
Reflections on Legitimacy

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The stimulating work on *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights* edited by Pardo and Prato (2019; henceforth *Legitimacy* volume) brings together extensive research on important urban matters that reveal the complexity of today's urban settings. In their previous work, Pardo and Prato are very clear on the complexity of the moral aspects of interaction in the urban field, stressing that any attempts to provide a theorization of cities by categorizing them into sacred, ethnic, gendered, global, informal, traditional, contested cities and so on, raise the obvious question, how can one group under the same category cities of different historical background marked by diverse economic and social conditions and different political systems (Prato and Pardo 2013: 97-98). Through the comparative analysis of several cities, one may find a common ground among different levels of legitimacy demonstrated through formal and informal aspects of social, political and economic everyday life. Legitimacy seems to be a reciprocal process between the rulers and the ruled; therefore, when it does not work, 'responsibility, legitimacy and trust are inevitable casualties' (Pardo 2019: 77). In this regard, legitimacy seems to be the outcome of different interrelating variables that comprise and establish the city as a 'whole'.

Pardo's extensive fieldwork highlights the ways in which the citizens of Naples are excluded from the different levels of good governance and political representation. He shows how the traditional stereotypical approach to the South — typecasting the *popolino* (ordinary people) as amoral and untrustworthy — engenders restrictions in terms of their factual citizenship (Pardo 2019: 62). Established on a 'blurring of the dividing line between what is legal and legitimate and what is legal and not legitimate in public life' (Pardo 2019: 74), the exercise of power meets the interests of select groups, which results in the economic and political exclusion of significant parts of society, thus affecting decisively their everyday lives and fundamentally jeopardizing their citizenship (Pardo 2019: 64). Nevertheless, the serious gap generated between citizens and formal authorities' long-standing failures and their impact on local micro and small business — fundamental to the City's developing entrepreneurialism — finds some solution in the culture of *sape' fa'*, which translates into dynamics of strong continuous interaction (Pardo 2019: 74) — a process that combines material and non-material aspects of life. Pardo stresses the need of building 'a responsible management of power that fully accounts for the significance of strong continuous interaction in ordinary people's morality and actions' (Pardo 2019: 77).

We encounter this notion of socio-economic cultural interaction, in many of the cases studied in the *Legitimacy* volume. One thinks of the neighbourhoods of North Kerala, where legitimacy is in the everyday life part of a fabric comprising reciprocity, support and social control (Abraham 2019: 137). 'In 1996', writes Janaki Abraham, 'houses in Devaloor were

closer to each other, very few had compound walls and paths often passed right in front of houses, resulting in a greater visibility and greater interactions’ (Abraham 2019: 129). The organization of space seems to contribute significantly to this kind of interaction, which combines with the existing social relations. The ‘presence of the local elder, the articulation of local custom and the importance of neighbours as witnesses’ (Abraham 2019: 132) point to the significance of the neighbourhood as a site in which legitimacy is sought and constructed.

Robyn Andrews examines Kolkata’s Anglo-Indians’ struggle to establish their identity in the post-colonial society; a struggle that is deeply connected with processes that embrace the diversity of the existing minorities, interacting with them culturally and socially and thus contributing significantly to a sense of belonging to the nation. Although as a community they have been accorded a number of benefits since the Indian Independence in 1947, it seems that for Anglo Indians legal citizenship is ‘devoid of a sense of identification with the soil’ (Andrews 2019: 244) and is being threatened, as in the case of the recent political rise of the BJP, a right-wing party promoting the idea of ‘India for Hindus’. Nevertheless, for Barry O’Brien, cited in Andrews, ‘early assimilation into a Bengali neighbourhood . . . contributed to a sense of belonging to the nation through language and cultural ability and literacy’ (Andrews 2019: 251).

In many cases, cultural interaction does not occur in the desired ways; in ways, that is, which would allow minorities to participate actively in the political and social life of the city. The Roma communities residing in the Czech Republic are a case in point. Here, Romani civic associations are predominantly built upon family relations and the concept of the extended family — in terms of origin and location — prevails, eliminating ‘the ability to subordinate one’s family’s interests to those of a higher body’ (Uherek 2019: 321). Moreover, newly born political parties such as the Romani Civic Initiative, despite being initially popular, have become the targets of negative stereotypes and confined at the outer edges of public interest until they finally dissolved (Uherek 2018: 311-312).

