

The Fourth Pillar: Power as a Source of Legitimacy

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TAN WEI KEE, NOV 24 2008

Politics can be broadly summed up as a study of power, a notion epitomised by the title of Lasswell's book.[1] Power, as Ball suggested, is "arguably the single most important organising concept in social and political theory",[2] without which nothing gets done, ensuring the breakdown of social systems. However, power requires legitimacy for long-term sustenance. Rousseau recognised this when he wrote: "The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty." [3] The importance of legitimacy lies in its cost-effectiveness. Consider the reasons why people obey: coercion; rewards; legitimacy.[4] In the first case, governments require huge amounts of resources to constantly monitor citizens and execute punishment, for "as soon as it is possible to disobey with impunity, disobedience is legitimate".[5] In the second case, governments need to spend resources to 'buy' obedience from the citizens to draw them away from potentially better alternatives. The third, however, requires only the citizen to have a sense of moral obligation towards the government, so that they are willing to obey without expecting a reward. As such, legitimacy has attracted much academic attention, most notably from Max Weber, whose concept of legitimate authority rests on three principal pillars: tradition; legality; ideology.

In this essay, I propose a fourth pillar – power, and show how it can *be as important a source of legitimacy as tradition, legality, and ideology*. In asserting that power itself can be politically legitimating, I do not imply that it is devoid of any support from the other three pillars. There is no existing viable government which does not derive part of its authority from at least one of them. I argue that people who benefit from the rule of a government by virtue of its power to produce utility will tend to regard power as the main – if not the sole – agent which legitimises rule, relegating other factors to subordinate roles in this legitimation process. Therefore, the question is: What are the ways in which a government can use power to convince people that its rule is legitimate? In brief, the discussion will be formatted into three sections. The first section defines the distinct concepts of power and legitimacy according to the scope of this essay. This is followed by a description of Max Weber's influential three-pillared model of legitimacy. The last section shows how the government can use power to legitimise its rule. Roughly speaking, it can use power to provide legitimacy by 1) maximising the welfare of the people and 2) eliminating potential rivals. I will conclude the essay by suggesting possible implications of my argument.

Despite being subjects of extensive debate, no single and universally accepted definition of power or legitimacy exists. Dahl's famous definition that "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something B would not otherwise do"[6] sees power as control over others against their own desires, connoting a lack of individual freedom. However, power can also be seen under a more liberal light, as a means of helping people meet their wants and needs. Freeman's definition – "power is the capacity to direct the decisions and actions of others"[7] – suits the purpose of this essay better than Dahl's as it gives a more well-rounded view that encapsulates influence and guidance in addition to coercion as the ways in which power affects people. Legitimacy is a subjective term, dependent on the perspective of those affected by power. What is legitimate to a group of people might not necessarily be legitimate to another group. Thus, the legitimacy of a government depends on the belief of a majority that it is legitimate.[8] Legitimacy allows people to subject themselves willingly to a power. As defined by Heywood, legitimacy is "the quality that transforms naked power into rightful authority".[9] Therefore, power is legitimate to the extent that it is seen by a majority as rightful or valid, thereby gaining willing compliance from the general population.

Max Weber's concept of legitimacy has been the "dominant model"[10] for studies of legitimacy despite being the subject of frequent criticisms. It is useful for providing at least an overview of how legitimacy is conferred upon power.

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Tradition, the first of these three pillars, gives power the advantage of history, inculcating in people a natural inclination to obey. Authority in traditional societies is based on customs and traditions which are regarded as rightful because they have been in place for a long time, validated by a “habitual orientation to conform”[11] cultivated through the ages. Such authority is not restrained by law, since the ruler is allowed to do as he pleases within the boundaries of tradition. Many modern governments still rely in part on this pillar for legitimacy, such as the constitutional monarchies in Jordan and Norway.

