
Introduction:
The Ethnography of Legitimacy and its Theoretical Ramifications

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In this Special Issue, published as Supplement to Volume 8 of *Urbanities* under the auspices of the International Urban Symposium-IUS, a strong international field of 14 mid-career and senior anthropologists and qualitative sociologists from different parts of the globe who are engaged in empirical research debate the thorny issue of legitimacy drawing on their diverse ethnographic knowledge and wide range of perspectives. They participated in a full-time 6-day workshop in Sicily, Italy, on *Erosions of Legitimacy and Urban Futures: Ethnographic Research Matters*.¹ On the evening of Sunday 10th September, the invited participants met for an ice-breaking reception followed by dinner.² Work started at 9.30 on the 11th and continued for full 5 days, ending at 19.30 of Friday 15th September. The meeting closed that night with a farewell dinner.

The reflections in this Special Issue benefit from the intense debate that animated that meeting to reflect on processes of legitimacy and legitimation in urban settings and engage with the attendant theoretical insights. The principal aim is to take stock of the current state of the art on this issue and point to potentially significant developments. Almost a century after the publication of Weber's work, current debate continues to focus on Weber's theory of different forms of authority and the attendant sources of legitimacy (1978 [1922]). Most notably, Beetham (2013 [1991]) has elaborated a reformulation of the Weberian analysis arguing that a social-scientific study of legitimacy should recognise the distinction between the normative and empirical aspects and provide an account not only of the formal rules and prescribed laws but, most important, a descriptive analysis of the social construction of legitimacy; that is, why people accept or reject a particular form of government and governance. In-depth ethnographic fieldwork has the power do precisely this.

This collective effort raises especially pressing questions that long-term field research needs to address in depth. The discussions identify a theoretical framework that contributes to clarify the empirical significance of the complex ramifications of legitimacy and the processes of legitimation in the political, economic and moral life of today's urban world. The complex, highly problematic and often rocky dynamics that mark these processes and their ramifications are central in anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, history and law. It is hoped that the summarized reflections offered here on topics ranging from banking to neighbourhoods, from poverty and unemployment to policy and governance, from

¹ This workshop was held in September 2017. We wish to express our gratitude to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research for a generous grant (Gr. CONF-751) that allowed us to organize this international meeting and to the International Urban Symposium-IUS for the clockwork organization.

² Some participants had previously met and interacted intellectually, others had not.

conflicting identities and interests to political action and grassroots organizing will foster scholarly contributions to this topical debate, for publication in future issues of *Urbanities*.

What follows is an integral part of a broad project rooted in long-term anthropological work (Pardo ed. 2000 and 2004; Pardo and Prato eds 2010) on the empirical and theoretical complexities of categories and processes of legitimacy and legitimation of morality and action; of the morality, production and application of the law; of politics and governance. Its principal aim is to trace the significance of knowledge gained through ethnographic research and to apply new theory related to legitimacy and legitimation to our understanding of changing urban settings. A most important subsequent objective is for adult debate on this topic to reach out, more broadly, to non-academics — professionals and decision makers who have an interest in the research findings — and to the wider public through comments and interviews in the media. To put it briefly, in the near future, this Special Issue will be followed by a series of publications and activities. A volume on *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights* (edited by I. Pardo and G. B. Prato) is to be published in the Series Palgrave Studies in Urban Anthropology. International seminars, round-tables, conferences and seasonal Schools will aim to encourage debate and originate publications in the form of individual articles, edited volumes, journal special issues and comments in the media.