This brings to mind the Colombian case of cultural and social interaction not occurring as expected in the Ciudad Verde Housing Megaproject, in Soacha. Adriana Hurtado-Tarazona explains that, while entailing that participants are ‘part of a middle class in formation’ (Hurtado-Tarazona 2019: 149), this project targeted mostly low-income communities. Underlining that housing projects such as this create a ‘city inside the city’, she tells us how the project was originally designed to function as a separate entity through private governance (Hurtado-Tarazona 2019: 146). The new residents are required to overcome the structural limitations of bad governance — of a failed Municipality — as well as the unfulfilled promises of the real estate developers. They interact ‘through daily practices that challenge the divisions between legal/illegal, formal/informal, and legitimate/illegitimate’ (Hurtado-Tarazona 2019: 151). They do so by self-regulating the existing deficiencies of public and private space. However, the homogenous hyper-regulated environment of modern enclosed housing complexes and ample green spaces often engenders conflict, restricting sociability and creative interaction among the various parts of society that fail to respond to the aspirations of social mobility and middle-class citizenship.

‘As we create our cities, our cities create us’ (Latham 2017: 184–85; cited in Koechlin 2019: 225-226). The reformulation of the urban space often coincides with the transformation of the urban experience and the meaning of urban citizenship (Koechlin 2019: 226), whereby citizens interrelate not only with each other but also with space. Processes of urbanization similar to those described above occur globally. In many Latin American countries, the formation of the middle classes is evoked to justify interventions such as the aforementioned Soacha Housing Megaproject. The homogenizing approach of urban design,¹ as a mere result of transnational urban practices, brings forward policies of inclusion and exclusion regarding the new arrangement of the urban environment. Notably, however, citizens in Western and non-Western countries tend to respond differently, in terms of legitimacy, to urban renewal

Discussing how local neighbourhood community decisions are centrally determined, Krase and Krase examine the paradigms of Districts 6 and 9 within the broader area of Brooklyn (2019: 188). The city’s rezoning plan for Crown Heights and the proposed construction of bike lanes along Prospect Park West have raised important issues on the future gentrification of the areas in question and the consequent displacement of the existing population. Although citizens self-organize, forming different associations in order to make their voices and grievances heard, in both cases the Community District Boards exhibit a lack of legitimacy. Seemingly guided by a principle of ‘maximum feasible local participation’ (Krase and Krase 2019: 172), the authorities seek to establish a legal-rational legitimacy through traditional local community authority. In doing so, they demonstrate the role of pseudo-scientific studies and the local media in distorting issues in their favour (Krase and Krase 2019: 186).

In the case of the redesign of Viger Square in Montreal, Natalie Boucher argues that ‘Legitimacy is a dynamic concept that relies on the perception of others. [...] No matter how committed one is, it is a matter of reciprocal perception’ (Boucher 2019: 207). The dynamics of plural relations in Western societies, particularly regarding bottom-up participatory processes of planning and decision making, often result in conflict between competing activists and neighbourhood spokespersons; a conflict that revolves ‘around the real and imagined racial biases of protagonists and antagonists on various local issues’ (Krase and Krase 2019: 180). This generates an urban environment marked by contradictions; quite opposite, that is, to the ideal Weberian rationale of legitimate domination (Krase and Krase 2019: 171).

Heading South, towards non-Western societies, we encounter demonstration of the homogenising urban space as a superimposed condition. This kind of urbanization is often the

¹ When ‘homogenisation’ is used in relation to the urban landscape, in most cases it can be assumed that criticism is implied. Homogenisation is ipso facto ‘bad’. Yet most observers would view as desirable homogenisation in the sense of making things similar by eliminating difference; for example, reducing social conflict and creating harmony. Urban landscapes that show a massive difference in scale between the size and costs of buildings, between the gross provision of luxury housing for the rich and the dismal squatter conditions of the poor, present obvious opportunities for more homogeneous development (King 2012: 21).

