
Competing Sources of Museum Legitimacy: Dominant, Residual and Emergent Definitions

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The central message of the collection of essays edited by Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato on legitimacy (2019; henceforth *Legitimacy* volume) is that ethnography can provide rich insights into the social construction of legitimacy. The insight that legitimacy is socially constructed is derived from Beetham's (2013 [1991]) reformulation of Weber's work (Pardo and Prato 2019: 8). Rather than a property of formal law, legitimacy is understood here as the contingent and provisional outcome of a social process where dominant conceptions of what is legitimate, promoted by governments and other formal agencies, encounter 'different morals of legitimacy on the ground' (Pardo and Prato 2019: 21). These we need to understand if we are to bridge the gap between dominant and civil spheres of society, allowing us to grasp how democracy ultimately depends on authority stemming from moral consent, or a sense of shared values and symbolism. This involves recognising 'the essential role of citizens as fundamental stakeholders in the social set-up of the democratic system and in their recognition of the legitimacy of such system' (Pardo and Prato 2019: 22). The volume explores this citizen-centred conception of legitimacy, whether legal or moral, and demonstrates how it can be studied ethnographically through unpicking the ground-level perceptions and actions of those at the receiving end of formal laws and policies (Pardo 2000).

Taken together, then, the chapters illustrate the centrality of citizens' experiences and perceptions in any claims to legitimacy. Therefore, top-down political or economic decision-making should not be concerned only with the legality of outcomes but also their wider legitimacy outside of formal rules, understood as constructed within the civil sphere. The ethnographies collected here, as Spyridakis puts it in his chapter, enable us to grasp 'the discrepancy between the regulations issued by top decision-makers and those who experience the outcomes of this process ... between what is perceived as technically legal and the extent of its legitimacy on grassroots level' (2019: 98). Ethnography allows us to question not only the legitimacy of power structures such as governmental regulations and public policies but also to enquire how those individuals and groups co-opted into public-policy interventions respond to and conceive of them. Spyridakis' study of the Greek Government's Minimum Guaranteed Income pilot programme shows how recipients' understanding of its legitimacy derives from their grasp, through daily lived practices, of the programme's 'calculations, institutions, knowledge and tactics' and how government actors use these to attempt to manipulate people's conduct. He reveals the intricate ground-level working-out of apparently legitimised policy interventions and how important it is to consider not only the ideology they express but also how they 'fashion the modern liminal agent and its identity' (2019: 101).

Many chapters in this volume interrogate ruling-class or establishment interests, initiatives and institutions and how these impinge on citizens (Pardo 2019: 65). These may themselves be characterised by internal struggles over the legitimacy of contesting policy lines. As many authors here recognise, there is not always a smooth transition from one type of dominant (serving ruling-class and governmental agendas) legitimacy to another; there are often contesting sources of legitimacy co-existing in the same period and within the same institution. Raymond Williams (1980), the well-known Welsh cultural theorist and historian, observed this coexistence of differing agendas in culture and proposed that their relationship to each other is that of a constant negotiation between dominant, residual and emergent cultures, mediated by the processes of selective tradition and incorporation. This can be applied to organisations (Bryson 2008). In any given period, complex organisations may be characterised by conflicting ideas of the best way forward, so that senior personnel may disagree, overtly or not, as to whether new agendas are needed, or whether existing approaches should be maintained. This can produce internal struggles over how to carve out and establish a new agenda for action and a new method to govern it. As power shifts, older approaches may become residual as a new dominant direction emerges, with adherents either clinging on or leaving to pursue alternative or even oppositional paths outside. These may in time go on to form new emergent cultures elsewhere. Importantly, as Bryson (2008) shows, these struggles over organisational mission-change are rarely internally-derived, and usually pick up on and reflect wider issues and debates in the cultural sphere at large.