Of course, philosophers have addressed legitimacy and legitimation since the beginning of time. The empirically-based discussion of these issues is, instead, comparatively new. As emphasized by the Sicily workshop, now perhaps more than ever much more ethnographic knowledge from across the world is needed. In the early 1990s, a small group of ethnographers endeavoured to develop an informed view, which has gradually grown into a sophisticated international debate.³ They have studied the processes and ramifications of conflicting moralities, the corresponding ideas of legitimacy and the attendant dynamics of legitimation at the micro level. They have done so moving well beyond a Weberian perspectivism (1978 [1922]) and addressing the attendant ambiguities (Pardo 2000a). They have examined in depth the socio-economic impact on urban life of policies, rules and regulations that are received in the broader society as unfair, slanted or punitive. Aware, with Weber (1978 [1922]), that the authority to rule depends on recognition of rulers' legitimacy across society (Pardo 2000b, 2018), they have asked: How much more governance failure before legitimacy is withdrawn and, consequently, democracy is jeopardised? The need to address this question is now more urgent than ever; particularly in democratic systems across the world, for there governance and the law are broadly seen to fail the democratic contract as they fail to meet the challenge posed by the implications of this phenomenon. Urban futures are at stake (Prato 2009, Prato and Pardo 2013, Hannerz 2015, Pardo et al. eds 2015, Krase and DeSena 2016). Combined with contextual pressures — of national and international origin — these failures undermine the very foundations of democratic society. They generate malignant changes that corrupt individual and associated life. As poverty increase and multiplies, 'natural' solidarity turns into egotism; the morality of reciprocity and help gives

³ See Pardo 1995, 2000a, 2004; contributions in Pardo ed. 2000 and 2004 and in Pardo and Prato eds 2010.

ground to the ‘every man for himself’ instinct; as predatory values spread, so do abuse and corruption; as rulers lose trust and legitimacy, their power loses authority and authoritative leadership turns into authoritarianism; as immigration grows out of any semblance of control, tolerance turns into toleration and toleration into intolerance; as the establishment loses legitimacy, democratic participation shrivels, to the delight of power lobbies and select élite groups. And so, dangerously, on.

It should go without saying that as a moral and ethical category legitimacy is not necessarily a hallmark of the official world, including bureaucracy, government and the law. Across society, actors often separate the legal from the legitimate. Not always, it has emerged, what is legal is received as legitimate and not always what is not legal is seen as illegitimate: much is often worked out at local social and cultural level, regardless of official views. Ethnographic research has repeatedly found that ordinary people’s view of what is legitimate and what is not legitimate defy — explicitly or implicitly, overtly or covertly — policies and changes in the law that meet the interest of élite groups at the expense of the rest of society. It has shown that no legitimacy is attached, at grassroots level, to rulers’ choices dictated by ideological bias, cronyism, clientelism and various forms of corruption that do not break the law. It has brought out significant ways in which ordinary people question — in practice and more or less explicitly — the criminalization of actions and behaviours that are seen as moral and legitimate at the grassroots and legislation that claims to uphold widely held views of legitimacy but is ambiguous or difficult to implement, is not implemented, or is implemented by double standards. At a greater level of complexity, the empirical analysis of legitimacy and legitimation has exposed the (often damaging) kind of strong perspectivism about morality and rational choice that undergirds dominant definitions of membership of society, non-membership or ‘undeserving membership’.⁴

In short, graphically stressing the importance of processes of legitimacy and legitimation, today governance and the law are generally seen to fail to meet constructively the challenge posed by the complexities and implications, ultimately the messiness of life on the ground. Raising critical issues, misplaced or instrumentally selective moralities in policy and in the production and enforcement of the law (Fuller 1969, Pardo 2000a and 2000b) play a significant role in such a failure. Today, rulers — including democratic rulers — are seen to be caught in a visibly delegitimizing path, as they prove unwilling or, at best, incapable of taking on board the concerns, needs and expectations expressed by increasingly disaffected ordinary people. Today, all too often policy is seen to be inspired by ideological bias, to serve the interests of a few at the expense of the many; whatever its (ever flimsier) ‘democratic’ disguises, it is seen for what it is: slanted, morally biased and conveniently ineffectual or tyrannical.

As Pardo has observed (1995, 2000), in order to address legitimacy beyond a strictly legalistic approach we must first distinguish between the philosophical concept of legitimacy — intended as the basis of authority, founded on ruling by consent rather than by coercive power — and a sociological analysis of its diverse sources; that is, of ideological views and

⁴ See contributions in Prato ed. 2009 and in Prato and Pardo eds 2010.

everyday-life apperceptions (in the sense of critical consciousness, and recognition and valuation) of legitimacy. Paraphrasing Norbert Elias (1982 [1939]), it could be said that the legitimacy of the political (and social) order is in constant transformation. Similarly, and most importantly, apperceptions of legitimacy are not static, but are subject to constant change, too, due to changes in the values, norms and needs within a specific socioeconomic and cultural context at a specific historical juncture.