outcome of globalised economic processes and transnational urban practices.² Lucy Koechlin discusses how, following a period of failed democratization in Kenya that led to unprecedented widespread ethnic violence during the elections of 2007 (2019: 220), a new constitution was passed that stipulated the devolution of powers (2019: 223). Contrary to the expectations of the people, the decentralization of political power merely resulted in the localization of former national practices of exclusion, establishing specific forms of differentiation on a county level (Koechlin 2019: 224). Within the broader political setting of devolution and the overarching re-spatializations effected by globalization, a new urban environment emerged, comprising lower-to middle-class estates with modern apartment buildings (Koechlin 2019: 218). So, a new city emerged adjacent to the informal neighbourhoods and the densely populated shacks and the detached bungalows dating back to colonial times, generating a geometrically ordered urban landscape made of almost identical buildings laid out in a ‘proper’ grid (Koechlin 2019: 238). As the new urban pattern superimposes itself over the city and its potential residents, new ‘urban interactions are cutting across habitual interactions . . . creating distinct, novel forms of urbanity’ (Koechlin 2019: 228).

Countries emerging from colonialism have developed similar mechanisms of urbanization marked by invasive policies, although the intensity of the phenomenon seems to differ depending on the disposition of the settlers. In these cases, the configuration of the urban landscape shows different degrees of space informality (Moretti 2018), at the same time undergoing specific types of urban transformation often associated with significant political transitions and attempts of democratization that vary according to the specific characteristics and historical background of the places in question. As Prato suggests, one has to be ‘critical of the concept of transition (to democracy) — which implies the imposed assimilation of “cultural artefacts”’ (2019: 51). Processes of political transition often raise important issues that jeopardise legitimacy, affecting the democratic process at different levels of governance. Elaborating on issues of legitimacy of political representation, part of Prato’s study focuses on the post-Communist situation in Albania. ‘Foreign intervention on the country’s internal affairs seems to be eroding people’s initially positive view of democracy’ (Prato 2019: 50), bringing cases of corruption that involve several political representatives and high-level bureaucrats and highlighting a political system that in reality excludes citizens from political participation.

² In the debate on whether globalisation leads to the increasing homogenisation of the built environment, Hans Ibelings’ book, *Supermodernism: Architecture in the Age of Globalisation* (1998) is one attempt to make the charge more specific. He suggests that it was the ‘big hotels’ and ‘glass box’ office buildings of the 1950s and 1960s that sparked off the global ‘architectural homogenisation’ thesis. Ibelings maintains that ‘uniformity and standardisation’ also manifests itself in singular structures like conference halls, theatres, exhibition complexes, churches and stadiums. Yet, he does not address the enormous social, economic, religious and cultural changes behind the appearance of these building types and what they mean for the growth of civil society, employment opportunities and social development; for Ibelings, ‘worldwide standardisation’ is to be (simplistically) explained in terms of ‘economics, similar architectural principles as well as construction systems’ (1998: 42). On this, see also King (2012: 19-20).

Attempts ‘to implement a Western-style democracy have brought out a conflict between foreign legitimating processes and citizens’ sceptical assessment of the new “democratically elected” rulers’ (Prato 2019: 28).

In the first part of her essay, Prato addresses Italian *partitocrazia* (party-ocracy), highlighting the ways in which the power of political parties may extend well beyond formal, legally recognized boundaries. She writes: ‘It was indeed this kind of opposition to *partitocrazia* that initially stimulated legislative changes on administrative decentralization, which in turn had significant repercussions on Italy’s national politics’ (2019: 34) Nevertheless, ‘post-*tangentopoli* institutional reforms and the new legislation have ostensibly failed to foster integrity’ (2019: 39). Even the appointment of the municipal Ombudsman — established with the intention of bridging the political gap and lack of citizens’ proper representation — ‘seems to be yet another case of the difficult relation between theory and practice’ (2019: 43).

The impact of processes of globalization on the local level and the significance of local dynamics in the global context (Prato and Pardo 2013: 99) are a common aspect of many of the cases depicted in the *Legitimacy* volume. The uncritical implementation of urban policies in specific urban environments could easily damage the very essence of democracy. The urban studies by Manos Spyridakis and Z. Nurdan Atalay, focusing respectively on Greece and Turkey, highlight the ways in which transnational urban policies, although operating on a separate level from the official state, seem to have a direct impact on everyday life, shaping and formulating the conditions of our existence (Spyridakis 2019: 101). By imposing an ideal type of how a ‘normal’ citizen should be, policies acquire growing importance in relation to the exercise of power and governance (Spyridakis 2019: 87).