The work in this volume takes forward the social construction of legitimacy and struggles over it in directions that chime well with Williams' thinking, and with Bryson's suggestions on organisational change. It could be useful to explore these linkages further in relation to the museum as public cultural organisation. For example, I am interested in the ways in which people informally draw on the past in identity-formation and additionally how they then become involved, or not, in the formal cultural sphere of heritage, museums and galleries. Currently democratic states are experiencing a period of intensified legitimisation crisis, in their financialised capitalism phase (Fraser 2015). In the UK, since the economic crisis of 2008 the last two governments have responded by imposing a permanent austerity in public funding for services in the cultural sector, resulting in cuts to museum budgets and closures. The culturally-dominant question for museums then becomes: on what grounds (ethical, political, aesthetic, social) is culture a legitimate area of spend for the austerity state? How is legitimacy built in cultural institutions and in the general public for the idea that culture is useful to society?

As Williams' famous study of 'Culture and Society' (1983) traces, the idea that 'culture is good for you' in the UK can be traced to the early utilitarians (for example, Jeremy Bentham) and their influence on the state's promotion of social improvement policies in the 19th century. The great public museum-building projects in the UK of the second half of the 19th century were one manifestation of this, with their emphasis on public access to (dominant and élites conceptions of) culture and education (Bennett 2013). This contrasted with more intrinsic evaluations of culture characteristic of romantic and progressive perspectives (Williams 1983).

In the current UK political policy context, the dominant conception of culture is this instrumental one, drawing on the selective tradition inherited from earlier utilitarian thought, which is competing with residual notions of intrinsic value that are still forcefully expressed in certain sections of the museum sector.

The governmental mission to instrumentalise culture for the public good was boosted in the second half of the 20th century through post-war public funding for museums' educational programmes and the establishment of museums education services in local authorities across the UK, although many of these later folded under pressure from Conservative government cuts to local government expenditures in the 1980s-90s. Thereafter, the 1997-2010 Labour governments reprised this role, redirecting cultural policy into a tool of social policy and proclaiming that the goal of museums and galleries should be to act as vehicles of social change (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2001). They contributed a set of policies and funding schemes, including the influential Heritage Lottery Fund, which tasked museums and galleries — in exchange for public funding — to deliver improvements to a range of social policy indicators, including public health and wellbeing, engagement with civil society, poverty-reduction, educational attainment (Tlili et al. 2007). One of the key measures introduced was the introduction of free public entry into the UK's national museums, in 2001.

This policy direction of instrumentalising culture for social value coincided and was consonant with the adoption of neoliberal free-market economic policies initiated by the Conservative Governments in the 1979-97 period and then pursued by the Labour administrations thereafter (as well as the Conservative-led coalition with the Liberal Democrats, in 2010-2016, and since then the Conservative minority Government). Arguably, this has gradually brought into the collective 'structure of feeling', as Williams (1961) terms it, an image and ethic of the UK as a market-driven society, where consumer-citizens and public/third sector organisations must depend on themselves for their own prosperity, rather than on the State (Harvey 2007). Whilst by no means uncontested, this marketized, or financialised image — as also illustrated by Atalay's case study of Turkey in the *Legitimacy* volume (2019) — has come to dominate citizens' relationship with the state. In the UK, this has been accompanied by a turn to the *economic* — as well as social — value of museums and the wider cultural and arts sector.

Now, the arts sector is held up by the UK government as a major player in the nation's economic resource. This was recently set out in the Bazalgette Review, a Government-commissioned independent review of the UK's creative industries sector in 2017. It notes that 'on current trends, the Creative Industries could deliver close to £130bn GVA by 2025 and approximately one million new jobs could be created by 2030' (Bazalgette 2017: 11). UK Government Culture Secretary Karen Bradley commented that the 'UK's Creative Industries are an *economic powerhouse* and the government is committed to removing the barriers to its growth' (in DCMS 2017, cited in Belfiore 2018: 2). This embrace of an instrumental cultural policy is far from being a phenomenon limited to the UK, but a by now well-established European trend (Belfiore 2002). Belfiore observes:

‘This opens up fundamental questions of democratic accountability: whose ideas of “cultural value” drive decisions over investment and funding justified in terms of public benefits? And can the process through which cultural authority is exercised in this decision-making process be made genuinely democratic and accountable? What is the responsibility of public policy towards those who appear as “losers” in these struggles over validation of their cultural value?’ (Belfiore 2018: 12).