The conceptualization of legitimacy as an object of study raises key questions:

- How should we understand the moral concepts of legitimacy by which rulers motivate their choices and actions?
- What are the culturally specific practices by which people make the categories of the legitimate and illegitimate shift across the domains of the moral, the economic, the legal and the civic?
- What legitimacy or illegitimacy is attached to the law and to policy at the grassroots?
- What are the everyday practices in which individual and groups engage and through which they potentially transform the idea of legitimate behaviour, of legitimate law and of legitimate policy?
- Through what processes the legal and the illegal are legitimated or de-legitimated?

From an ethnographer's viewpoint, these questions are crosscut by a concern with how we should deal with ideas of legitimacy across the social spectrum. So far, the in-depth analysis of diverse ethnographies has brought to light behaviours that are firmly rooted in the morality and ramifications, in practical life, of a *strong continuous interaction* between the material and the non-material aspects of life (Pardo 1995 and 1996: iv). An important condition is to stay committed to eschewing confusion between legitimacy and legality and engaging analytically with important aspects of action that demonstrate the moral and cultural complexity of people's managing the messiness of real life. If our understanding of human beings in society is to share the responsibility of a complex view, we must take very seriously the interplay between personal morality and civic responsibility, and between value and action. In the first place, we have argued (Pardo and Prato 2010), this requires an informed awareness of the vanity of the monist approach to the complex ways in which people merge social morality and personal choice into practices that observably recognize more than the self and may contradict, de facto, the legitimacy of the law and policy (Pardo 1996: Chap. 2 and Chap. 7).

World-wide discontent with how the dominant élite manage power is generating grassroots opposition, which is powerfully contributing to the growing gap between the rulers and the ruled — critically, between ideas and recognitions of legitimacy at the grassroots level as opposed to among élite groups. In recent times, democratic society has experienced particularly disruptive effects of this gap. Conflicting moralities across the social, cultural, economic and political spectra are increasingly coming the fore across the world, corresponding to a progressive erosion of the law and of the legitimacy of governance.

In spite of scholarly warnings on the impact of these problems on good governance, the political élite express, at best, lukewarm acknowledgement, while doing little of any

consequence. On the other hand, citizens increasingly question the legitimacy of local, national and supra-national bureaucracy, administration, decision-making, policy and the law. These problems are particularly evident in the urban field, from secondary cities to metropolitan areas (Pardo and Prato eds 2012 and 2017, Krase and DeSena 2016). Every day there are reports of grassroots protests of assorted types that expose both the obnoxious ways (obnoxious, that is, to reason and citizenship rights) in which dominant élite manage power and the growing opposition in the wider society to their rhetoric and actual behaviours.⁵ The list of recent occurrences that point to the acute crisis of citizens' trust in their rulers is long, and growing. One case is given by the Italian rough treatment of the fundamental division of power and of the democratic process that, since 2010, has allowed a succession of unelected governments to rule the country. Another example lies in the acrimonious subtext of the 2017 US Presidential election and the grassroots motivations of the American voter that are reflected in many ways in those that animated the British public to vote to leave the EU, and large proportions of the electorate in France, Austria, Germany, The Netherlands, Hungary, Italy and so on to give strength to 'anti-establishment' parties that may well be controversial but cannot be simply dismissed as populist. The consequences are dire, though largely anticipated in the cited publications.

