



Book Review: The Legitimation of Power

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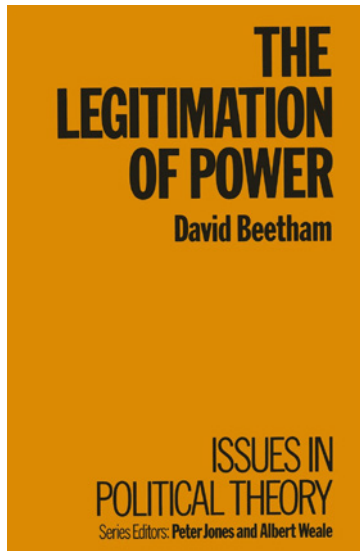
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The Legitimation of Power by David Beetham (1991) delves into the question of what legitimation means? What makes power legitimate? He posits that many experts from the fields of law or philosophy have been interested in settling legal or moral issues and dilemmas about power. Political scientists, on the other hand, have long attempted to comprehend “the empirical consequences that legitimacy has for the character of power relations, for the different ways in which they are organised, and for the extent to which the powerful can actually count on the obedience or support of those subordinate to them” (p. 5). There are two main parts to this book. The first part explains the concept of legitimacy, and the second part looks at the relationship between states and legitimacy.

Beetham starts the first chapter by criticizing Weber's definition of legitimacy as the 'belief in legitimacy' because it appears to have been adopted by almost all social scientists (Beetham 1991). He asserts, “*the whole Weberian Legitimacy has to be left behind as one of the blindest of blind alleys in the history of social science, notable only of the impressiveness of the name that it bears, not for the direction on which it leads.*” For Beetham, associating legitimacy with only belief exaggerates the role that belief plays in the legitimation of power. “*What is important*

for legitimation,” writes Beetham, “*is evidence of consent expressed through actions which are understood as demonstrating consent within the conventions of society, such as*

- *concluding an agreement or entering into a contract with a superior party;*
- *swearing an oath of allegiance;*
- *joining in acclamation;*
- *voting in an election or plebiscite, and so on” (p.12).*

For Weber's typology does not go beyond associating legitimacy with belief. In this seminal work, Beetham posits that there are three underlying factors of legitimacy; legality, the justifiability of the rules in terms of beliefs and values present in each society, and actions of consent to legitimacy. He contends that people's reasoning of authority also matters for legitimacy. In a stark contrast to Weber, people must find it logical to give their consent to the authority, thus legitimise their power.

In the second chapter of the book, the author outlines what he means by power. He describes power briefly as “*the ability to achieve our purposes*” and adds, “*it is unequally distributed*” (p.43). “*To speak of having power over someone usually implies a continuous relationship, in which a substantial sanction is always present.*” This account of having greater power and its implication on us is problematic. It implies that there has to be a superiority if one is more potent than the other. From the perspective of democracy, power is granted to the rulers by the will of the people. Those elected representatives are therefore obliged to rule the very people who choose them. In this relationship, power is a regulation rather than subordination. He uses the parent-child relationship metaphor to justify his arguments that subordination is beneficial and temporary.

He then posits that “the expanded powers of the dominant are dependent upon the limitation of powers of the subordinate and are achieved primarily at their expense.” These claims appear to neglect the fact that subordinates have the power to change the distribution of power. The author also seems to think that these differences concerning power -he terms them inequalities- are intrinsic to societies. He then goes on to argue that such inequalities are the result of the difference in competence.

In the second part of the book, the author attempts to address ‘Why should political legitimacy be so difficult to attain in the contemporary world?’ (p.117). For the author, “the contemporary state is a form of power-structure that requires legitimation” (p.117). He then gives examples from countries like Greece in

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1974 and Iran in 1979, where regimes appeared healthy, yet due to loss of legitimacy, they collapsed swiftly. Another possible outcome of the loss of legitimacy is civil war (Beetham 1991). For that, it would be accurate to add here that states survive and thrive on legitimacy. Without it, states are doomed to collapse. From the examples and explanations he provides in the book, such claims ring true. Even today, where many states -the most obvious example would be Syria- fail to control their citizens appear to have legitimacy issues.

As mentioned above, legality is one of the three fundamental prerequisites of legitimation. In achieving legal authority, states benefit from *“the set of institutional arrangements and practices to protect the rule of law”* (p.126). He then says that such arrangements must also mesh with the nominal and normative rules present in each society. *“Constitutional order,”* Beetham writes, *“must facilitate rather than hinder the pursuit of a general interest”* (p.127). Though there is no doubt on the part that rules and laws must conform to the norm of societies, it is not clear, however, what he means by general interests. Who creates such interests, or how they are created? Does he mean finding common ground for the subordinate and dominant? Addressing these questions would have increased the clarity of the arguments.

Under the sub-section called *‘Crisis Tendencies of Political Systems,’* Beetham argues that crisis occurs when there is a problem with agencies through which legitimacy is procured. For that, crisis *“in a liberal democracy,”* he argues, *“means a threat to the electoral rules and their associated freedoms or an erosion of commitment to the idea of popular sovereignty underpinning them.”* He then discusses Islam and legitimation and argues that Islam's rise has proved the idea that *“political legitimacy can only be securely grounded on a secular basis.”* Upon closer examination, if one looks at the role that religion plays in the Western World and values of religion embedded in countries like the US, that presumption was already wrong. The problem here stems from the idea that when a western country seemingly adopts a religion's values, they do so in a secular manner. When a so-called Islamic country adopts Islam's values, however, it does so in an unsecular manner.

In the book's last two sub-sections, the author looks at de-legitimation, political breakdown, and re-legitimation. De-legitimation for Beetham stems from a legitimacy deficit which he describes as follows: *“A legitimacy can occur either because of a divergence between constitutional rules and given beliefs about the source of political authority, or because of their inadequacy to resolve problems of government performance; or indeed both simultaneously”* (p.208). To summarise, a legitimacy deficit leads to delegitimation, which means the withdrawal of consent. It seems of great importance to comprehend how the public withdraws its consensus from the ruling power. This question was not addressed in detail by the author. Therefore, this area of inquiry is a fruitful topic to advance for future researchers.

References

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