The second pillar is legality, which accords legitimacy by restraining the power of the government, ensuring that it is acting according to established rules set in a constitution. Weber considered this the most ubiquitous source of legitimacy in modern states.[12] In this case, a form of contract is agreed upon between the government and the governed, which guarantees that the government will act according to the laws in exchange for obedience. In this respect, it is not unlike the social contract theory by Locke that binds the government to rules which, when broken, gives people “the right of revolution”,[13] since the government’s power is no longer legitimate.

The third pillar is ideology, which may be embodied by a set of ideas or a person, in which case it becomes charisma. Notable ideologies include democracy and communism. Ideology gives power legitimacy by providing a promise or vision of an ideal society, inspiring people to obey in order to achieve that vision. It played a significant role in legitimising American leadership during the Cold War, due to America’s being the “leader of the free world”. [14] Ideology in the form of charisma are embodied in people who are said to possess that “gift of grace”[15] which arouses devotion and confidence in the people to follow their leadership to achieve the desired ends. The problem with this lies in the renewal of leadership, manifested in the regimes of Napoleon and Hitler. Once the possessor of charisma is absent, the regime will have to rely on other pillars for legitimacy.

Besides the three pillars, power is also a significant source of legitimacy. One way in which it can be politically legitimating is by being exercised for the purpose of providing a high standard of living for the people, to “achieve the greatest amount of happiness altogether”. [16] This means the maintenance of societal order, including the upkeep of territorial security, development of the economy, and correction of social inequality. Not only does the government need sufficient power at its disposal to accomplish all these, it also requires the expertise to wield it. The government needs credible military power to deter external attacks. It requires expertise in the formulation of effective economic policies to ensure consistent growth. The ability to acquire natural resources for energy is also imperative for a well-developed economy. In addition, the government has to maintain social equilibrium, by providing affordable education and healthcare, all of which are possible only if the government has the capacity to implement them. Therefore, when the government uses power to justify its *raison d’être*, *people are likely to see it as legitimate because its rule directly benefits them*.

The second way in which power can be politically legitimating is through “preference-shaping”, [17] one of the three dimensions of power; the other two being decision-making and agenda-setting. In practice, this means the government can use its power to eliminate potential rivals, while convincing the people that the present government represents the best deal. This allows the government to secure their willing compliance because “they can see or imagine no alternative to it”. [18] The government can deprive the opposition of any outlet to voice their views, by implementing censorship to filter out dissident content. This can be supplemented by subtle propaganda campaigns to either discredit the opposition, or glorify the government. It can also extend its control over key industries and state apparatus to further consolidate its power, making it more infeasible for potential rivals to challenge its rule. The results of these measures should persuade people of the relative superiority of the ruling government in the face of bafflingly quiet or impotent rivals, and logic will convince them to voluntarily accept the status quo and acknowledge its legitimacy.

The Singapore government has managed to strike a balance between providing utility and suppressing political opposition. On one hand, Singapore enjoys a high standard of living, with one of the highest per capita GDP, literacy rate and life expectancy in the world. [19] The country has a general reputation of being corruption-free. [20] On the other hand, Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp both have close links to the government. According to a media watchdog, the Singapore media is “in the grip of a rigorous self-censorship”. [21] Opposition parties, the most prominent of which is the Singapore Democratic Party, are still stifled by a dearth of communication outlets to

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promote their views,[22] and consequently hold relatively minute influence over the public. The legitimacy and support which the government enjoys from the people stem arguably more from its power to fulfil its functions and silence its rivals than the legal basis upon which it is established.

In conclusion, power is clearly as relevant as tradition, legality, and ideology in the legitimization of political rule. Power legitimises the government by empowering it with the means to fulfil its purpose of being through the provision of utility. Alternatively, the government may also use power to eliminate potential rivals so that it appears to be the best choice of leadership for the people. As states move into an era of globalisation and democratisation, power could prove to be an increasingly important source of legitimacy. The voice of the people expressing their needs will ring ever louder, and the fulfilment of these needs that is crucial to maintaining legitimacy cannot be executed without sufficient and competent power. This, alongside the perpetual problem of scarcity, could intensify the competition for natural resources necessary for economic development, resulting in a tenuous political climate more prone to conflicts.

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