
Rethinking Descriptivism and Explanation in Legitimacy Debate: Highlighting the Role of Causal Process(es) in Ethnographic Theory

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The main issue that permeates the chapters of *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights* (Pardo and Prato 2019, henceforth *Legitimacy*), could be stated as follows: on what grounds those who rule society's political institutions obtain to persuade the ruled to follow rulers' worldviews? Most, if not all the contributors question the Weberian approach which tried to reconcile Kantian and Hobbesian traditions by dividing rationality into instrumental and value-laden dimensions. The core of the questioning of the Weberian thesis lies in the facts that Weber's rational-bureaucratic type of legitimacy is normative, not empirical, that Weber failed to see that what binds the rulers and the ruled is not some technical-instrumental procedure through which the interests of the ruled are satisfied (for example through parliamentary democracy) but values and ideals which the sovereignty ought to serve (for example, common good). Prato's words are suggestive:

'I have contended that an informed study of contemporary politics must go beyond the dichotomy between a political philosophical study of the situation as "it ought to be" and an anthropological study of the situation "as it is".' Prato 2019: 32)

Then she says:

'My contention is that in order to grasp how a system actually works it is not enough to investigate the functional, or utilitarian, aspects 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' (ibid.)

The deficiency of political philosophy's implementation of the Weberian type of rational legitimacy stems from its inadequacy to capture the first-person perspectives of the ruled, while ethnography's adoption of such an approach would be misleading in so far as what is analyzed is only 'legal parameters'. In Prato's line of thought, people should obey those who rule not because of instrumental procedures but because of Power's moral grounds. If ethnography has a role to play in this goal, it should be to describe how actors define their own situations, how they resist to rulers' exploitation and how they invent alternative political micro-contexts to satisfy their interests. In other words, what unites the chapters in the volume is an attempt to reconcile the normativity of political philosophy's arguments with ethnography's descriptivism. For instance, Pardo believes that ethnographers should pay attention to how Naples citizens come to distrust local political institutions:

‘The long-standing failure — perhaps unwillingness — of Naples rulers to come to terms with ordinary people’s entrepreneurial culture, and the corresponding policies, is at the root of my informants’ feeling that they are treated as second-class Italians.’ (Pardo 2019: 66)

Only if ethnographers remain indifferent to the grand and abstract theorizing of political philosophy will they be capable of capturing the processual nature of actors’ decision-making practices in real life situations. Ethnographers will fail to tap local culture’s logic unless they avoid abstraction. Pardo expresses this concept clearly:

‘As a social anthropologist, I am averse to unjustified abstraction. Generations of solid anthropologists have demonstrated the unique value of an in-depth understanding of the moral complexity and social value of individual action gained through classical long-term fieldwork.’ (Pardo 2019: 58)

Thus, descriptivism constitutes the *par excellence* methodological vehicle for overcoming the core antinomy around which the subfield of political anthropology is structured: The ‘political science’ side of political anthropology privileges large number of cases of which the logic can be captured by explaining the variables of these cases and the ‘social anthropology’ side prioritizes detailed narrative descriptions of single cases of which the logic can be tapped interpretatively. The roots of devaluating abstraction in anthropology are to be found in Boas’ repudiation of the vast generalizations and in his valuation of descriptive studies of particular cultures researched by ethnographers spending years collecting the most minuscule facts of everyday life. Pardo states:

‘I have insisted that our study of what real people do, why they do it and how they attach legitimacy to what they do, in many cases regardless of the law, must deal with this *interaction* and its “moving parts” — meaning the complex interplay of values and interests that underscores their coping with the messiness of life in ways that give satisfaction, as well as producing tangible results that respond to their representations of a good life.’ (Pardo 2019: 65)

For Gellner (1973), descriptivism’s theoretical underpinning is rooted in Winch’s inversion of Wittgenstein’s theory of language. In particular, social anthropologists adopted Winch’s view on how to approach social action: instead of searching for causes, ethnographers should reconstruct its meaningfulness. This is not only a methodological exhortation but it is a peculiar inversion of Wittgenstein’s theory of language meaning. Whereas for Wittgenstein meaning should be accounted for as the employment of an expression in diverse concrete contexts, which were endlessly diversified and were parts of ‘forms of life’, Winch replaced ‘meaning=use’ with ‘use=meaning’. Thus, the essence of what people say and do is not to be found in their causes but in their meaningfulness; in other words, action is not caused but meaningful. Gellner puts it eloquently:

‘[For Winch] to understand social practice is to understand its meaning. It cannot but have meaning: the fear that understanding might reveal it to be the slave of antecedent causes (thus being ‘explained’ by them) turns out to be an error, and one demonstrably such in *all* cases: one, it appears, arising from a fundamental error concerning the very nature of social understanding. This is where the idealism comes in: remove this one error, and we are freed forever, by an omnibus proof, of the bogies of determinism, mechanism and so on.’ (Gellner 1973: 58)

It sounds like a truism to say that this kind of forms-of-life accounting for social phenomena leads to (epistemological and conceptual) relativism. Additionally, by ostracizing causes from anthropological view one misses the opportunity to explain why things are that way and not otherwise. In particular, by remaining indifferent to explanation, ethnographers are liable to two shortcomings: first, they fail to bring to the fore the forming causes of social action which are not reducible to the reasons actors draw upon for making sense of their lives and, second, they remain trapped into a nominalistic approach of social action in the sense that they exhaust all of their energy to describe how ‘strategic’, ‘manipulative’ or ‘inventive’ actors are within specific ‘forms of life’. Although the elucidation of these points deserves a whole book, I will try to sum them up in a few words.

Regarding the first shortcoming, by referring to ‘forming causes’ I have in mind a Critical-Realist framework with its three-level stratified social ontology. In searching for ‘forming causes’ ethnographers are trying to identify the generative mechanism which produce specific lines of actions and not others, the necessary and sufficient conditions which trigger specific practices and not others or which make things be that way and not otherwise. This does not mean that ethnographers apply ready-made theoretical clichés to their research material (for example that capitalism determines people’s actions) but that they identify the case-specific process through which *in potentia* becomes *in presentia* (Collier 1974: Ch. 2)

As far as the second shortcoming is concerned, I think that descriptivism brings from the window what has been supposedly thrown out through the door, that is nominalism. In particular, by exhausting their descriptions on actors’ manipulative or bricoleur-like capabilities, ethnographers come to adopt as their main theoretical challenge the issues which have been posed by Rational-Action-Theory propositions. What is at stake, in my view, is not whether actors are rational or irrational or when and under what circumstances they are rational or irrational but how group-specific ingredients make social relations negotiable and mutable. Instead of seeing human action under the Weberian prism of instrumental or value-laden rationality, ethnographers could profit from a Jackson-inspired existential framework for approaching being with others. Michael Jackson (2013) proposes an existential framework for doing ethnography of which a central thesis is that if one wants to tap humans’ forms of decision making, one has to examine border situations. In researching border situations ethnographers can tap the generative mechanisms not only of actors’ decision-making process but of groups’ transformation as well.

For Jackson, social life is full of contingency, playfulness, unpredictability, mystery and emotion and it cannot be reduced to agency/structure dualisms. A shared human liability is actors' regression between a desire of sharing an identity with others and of standing out from others as singular persons. This image of social life coexists with the view that self is emerged through contradictions in the sense that 'life is made liveable both through acting upon the world *and* submitting to it, engaging with others *and* holding oneself back from them, accepting reality *and* imaginatively denying it' (Jackson 2013: 18). Thus, in addition to describing the details of humans' self-deception, ethnographers should pay attention to the group-specific dynamics which make it possible. For Jackson the dilemma of whether we are made or we make something of what we are made is false because we seldom 'stand at some metaphorical crossroads, contemplating which direction to take, rationally appraising the situation, making a choice, and acting on it' (Jackson 2013: 19). Let me make clear one of my main points: a critical dialogue between existential ethnography and a Critical-Realist framework of explanation could be of much help in approaching the issue of legitimacy through the prism of political anthropology. I suggest that ethnographers should leave aside the Geertzian web-of-significance Weberianism and start thinking of explanation as their major task. How could it be done?