These questions address precisely the issues of legitimacy explored in the volume by Pardo and Prato. The contributions to the volume suggest that ethnography could play a vital role in revealing how ideas of cultural value circulate amongst different sections of the public — whether ‘losers’ or ‘winners’.

The policy framework concerning museums’ social and economic roles has two principal aspects, both of which challenge residual concepts of museums’ legitimacy: pronouncements about the need for museums to change in order to focus more on new roles, and a toolkit of audit measures that supposedly enable their impact to be measured. Of the two, it is the latter that have attracted most scepticism from researchers and academics. Auditing cultural impact is associated with the principles of New Public Management, which borrows from manufacturing models to measure ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’, with the latter assumed to be predictable, measurable and to an extent modifiable (Newman 2013). Having been required to adopt business accounting practices by their funders, museums and other cultural institutions now pay careful attention to income generation through efforts to increase business sponsorship, private donations, visitor numbers and spend. This inevitably produces a situation in which museums’ marketing and development sections become preoccupied with counting visitors, sometimes at the expense of paying attention to visitors who count (Hooper-Greenhill 1988). The consequences of this for museums’ public legitimacy need to be further interrogated.

None of this policy-level and academic contestation necessarily resonates with civil society definitions of what a museum is, or ought, to be. In fact, most of the discourse about museums’ social and economic roles is audible only at an academic, institutional and governmental level, where it circulates in the form of academic critiques, policy documents, government statements, consultancy reports, third-sector and professional-association communications, and so on. In so far as the public is concerned at all with the state of museums, they are likely to derive their opinions of them largely from their experiences as visitors. Whilst the effects of cultural policy changes may be manifest in, for example, new kinds of exhibition topic, visitors are unlikely to be well-informed about the policy debates driving them, since these are not publicly aired except in occasional cultural commentary in the more highbrow media. As a result, struggles over legitimacy and debates around public benefit are conducted at a largely institutional level, within and amongst organisations themselves.

This ‘bubble’ of professional discourse about museums is problematic because organisational legitimacy is not derived from within organisations themselves, as the literature on organisational sociology has long recognised (Bryson 2008). The sources of legitimacy that cultural institutions now require are no longer, or less frequently, fields of high-cultural or

academic-disciplinary specialism in artworlds, scientific institutions or élites communities of cultural practice. Instead they are increasingly supplied by the domains of practice of governments (national and local), public and philanthropic funders, policy-makers and policy-networks, who wish to use their investment in culture for social and economic outputs and ends that they consider legitimate, which are not aligned with élites knowledge fields. Ultimately, legitimacy is located within the social spaces of real and diverse publics and non-aligned civil society groups who are intended actively to take part in the cultural activities and encounters that these top-down policies foster. Yet, changing role requirements in the dominant professional culture (that is, to be more instrumentally focused) present museums with significant legitimacy challenges in the civil society realm. These are arguably greater than the challenges they face in adopting the requirements of professional cultural policy-making, since the latter is a comparatively navigable field. Professional policy documents, statements and directives articulating clear goals and values for museums can be relatively straightforwardly reflected in their own policies and mission statements (although it is far harder actually to implement them, in so far as they require changing working practices, procedures and organisational infrastructures that may be ingrained and resistant to change). What is far less straightforward for museums is to be able to gain a clear sense of their role in the eyes of the general public, i.e. within the informal, highly diverse and non-organised spaces of public, non-aligned civil society actors that are the aimed-for participants in their cultural activities.

How can museums find legitimisation beyond the formal realm of policy? Beyond counting visitors, how can they measure their public ‘impact’? Although museums offer audiences a range of physical and digital interfaces through programmes of events, exhibitions, activities and the like, audiences are not the same as publics. Much research testifies to the fact that, notwithstanding two or more decades of effort on museums’ part to diversify these audiences, they remain overall (with some exceptions) stubbornly non-diverse (with the recent Warwick Commission on cultural participation showing that 87% of visits to museums were made by those from the highest social groups, with only 13% from lower ones). Even committed and active outreach work of the kind that many museums now attempt, which brings museum activities into public spaces that would not normally supply visitor streams (such as community or youth groups in disadvantaged areas), can at best be patchy and intermittent. In truth, sustaining outreach programmes is only becoming more difficult given the UK Government’s current public austerity regime that has imposed severe and ongoing spending cuts on the cultural sector, producing critical staff shortages and workload pressures over the past decade. The Museums Association, for instance, reported in 2017 that 64 museums had closed in the UK since 2010 — a rate of 9 per year. That year also saw the lowest number of museum openings since 1960, according to early findings from the Birkbeck Mapping Museum project¹. The major cause is swingeing cuts to local government budgets (Gray and Barford, 2018).

