
Notes on Legitimacy

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Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights (Pardo and Prato eds 2019) is a collection of papers resulting from a workshop on urban legitimacy in the summer of 2017 which was preceded by many other meetings and other volumes. The range of the work is vast, both in geography and scope. But much of the work centres around the crisis of legitimacy we are currently witnessing in ‘democracies’ and both the legitimate and illegitimate (one could add legal and illegal) actions of various social actors concerned with legitimating structures/institutions. The volume is centred around five central questions: differing conceptions of legitimacy; culturally endogenous dis/legitimizing practices that cause categorical shifts in the legitimate; the relationship between law, legitimacy and protest; everyday practices of engaging legitimacy; and il/legal processes concerning what is legitimate. While each chapter focuses on different levels of institutions, often different meanings of legitimacy, and are in different locales, there is significant overlap in what each other is trying to accomplish. In what follows, I key in on the major contributions of the authors in answering the five central questions by breaking the volume down into what I perceive are the three main contributions, briefly describe my work on the topic and end with some very minor quibbles regarding the volume — which overall is highly successful in pushing forward what is one of the most important topics for social scientists to concern themselves with at this point in time.

Categorical Shifts in Legitimacy

One of the main contributions of the book is the work done on how legitimacy shifts with shifts in power/parties, time/space and/or processes. In her chapter, Prato (2019) looks at how legitimate contestations of power within a democracy quickly shift to party rule and hence unchallengeable illegitimate actions. In her comparative ethnography of Italy and Albania, she shows how personal credibility and political accountability of authorities influences what citizens see as legitimate. She reminds us on page 31 that expectations of political accountability differ in different contexts and I think that is an important reminder for the rest of the book (in his chapter, Pardo discusses legitimacy likewise in interactional terms). Like others in the volume, Prato demonstrates that in Brindisi the power system was self-perpetuating even though everyday citizens regarded it as illegitimate. She also shows that history can be important for claims to legitimacy. As Zerubavel shows in *Time Maps* (2003), ‘the social shape of the past’ allows different political groups to link to historical actors and events to legitimate themselves as natural successors. Thus, in addition to geography, Prato shows that we need to be mindful of the past for understanding legitimacy.

Pardo (2019) demonstrates how decades of the non-democratic positioning of people in power has resulted in the de-democratization of Naples. Here the categorical shift in what is legitimate has an overwhelming effect on what is considered legitimate and legal. As he notes on pages 58-59 this has severe impacts on how grassroots organizations view those who occupy positions of power. His argument, which I find particularly evocative, is that there is a lack of co-culturality and trust between ordinary people and those in power, who fail to achieve legitimacy in the broader society. And while his focus is on Italy, and in particular Naples, similar processes have played out elsewhere essentially rendering citizenship void of any meaning. In the case he examines, there are also nativist undertones in who gets to be a citizen which as he rightly notes further undermines both the value and meaning of the concept. As I note below, Pardo's piece suggests that the government's illegitimacy seems to be intentional, in that it creates what Adams et al. (2009) call chronic disaster syndrome — where governments manufacture crises in order to free themselves of having to operate under democratic constraints.

Koechlin's chapter (2019) is concerned with the devolution of the central government and how urban actors rearticulate the changes between the local and central government. Unfortunately, rather than empower local government, local government simply mirrored corruption and patronage on the national level. Thus, rather than include the previously excluded or marginalized, the new government has simply recasted the right to the city. Koechlin's chapter is important because it demonstrates a quasi-passive nature to the relationship between legitimacy and citizenship; here legitimacy is something that more or less happens without collective effort.

Uherek (2019) also looks at social class as a determinant of legitimacy and citizenship. He looks in particular at the Romani population in the Czech Republic and how public and private interests interfere with one another. The Romani's extended family is the most important institution for identity purposes. Thus, the political sphere is usually outside of their purview. In the 1980s they seized the opportunity to establish representation and hence seize some legitimacy, but as Czechoslovakia broke up in the early 1990s, this opportunity withered and legitimacy become problematic. Likewise, beliefs and practices of the Romani did not necessarily square with political realities (gender equality, for example). Ultimately, differing legitimacy systems clashed making full citizenship for Romani complicated. Here Romani shifted in and out of legitimacy as their citizenship shifted.