First, I think that the implementation of an existentialism-inspired ethnography enables researchers to see legitimacy not through the Thomas-Znaniecki's motto, 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (1926: 18), but as a total social fact in the sense of what they try to tap is not (only) 'natives' point of view' but the multidimensionality of being with others. Tapping the multidimensionality of being with others means that the ethnographer is trying to detect informants' surplus of meaning and life's tendency 'to deny our attempts to bind it with words and ideas' (Jackson 2013: 21). This holistic, *fait-totale-sociale* approach to legitimacy is to treat informants' relation to political institutions as an embedded aspect of total social life rather than as an isolated segment of society. Undoubtedly, the main virtue of *Legitimacy* is that it remains faithful to this epistemological holism and to anthropology's long-standing distrust of the homo-economicus model of social action.

For instance, Spyridakis' chapter underlines that the Social Solidarity Income (SSI) should not be seen as an economic policy to which informants respond by means of profit-maximization reasoning but as a moralizing practice (Spyridakis 2019). This means that SSI, institutionalized as a state-funded welfare programme, establishes the social category of 'beneficiaries' of which the members think of SSI as a legitimate philanthropy not in procedural but in moral terms — this is the 'morals of legitimacy' Pardo refers to in *Legitimacy* (see more broadly Pardo 2000). However, this is a fragmented legitimacy since there are many informants who question this policy because it puts them in the vicious circle of poverty by keeping them out of the labour force. The image of a fragmented legitimacy is provided by Abraham's ethnography in North Kerala who highlights that legitimacy practices are deployed not in what Westerns would call 'public sphere' but in the materiality of space

(Abraham 2019). As she points out, the spatial organization of neighbourhoods sets the stage for the micro-politics of the morality of legitimacy which is processed by how different groups of people subscribe to different and multiple centres of legitimacy in the local. In a similar vein, Atalay (2019) shows how the legalization of credit card membership annual fees in Turkey conceals the displacement of democratic citizenship and the legal/legitimate separation in so far as banks persuade citizens to take loans and credit cards, thus legitimizing in way their debt.

As I previously stated, what these and the rest of the chapters share is a clear distrust to the assumption that universal rationality suffices to interpret people's preferences or strategic interests shaped by specific, culturally transmitted understandings of reality. On the contrary, these ethnographies point to the significance of informal networks diffused in many areas of economic life and built on local and culturally specific notions of trust, all of which dispute the image of humans promoted by the neo-classical economics as isolated and calculating individuals. However, I believe that an existentially-inspired ethnography could supplement this rejection of instrumental rationality since it is one thing to deconstruct a theoretical tradition and quite another to propose a viable and capable of enabling empirical research alternative image of social life. To this end, existential ethnography prioritizes values, passions and emotions as a crucial part of social action instead of dismissing these as Rational Action Theory do.

Of course, one should not read this priority as a caprice of some 19th century existential philosophy but should be reminded that economists like Keynes or Hirschman have analysed the role of passions and interests in economic decision making. More recently, by renaming passions and interests as 'animal spirits', Akerlof and Shiller (2009) concede that they refer to our peculiar relationship with ambiguity or uncertainty, sometimes we are paralyzed by them but sometimes they refresh and energize us, overcoming our fears and indecisions (Akerlof and Shiller 2009: 4). For instance, they note that when economists build most of their macro-economic reasoning upon the notion of 'confidence', what they propose is not a computer-like frame of mind from which both consumers and banks are imbued but that expectation, feelings, and beliefs is what shapes humans' care about future states. The more consumers and banks trust each other, the more the usage of credit cards will be increased in the future. Consumers' behaviour does not rest on whether they use information for making rational predictions but on the sense that they have about future outcomes. So, the virtue of an existential ethnography is to offer a detailed description of how these animal spirits shape the morals of legitimacy.