¹ Source: Larkin, J. blogpost 23/02/18

<http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/mapping-museums/2018/02/23/museum-closure-pre-findings/>

The spaces of engagement and non-engagement that museums provide for citizens are currently not well mapped by research. Ethnography has a unique ability to shed light on the complexities brought into play in encounters between cultural institutions, their representatives on the ground and diverse publics. In Prato's case study of Brindisi, for example, the integrity of public policy actors is always in contest. Defined as 'a system of values that carries significant expectations of people's behaviour... [through] adherence to shared moral and ethical principles', integrity is a *sine qua non* for the establishment and maintenance of public trust in authority and a sense of its accountability (2019: 53). How people on the ground assess manifestations of authoritative discourse and actions depends therefore, for Prato, on its 'adherence to shared moral and ethical principles'. The extent to which these are perceived as possessing integrity will determine the legitimacy, for them, of the messages received. As citizens encounter power not in the abstract but in concrete forms, as Pardo's chapter (2019) also suggests, it is the perceived personal integrity of the representatives of authority with whom citizens encounter power not in the abstract but in concrete forms, as Pardo's chapter also suggests, it is the perceived personal integrity of the representatives of authority with whom citizens come into contact – whether via the media or more immediately in face-to-face encounters – that forms the basis for their judgements. This ordinary, everyday activity of making judgements about the actions of formal-sector agents encountered, and the perceiving of integrity (or the lack of it) in them, is what needs to be studied, since it is from this that legitimacy will be granted or withheld. This is a better way, it seems to me, of accurately evaluating the public engagement and inclusion projects pursued by museums (and policy-makers) than the routinely-used visitor surveys or tick-box questionnaires.

Ethnography can usefully shed light on why people do and do not choose to participate in, and thereby legitimise, the formal spaces of engagement offered by museums and galleries, whether through outreach work or inside visitor sites themselves. These interactions are always shaped by the ideas and images formed by participants of what is on offer in combination with their commitments and investments in all other spheres of their everyday lives. Pardo's study (2019) of the entrepreneurial actions of ordinary people living in a deeply dysfunctional governance regime in Naples brings out how managing and making do require a necessary and 'strong, continuous' everyday interaction between material and non-material dimensions of life. This is what his ethnography lays bare. As Boucher's chapter further illustrates, participation often involves 'a balance of commitment and detachment' on the part of participants (2019: 210), where people will get involved in a given public-oriented project only according to their immediate means and purposes, and no further. This will not necessarily mean signing up to public projects in active, committed or ongoing ways. In terms of participation in museum-initiated projects, participation is likely, for many groups, to be only sporadic, partial and apathetic, given that other dimensions of everyday life are making multiple and pressing demands.

The potential social stratifications to consider are many and varied. Retired people, for example, who may have fewer everyday competing investments, are often the most likely

demographic to turn up to museum-initiated events. Young people's attention, by contrast, is notably harder to attract and maintain, unless they find legitimate and meaningful purposes to lend it. In a museum, such a legitimate purpose could be through gaining accreditation for taking part or finding a stage on which to project a sense of meaningful identity or positive action. The volume by Pardo and Prato amply illustrates how ethnography could be better utilised by researchers investigating such striated dimensions of public participation in the formal cultural sphere of museums, galleries and other cultural institutions. As exemplified by many of the chapters in this volume, ethnography directs us to the 'study of what real people do, why they do it and how they attach legitimacy to what they do' (Pardo, p. 65). This sets out a compelling agenda for future research into the ground-level legitimacy of cultural institutions, especially where governments are now seeking to instrumentalise culture for economic, policy and ideological ends.

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