Capitalism, Class and Legitimacy

The influence that money has on legitimacy is at the heart of many chapters of the volume. Similar to Pardo (2019) and Prato (2019), Spyridakis (2019) examines the decline in social rights and citizenship through il/legal processes concerning what is legitimated. This is one of the chapters that clearly shows how globalized capitalism has become legitimated because of its link to democracy and other legitimating structures. Here he challenges the Minimum Guaranteed Income (MGI) as both a product but also re-enforcing process that seeks to

legitimate what many question as both immoral and illegal. This important work shows that legitimacy is often imposed by those who have access to power on those without power and hence different classes often have different conceptions of what is legitimate. Also similar to Pardo, the state ends up protecting citizenship for some groups while excluding others. This ‘gaming’ of citizenship by authorities is definitely a future topic for legitimacy studies.

Atalay (2019) likewise focuses on instruments of globalized capitalism, but unlike Spyridakis’ analysis of formal and informal mechanisms of support, here the reader learns about the role of credit cards and what citizens see as illegitimate behaviour from banks in Turkey. Her work shows how actions perceived as illegitimate can be troubled by laws making those actions legitimate. Atalay gets to a central feature of the volume, which I discuss in more depth below, that citizenship hinges on money. As she notes (p. 108), financialization essentially disconnects the rulers from the ruled. This is because under financialization the state is no longer bound to its citizens but to globalized processes and flows. This undermines the legitimacy and legality of the state and impedes the ability for citizens to have the state intervene on their behalf (p. 120).

Mollica’s analysis of Lebanon (2019) looks at how foreign money has resulted in increased tension among different religious groups, and shows that seemingly illegal actions can quickly be made legitimate by capital. Mollica’s chapter is interesting in that he uses an ethnographic moment to explore legitimacy. During field work he was approach, questioned, and followed by men who were not ‘government officials’. More troubling was that an event that should have been made into a scene by passer-by, was treated as taken-for-granted. In Lebanon, various religious ethnic groups (particularly Hezbollah) overlap with the authority of the state. Hence illegal actions are taken as legitimate and the legal entities avoids questioning the illegitimate/illegal actions because the local community legitimizes those actions. Ultimately, Mollica (p. 276) asserts that ‘the maintenance of the status of citizen may well be associated with small geographic units, in other words, local communities’. I think this is an important point to make. As a number of chapters in the volume point out, citizenship means different things to different people and we can expect those people to more or less organize themselves into familiar urban patterns — neighbourhoods, blocks, streets, and so on. Thus, in any urban area we are likely to find people with different relationships to authority/legitimacy and therefore different kinds of citizens. While money is not the main subject of the chapter, it structures what Mollica experienced doing fieldwork and ultimately shows the power of capital in structuring the rights we expect from citizenship.

The Fragility of Legitimacy

The final commonality among chapters that I found is just how fragile legitimacy actually is. In most chapters, this was true. Legitimacy was fleeting. Often this came about because of some contestation over legitimacy. Hurtado-Tarazona’s chapter (2019) looks at everyday reactions to failed legitimacy or what we might say is the fragility of legitimacy. Here in Soacha, residents routinely engage in actions that are seen as illegitimate or illegal based on class specific notions

of morality and citizenship. Residents of municipal (public) housing police other residents so that they can maintain the visage of being middle-class and hence citizens. Here what is considered illegitimate shifts as one goes from poverty to middle-class. For example, hanging clothes near windows, though legal, becomes illegitimate in attempts by ‘horizontal housing’ residents to gain a middle-class habitus. Hurtado-Tarazona gives numerous examples of policing noise, aesthetics and bodies that limits lower class lifestyles.