As a fitting corollary of the conflict between the élite and the rest, the question, 'What will happen to us?' is being cogently asked in our ethnographies, mirroring similar concerns around the world. Legalistic and formalist views definitely aside, the foregoing brings powerfully to a head the need to address the problematic of legitimacy on the ground, which, we suggest, of course involves taking stock of the ethnography of legitimacy and the attendant theoretical insights but also requires us to move urgently ahead through strong scholarship that addresses this controversial realm and the attendant problematic ramifications.⁶

If it is the duty of anthropologists and fellow social scientists to study humankind to improve humankind, it is also their responsibility to help answer this question with particular attention to the morality of what is right, of what is doable, fair and can be lived with, as opposed to what is legal. In 2016 we thought that it would be timely to take stock of the past debate and push on, moving the discussion beyond what has been to what will be. Given the current global scenario, we hoped that the application of the ideas offered by the cited literature on morality, action, law, politics and governance would help to stimulate engaged scholarship and robust exchange of ideas to bring out the epistemological significance of charting new theoretical directions on 'legitimacy' and 'legitimation' as loci of ethnographic knowledge gained through long-term field research. We worked out an intellectual programme, applied for funding and invited a group of colleagues at different stages in their

⁵ See, on this, Bekkers et al. 2007, Gupta 1995, Morris ed. 2000, Pardo and Prato eds 2010, Riberio Hoffman and van der Vleuten eds 2007, Sarduski 2008, Sharma and Gupta eds 2006.

⁶ See, for instance, Breitmeier 2008; Camargo Sierra and Hurtado Tarazona 2013; Coicau 2002; Fassin 2014; Pardo ed. 2000; Pardo 1995, 2000b, 2004; Prato 1993, 2000, 2006, 2010; Peters et al. 2009; Pardo and Prato eds 2010; Spyridakis 2010.

careers who share a strong commitment to ethnographic research in urban settings and to empirically-based analysis to join us in developing this debate. They provided different experiences and skill sets to the overall discussion that took place one year later throughout the workshop that we held in Sicily.

In organizing the meeting, we benefited from the intellectual and organizational know-how, network and local knowledge of the International Urban Symposium-IUS. The contributors were asked to draw on their research in urban settings to prepare ethnographically-based papers that addressed the complex interactions among morality, ethics and legitimacy that emerge from the empirical study of the relationship among the legal, the not-strictly legal and the illegal. We invited analyses that took into account the aforementioned perspectivism in addressing actions — legal and not-strictly legal — that are regarded as legitimate at the grassroots and of policies and rulers' actions that do not break the law but are regarded as illegitimate in the broader society. We asked that particular attention should be paid to the impact — economic, social and political — of these actions, of the criminalization of behaviours that are regarded as legitimate at the grassroots and of the legalization of actions that are regarded as reprehensible and illegitimate at the grassroots. Throughout the meeting engaged debate based on comparative reflection benefited from regionally diversified ethnographic knowledge from East Africa, Canada, Europe, the Far East, India, Latin America, the Middle East and the USA, and amply demonstrated the epistemological significance of charting new theoretical directions on 'legitimacy and urban governance' as a locus of ethnographic research that matters to our urban futures.

The general atmosphere of informality and the participants' dogged engagement with the topic and the organizational set up contributed to making this workshop successful and highly promising for the development of reflection and debate on this critical theme. Over the week that we spent together, we became a truly engaged and close-knit group of human beings, which bodes well both intellectually and in terms of academic network: many promising ideas and a number of projects were seeded during the informal meetings in the evenings and during the excursions. It was a bonus that this meeting was welcomed by the local municipal authorities, who treated the group to a wine-tasting cum archaeological excursion and that we should enjoy perfect late summer weather in a beautiful Sicilian setting.

As the papers were circulated in June among the participants, they were not read during the workshop. There, participants brought out the major points in their papers, stimulating round-table discussion. Throughout, we debated how an ethnographically-informed knowledge about legitimacy should both avoid taking this category for granted and bring out its empirical complexity and socio-political significance. Thematic Discussion Groups focused on the 5 key questions that we have listed earlier. A final Round Robin, titled 'Where we are, where we want to go', offered all participants an opportunity to outline how they intended to use the workshop to revise the papers; specifically, they clarified how the workshop had contributed to their perspective and what revisions might appear in their articles. Ideas for future developments were also discussed.

The early results of our collective efforts and the growing interest among the international community suggest that the future for this topic is very promising, that the attendant ethnographically-based analysis is likely to contribute to scholarship with the ongoing production of social theory. We reiterate our hope that the publication of the findings will stimulate further debate, new topical research and collaboration with non-academics who operate in society and are interested in our empirical knowledge, and in making use of it.

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