Second, by avoiding to conflate epistemological (what are the conditions of knowability 'legitimacy' as an object of study) with ontological levels (how are the objects of knowledge 'actually' constituted), Critical-Realist-inspired ethnographers can embrace causality not in linear (through variables) but in narrative terms. Narrative causality means the detailed identification of the process (or of the generative mechanism(s)) through which A is transformed into B and not C. This presupposes a rigorous methodological reflection on

sampling, data analysis and generalization, issues that traditionally have been seen as irrelevant to social anthropology (I firmly believe that this is a consequence of a hegemonic misreading of Dilthey's *erleben* [experience], which has been adopted as self-evident by quite a few ethnographers). Moreover (and this is one thing ethnography has left untouched), ethnography enacted through a Critical-Realist prism aims at explaining not informants' intended meanings but their non-intended consequences at social level (in the same way that the intended meanings of worldly asceticism gave shape to the emergence of capitalism's instrumental rationality). This is not new but it goes back to the much-debated issue regarding how and in what sense the mind is social. From a Critical-Realist point of view, it is the independency of mind's sociality that explains this gap between intended meanings and non-intended outcomes and of which the key of explanation is to be traced as a causal process. In other words, while an old-fashioned functionalism suffers from teleology and structuralism tends to disregard subjective meanings, Critical Realism, on the contrary, privileges a process-tracing explanatory framework that acknowledges subjectivity, context and temporality.

This is exactly the difference between an expository and explanatory approach underlined by Mannheim (2003). The first resembles those who try to construct a jigsaw puzzle by looking at the preordained and ready-made completed image. Mannheim does not dismiss in toto this way of approaching social facts since it is the first step in seeing how the part is connected to the whole. However, he says that in order for the pitfalls of teleology and determinism (either in its 'over-socialized' or in its 'culturalistic' variant) to be avoided structure is the order by which a causal sequence is not attributed to individual meanings: in order to get to know what banks are or what money is, researchers need not ask people why they take money from an ATM. As Mannheim puts it: 'the sum total of causal motivations does not explain the complete structure' (2003: 73). In this ontological conception, causal and interpretive operations are not in extreme opposites but have the following complementary direction: one describes an event by relating it to the totality in which it is inscribed and one explains it by detecting and identifying the causal path through which the non-intended meaning obtain an objective existence or form, or else, through which things are not in that way and not otherwise.

The benefit offered by the Critical-Realist-inspired ethnography that I have briefly described is that researchers can forge middle range explanations on the phenomenon they study. Let me give an example from the legitimacy debate. By comparing the urban ethnographies of the 'legal but illegitimate practices' from Colombia (Hurtado-Tarazona 2019) and Kenya (Koechlin 2019), one could trace the determinants of why collective action and demonstrations are undermined and annulled in non-western countries. Is the process of 'becoming middle class' related to these determinants? If yes, in what ways? Could the process of 'urban transformation' (for example, housing policies) play the role of the generative mechanism which gives shape to the 'fragmented legitimacy' so eloquently described by (almost) all of the chapters?

The reflections that I have offered are meant to underline that cases and comparisons are the best means for achieving theoretical propositions regarding specific phenomena. This can be obtained by focusing on the concept of *process* in which, as I have tried to show, three theoretical traditions are met. First, Gluckman's, Turner's and Leach's emphasis on conflict, faction, struggle and manipulative strategy. Second, the Chicago School's micro-sociological interest on identity, emergence and negotiation. Third, Critical Realism's insistence on searching for causal explanations in ontological levels that are not always accessed by agents. While I have exposed the first and the third theoretical tradition of the concept of 'process', let me briefly refer to the Chicago School conception of process as it has been discussed by Andrew Abbott (2016). Abbot's processual social ontology starts not from isolated and rational individuals trying to create social order either by convention (Hume) or by Sovereignty (Hobbes) but from events from which social entities and individuals evolve. Social life's internal boundaries are perpetually changing and its institutions or social groups are 'not fixed beings that can succeed one another, but lineages of events strung together over time, to which new things are always being bound, and from which old things are always being detached' (Abbott 2016: 202).

I firmly believe that the chapters in the *Legitimacy* volume constitute an excellent example of how one could approach morals of legitimacy through the 'process' concept, as it has been implemented in the first two theoretical traditions. What is missed is a comprehensive approach which tries to tap specific causal processes emerged from the ethnographic cases in the book and of which the goal will be ethnographic explanation (not ethnographic description). The comparative character of the *Legitimacy* volume is like a research 'treasure' through which ethnographers could bring to light generative mechanisms that will explain the phenomenon of which the cases are instantiations.

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