Abraham’s ethnography of two neighbourhoods in Thalassery (2019) demonstrates conflicting notions of legitimacy at the neighbourhood level. Notions of legitimacy are bound by ‘what will the neighbours say?’. The legitimacy sought and given by neighbours is, however, increasingly compromised by financial institutions, caste, and party lines. Events ranging from marriages to everyday interactions have become precarious as sources of legitimacy change. What is legitimate one day here is illegitimate the next.

Likewise, Kruse and Kruse (2019) focus on decades of work in urban planning in New York City. They show how legitimacy and legitimating processes at the neighbourhood level often involves compromises. Half of the chapter deals with rezoning affordable housing and the other half looks at bike lanes in an affluent part of a contested neighbourhood. Much of this chapter compliments findings from other contributors, namely that local governments become seen as illegitimate to groups of citizens by misrepresenting their actions through moralizing language. Likewise, the addition of the study on the bike lane is interesting in that it shows how, even in a neighbourhood setting, foes can be created from groups who would normally be co-advocates.

Boucher’s chapter (2019) echoes much of what Kruse and Kruse find. Her chapter is concerned with the destruction of a Square in Montreal and how different groups understand the term legitimacy. She compares her legitimacy as an urban scholar and activist and that of a well-known elite with connections to government. Both act in differing ways towards the committee (‘the group with no name’) that they are part of, the result of which is in some ways a contestation of everyday legitimacy. Her chapter also shows how governments use the built environment (or public projects) to gain legitimacy. Ultimately, everyday citizens are not able to comment upon the Square, and eventually it is demolished.

Finally, Sarfati (2019) looks at the tragic sinking of a ferry in South Korea and how citizens’ claims of illegitimacy forced resignations at various levels of government. Within this case study she also looks at how difficult it can be to commemorate publicly the tragedies and how legal actions can be seen as insensitive, immoral and hence illegitimate. Also, of importance, she shows how patterns of government inaction can aggregate to tip an event towards having people think of authority as illegitimate.

Legitimacy and Social Disorder

My work seeks to answer the same question posed by Pardo and Prato (2019: 2) in the introduction, ‘how much more governance failure before legitimacy is withdrawn, and consequently, democracy is jeopardized?’ I went to the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans

during the long-term aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to understand how communities move on from major disasters. What I found was a community at odds with various levels of government and residents who questioned the value of their citizenship; they questioned the legitimacy of government; and, they questioned democracy. When I was in the Lower Ninth Ward in 2010 only a quarter of the population had returned. There were no police or fire stations, no health clinic, no grocery store, and no library. Residents had to wait almost a year to begin the rebuilding process, during which time they learned that The Bring Back New Orleans Commission, assembled by local government, decided to turn their neighbourhood into greenspace. Approximately 20,000 residents, mostly Black and working class (the poverty rate was three times the national average), would have to find a new home and a new neighbourhood. Many residents were scattered around the US, having been forcefully evacuated; they had not been able to return to New Orleans; and now, they were not going to be allowed to rebuild their community.

Sanyika (2009) called this ‘Katrina Cleansing’ — a series of policies to displace permanently residents by reducing the footprint of their neighbourhoods (Sanyika 2009). Where residents protested their erasure, they were punished through a series of retaliatory policies and measures designed to discourage and prevent them from rebuilding their homes and communities (Harvey 2017). This involved a racially discriminatory housing grant program, the elimination or reduction of public services (including housing, hospitals, clinics, schools, fire/police, transportation, and mail), and the largest instance of contractor fraud in the history of the country (which has to date not been investigated).

The failed recovery efforts seemed intentional in some neighbourhoods. Adams, Hattum, and English (2009: 630) noted that these efforts ‘authorize[d] violence by way of its inhumane erasures and interventions’ that ‘underfund[ed] community rebuilding efforts, and [allowed for] an evisceration of the role of government in providing public security’ (681). This neoliberal project of government abandonment results in what Wacquant (2009) described as ‘punishing the poor’ and Bourgois and Schonberg (2010) referred to as ‘lumpen abuse’. The ongoing failure to rebuild and restore New Orleans allowed for and justified the existence of a post-normal society. This idea of a post-normal society is exactly how many residents of the Lower Ninth Ward described their neighbourhood.