Spyridakis discusses the implementation of the Minimum Guaranteed Income (MIG). He points out that financial benefits such as the MIG may be primarily conceived as fundamental rights of citizenship but they become almost inaccessible to many local people because of the stipulated eligibility criteria. Although the levels of poverty in Greece have significantly increased as a consequence of the recent economic crisis, the typical criteria outlining what is expected from potential beneficiaries do not reflect the conditions of everyday life, leading to the ‘over-fragmentation [of the population] into particular and splintered categories which protect some population groups and cast others aside’ (Spyridakis 2019: 92). Combined with the state’s existing deficiencies in terms of planning and policy implementation, citizens ‘are being gradually detached from a way of life characterized by relative material stability and move into a realm of generalised uncertainty’ (Spyridakis 2019: 84).

This echoes interestingly the issues raised by the ‘bank-based financial system’ that was introduced in Turkey in the early 1980s and that seems to hold a primary role in the country’s economic market (Atalay 2019: 108). Examining the application to the Turkish setting of a globally integrated economic model, Atalay argues that the transfer of state power to bureaucratically autonomous financial institutions (the banks) challenges fundamental rights of citizenship. The ensuing conflict between citizens and banks concerns illegal credit card membership annual fees. Atalay explains that the legislation that regulates the financial market

and credit card membership fees takes into account the interest of the banks and not of the citizens, closing the possible avenues for legal action (Atalay 2019: 118-119). Clearly lacking legitimacy in the broader society, the behavior of banks generates a precarious urban environment marked by financial instability. In both the Greek and Turkish cases mentioned above, uneven urban processes exclude significant parts of society from the economic life of the city.

The processes that have a serious effect on democratic procedures and threaten the very existence of legitimacy in civic society do not always occur in direct relation to governance and are not always easy to identify. In many cases, urban policies neglect to acknowledge — often intentionally — the variables that transform urban life. Nevertheless, considering that legitimacy is a dynamic concept in constant change,³ a political awareness of all concerned parties acquired through constant interaction with society is needed. Liora Sarfati (2019) discusses how the massive protest movements following the sinking of the Sewöl ferry and the death of 304 passengers engendered such a political awareness, leading to the impeachment and de-legitimation of the president. Sarfati suggests that these events enhanced the democratic process, arguing that awareness of the weak safety regulations and poor supervision of private business tolerated by the authorities became so strong that it contributed to the social imaginary for urgent political change, stressing the need to act.

As Abraham points out, the fabric of everyday life, of which the dynamics of legitimacy are part, may be influenced by different levels of interaction — local, trans-local, national and global (Abraham 2019: 140). Meeting this point, Marcello Mollica describes the case of South Lebanon and the ways in which ‘illegal practices are lent legitimacy under specific temporal, spatial and cultural determinants’ (Mollica 2019: 260). His research shows that the sense of belonging develops by ‘reference to a specific (religiously defined) group, acting in an (ethno-religiously defined) area to pursue (ethno-religiously defined) interests’ (Mollica 2019: 276) and engenders often-overlooked conflicting loyalties that exceed national borders. In this respect, an understanding of the dynamics of legitimacy requires an in-depth understanding of the specific determinants of urban space. Legitimacy as ‘a dynamic concept that relies on the perception of others’ (Boucher 2019: 207) also relates directly to the ways we perceive ourselves as part of a society.

Pardo’s (2019: 74-77) concept of strong continuous interaction between material and non-material aspects of life is crucial to this analysis. This interaction often is a two-way process and becomes a significant factor in contemporary urban change. It connects with the informal aspects of urban life, linking the concept of informality with everyday practice and the concept of formality with the regulatory systems of governance. In other words, one cannot ignore that theory and practice are two factors that are constantly interrelating and that ‘in order to grasp how a system actually works it is not enough to investigate the functional, or utilitarian, aspects

³ The legitimacy of the political (and social) order is in constant transformation; most importantly, the conceptions and dynamics of legitimacy are subject to constant change (Norbert Elias 1982 [1939], cited by Pardo and Prato 2019: 10)

of action; we need to understand what ideal of society and political system individuals aim to accomplish when they, for instance, bring to life a new political organization or advocate new forms of political action' (Prato 2019: 32).

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