of the

likeness of a unique individual. Each deepfake is a composite of features of at least one source and a target (in the case of this chapter, the dead celebrity). The process of synthesizing, what maybe thousands of hours of source material from both the living and the dead, ends up genericizing certain aspects of a celebrities features or performances, whether it is their voice (as in the case of Monroe, Bourdain, or Regina) or their image, because it makes the likeness of these celebrities exchangeable with those others who perform them (even if it is a performance of their former selves, as with Abba).

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Thomas Scheffer (Goethe University Frankfurt)

Some (still authorized) notes on the collapse of political discourse including its authorship

Talking about authorship is about context, or, more precisely, the language game that the member(s) contribute to as author. Just a few years ago, the hegemonic language game seemed safe and clear. A political position that successfully integrated matter, measure, and conviction was released into political arenas to compete with others for the support of the audience. Formulating those positions was laborious. Months were spent doing the groundwork and gathering the collective – a party, a faction, or a coalition – behind them. Today, with Trump as the new role model of (post-)political discourse, the language game is undergoing fundamental changes, including the currency itself. Rather than political positions, the audience is confronted with Trump's sermons: erratic interventions unbound from any discursive past, archive, reality, sociotechnical efficacy, facts, or truth-telling efforts.

Indeed, we may witness a perhaps lasting hegemonic shift in politics, redefining what authorship means and demands for today in politics. This basic shift is not determined by the content of contributions or the intensity of polarization and conflict, but by the replacement of the lead currency. Ironically, major discourse formations are changing from political positions to, for lack of a better word, "trumps," the smallest unit by which to play this new language game. A trump has no disciplined tripartite unity and thus does not lend itself to Sachpolitik and its critique. The trump fades out matter and measure with a strong ideological emphasis on

conviction. Even that component no longer holds for the trump, since authorship and its functions are undermined and neglected when defined in line with the political debate as we know it. Nothing seems to bind the principal: no consistency, no previous statements, and no truth-telling.

The language game of competing positions seems to collapse into a mix of "charisma" (Max Weber) and "spectacle" (Guy Debord). What seemed like a difference in degree of objectiveness (Sachlichkeit) turns out to be a radical and fundamental shift. The synchronous collapse of authorship is so drastic that one may even wish back what Foucault commented on rather critically: the binding forces that come with the ascription and function of authorship. Today, accountability, control, and the archive—all of those powerful devices—look rather appealing. Some scholars have referred to the trumps as a means of "bullshitting." Others identified its strategic core as "filling the sphere with shit." Others were simply stunned by the degree of "shamelessness." Regardless, Trump dominates the news, newspapers, TV shows, and digital platforms, blocking any return to a object-related debate (Sachdebatte). The disappearance of competing positions as we know them, along with political authorship, is what causes consternation. In that powerful hegemony, social and natural scientists played their roles as experts, advisers, and advocates more or less strategically. They obtained some institutionalized authorship within a division of position-formation by contributing to the "matter"-component or by providing critical deconstruction on the language game itself. They could believe that their epistemic function somehow finds its way into what counts within the game. This belief is fading, as is the function of constructive critique.

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Katrin Trüstedt (ZfL Berlin)

Who can speak, for whom?

This contribution reformulates Foucault's question *What is an author?* to: *Who can speak*, and: *for whom?* Starting with Gayatri Spivak's critique of Foucault and Deleuze in "Can the Subaltern Speak?," it asks about the conditions of possibility of speaking and being heard, and about the role of academics speaking for those who may not be able to. Using contemporary examples from the rights of nature discourses ("who can speak

for the forest?") and from indigenous practices informing them, the contribution reflects on both the necessity of speaking for others on the one hand, and on the dangers of advocacy violence on the other.

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