‘Look at this place. Ain’t no one suppose to live like this. It looks like dying here [long pause]. I call the police, but they say they can’t do nothing. You call the city and they say they working on it. Ain’t nobody doing nothing. We got houses, that one right there, ain’t no one touched it since the storm. We can’t get people back if they don’t want them to come back. This ain’t normal, living like this. We living like animals back here.’ (Grace, black female 80s)

Prato notes that citizenship and the legitimacy of government is a relationship of reciprocity; citizens must be made to feel that their governing institutions will protect them and their rights (2019: 54). In Katrina, citizens were obviously not protected, neither from the

disaster nor the government. The government took away rights and thus residents began to question their most basic relationship with authority.

In order to protect themselves from the government and neoliberal allies, residents began to sneak into the Lower Ninth Ward and try to rebuild their homes. They encouraged people to rebuild in what locals and some others refer to as a Jack O'Lantern style of redevelopment. Here homes are scattered, in an act of defiance, throughout the neighbourhood that resembles the crooked, gap-toothed smile seen at Halloween. Residents know that it is not sustainable (from a resource or communal point of view), but a larger problem is that it fosters a sense of rugged individualism. Residents frequently describe the neighbourhood as 'the frontier', 'the edge', and 'the wild west'. The urban experimentation gives way to an anti-democratic experiment in self-governance. Residents believe that they are completely responsible for themselves. As Ward 'Mack' McClendon, who runs the Lower Ninth Ward Village — a makeshift community centre, among other things — is fond of saying, '[W]e got to do this ourselves, because the calvary ain't coming'. Because they have been marginalized, they no longer feel as though they are part of a larger society.

In response to their government abandoning them, residents had to form their own democratic institutions and rethink what it meant to be a citizen. This splintered the community. Some became extremely involved in community meetings, while others were indifferent. After years of meetings, many of those who were involved had become tired and dropped out of various civic groups altogether. Others still occasionally attended meetings, but with an average of three meetings a week (community groups, neighbourhood associations, non-profit meetings, etc.) five years after the original event, it was impossible to keep up with everything. Due to the surge of volunteers in the community, it was not uncommon for volunteers to outnumber residents at neighbourhood meetings. Furthermore, despite good intentions, many non-profits pushed agendas and proposed projects that were antithetical to the residents' wishes. Residents slowly found themselves without legitimate representation and increasingly in a situation of illegitimate representation.

As Pardo and Prato note (2019: 21-22), the importance of this discussion regarding legitimacy is rooted in the very notion of what we mean by democracy. Without legitimacy you cannot have true citizenship. The classic question then is What is to be done? For people like those in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, in Naples, or Turkey, or Kisumu, or the other places written about in this edited volume, how will their relationship to the state or their status as liminal citizens change? What do we do with authority that has become illegitimate? What if political rulers are okay with partisan legitimacy and one-party rule, what if they do not care about true citizenship; what if democracy is just a façade? And more importantly is the crisis of legitimacy simply a crisis of capitalism?

Overall, I have very few complaints about this volume. It is a superb follow up to the previous work by Pardo and Prato on legitimacy (Pardo ed. 2000, Pardo and Prato eds 2011). At a few places there is a loose use of the term legitimacy, but as Pardo and Prato (2019: 10) note the concept is constantly contested and changing. I did feel, however, some chapters only

marginally added to our understanding of the concept. Another small issue I had with the volume was simply the overwhelming and dizzying array of places the reader is asked to visit. This is obviously a plus to both understanding the nuances of and the range of issues regarding legitimacy and citizenship, but it was also at times overwhelming. Finally, I would have appreciated more of the original ethnography and less analysis of the respective ethnographies. Some of the chapters, such as the ones by Mollica, Hurtado-Tarazona, and Sarfati are beautifully written and the reader gets a lot of insight into the actual ethnography, but elsewhere it is more difficult to get a feel for how everyday citizens are struggling with legitimacy. In all, this edited volume will be immensely useful for those who study legitimacy and citizenship for some time to come.

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