

Legitimacy, Popularity and the Construction of Political Myth: Contemporary Discussions

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The concept of legitimacy has a long history within political science and social thought. In a common definition, legitimacy is understood as a popular belief 'that a rule, institution, or leader has the right to govern' (Encyclopedia Princetoniensis 2014). Differently put, legitimacy refers to a widespread belief that current arrangements of power are appropriate, proper, just, and in keeping with agreed-upon rules. On the individual level, legitimacy could be defined as a psychological property (Tyler 2006) expressing such a belief. Because of legitimacy, people feel that they ought to defer to decisions and rules, and follow them voluntarily out of obligation and responsibility to others rather than out of fear of punishment or anticipation of reward. This is in contrast to acting out of fear of coercion or because the powers persuade you through your pocket book; there is a vast difference between persuasion and conviction as any parent probably can testify. This is why legitimacy is so important to the success of authorities.

As pointed out already by Herbert Kelman in the late 1960s, if the nation-state is to function effectively, the basic tenets of its ideology have to be widely accepted within the population. Being able to gain voluntary acquiescence from most people, most of the time, due to their sense of obligation makes state and society function during periods of scarcity, crisis, and conflict. It creates a reservoir of support which can be drawn upon under drastic circumstances, a support that is not contingent upon self-interest or coercion. This is the equivalent of the diffuse reciprocity that game theory scholars used to talk about in the 1980s. By way of contrast, when the indispensable consent between rulers and ruled is missing, social order ultimately breaks down. This is the situation when Leviathan will finally be toppled.

Most contemporary academic discussions on legitimacy take their point of departure in the Weberian ideal types of legal-rational, traditional and charismatic legitimacy (Weber 2006: 157-8). Of these, it is the first one, founded in the meticulous adherence to constitutional rules and resting on a mandate of wide popular consent, which spells out the mature and

sustainable legitimacy of contemporary democracies. Even so, it was made clear already from Weber's pioneering works that the Western ideal type of legitimacy is not the only way in which social arrangements of power may be justified internally in a state and can consequently be held stable. Moreover, even though legitimacy is at its core a positive thing there are potential risks connected to it. Again, Herbert Kelman reminded us about them: through legitimacy people authorize others to act on their behalf, in the process they may think that their own conduct need not be assessed in moral terms as long as it is in keeping with those prevailing beliefs, or what I will be referring to as political myths. In other words, when a political leader deemed to be legitimate exhorts people to act in a certain way, they may concur just because s/he is deemed legitimate and not because the actions are moral or proper. They may in fact even be outright immoral. This becomes especially precarious when the legitimacy of the ruler is not founded upon legal-rational basis but on charismatic grounds.

It has from a normative point of view often been debated whether or not the concept can be meaningfully applied outside a democratic context (Peter 2014). Taking due regard to the dangers of conceptual stretching (Pakulski 1986), many scholars have adapted the theorizing on legitimacy to make the concept applicable beyond the democratic nation-state context (Alagappa 1995; Schlumberger and Bank 2001; Heberer and Schubert 2008), as well as to international relations (Hurd 2008) and indeed even international organizations (Beetham and Lord 1998) or the company level (Tyler 2006). I would also adhere to this line. It is meaningful to talk about the cement that holds states together, short of coercion or pecuniary self-interest, regardless of whether the legitimating grounds are democratic or not, since the consequences of processes of acquiring and attaining the societal stability that can only come from some kind of legitimacy are vast and profound for domestic politics of states as well as for their outward behavior.

In his adaptation of the Weberian conceptual apparatus to the Soviet political system, T. H. Rigby (1982) once coined the concept of goal-rational legitimacy to capture the basic logic that the end (such as the ultimate achievement of communism) was argued to justify the means, and that some kind of legitimacy accrued from this. A further effort at diversifying the Weberian triad was undertaken by Leslie Holmes (1997), who among his sub-types of legitimation included the eudaemonic type, according to which popular consent is

maintained as long as a minimum level of affluence is upheld and distributed to the population. Here, however, the difference between legitimacy and acceptance seems almost minimal. Even so, this subtype is of considerable value for the analysis of many contemporary states, Russia included. This also ties in with the difference, recognised in somewhat more recent literature, between more diffuse and long-term legitimacy which builds on commonality of values between the rulers and the ruled (input legitimacy), and more output-based legitimacy (McDonough et al. 1986; Scharpf 1999) or performance-based legitimacy (Burnell 2006), which rests on the ability of the political leaders to deliver the goods. The latter variant of legitimacy is commonly presumed to be of less longevity and is also believed to erode in times of economic downturn – a factor that is important not least in the context of contemporary Russia. And with this I believe we can for the moment leave aside the distinction between legitimacy and acceptance, but we will return to it further on.

Legitimacy is not built out of thin air; the convictions in people's minds that arrangements of power are appropriate, just and in keeping with agreed upon rules have to have some kind of ideational basis. We could call these bases legitimating ideologies perhaps, or foundational narratives, or societal beliefs, or ethos, or we could call them, as I would tend to favor, legitimating political myths. They are political because they touch upon the fundamental distribution of power and authority in society and they are legitimating on the grounds that they convincingly tell the story to a significant number of people of why these arrangements are appropriate, just and in keeping with agreed-upon rules

But what do I mean by myths? My interpretation and use of the concept of myth deviates from the standard everyday use of the term. Myth is not about falsity in philosophical terms, as Chiara Bottici reminds us. It is not about cheating, lying and spreading false convictions. Myths may well be false, of course, but they may also be true, but this is actually irrelevant as the important thing is that they are believed in by a significant amount of people, and that this amount of people relate to them as if they were true. The main thing is that they express naturalized, taken-for-granted cultural knowledge in the Barthesian sense of the word. It is in the best interests of political elites to try to vie for being the most credible keepers of the seal, for being those that best embody the myths and are most prone to act to uphold them. The myths bestow legitimacy on those leaders that master the game. If their populations do not share general ideas about what makes their national community

worth fighting for, if the realm of the state is devoid of such motivational power, then there is not much to keep it together in the long run (Rouhana 1997).

‘The best definition of myth is the shortest: an important story’, writes Boer (2009:9).

Political myths are narratives that are believed to be true or acted on as if they were believed to be true by a substantial group of people (Petersson 2013). At a superficial level one could recognise all political myths as stories or narratives, but as pointed out by Bottici and Challand (2013: 4), ‘not all narratives are able to acquire the status of a myth’. In more straightforward terms a narrative acquires the status of a myth when it is widely accepted as truth or even taken for granted and not subjected to critical scrutiny.

So in what way is the story told by myth important? Why is it important enough to make people accept it widely? One answer is that political myth is a ‘common narrative that grants significance to the political conditions and experiences of a social group’ (Bottici and Challand 2013: 92). Common for political myths is also that they, on the collective level, entail ‘an emotional attachment that motivates political action’ (Bottici and Challand 2013: 4). This action component is of great importance: in the words of Bottici and Challand (2013: 92), political myths are an invitation to act here and now. There are therefore strong links between legitimacy and political action, on the one hand, and political myth, on the other, which makes political myth a highly relevant, if also still somewhat neglected, field of political analysis (Bottici and Challand 2013).

Moreover, political myths are deeply intertwined with identity, which provides one key answer to why the stories told by myths are considered important to many. The myths speak to people on an emotive level often without the audience being directly aware of it. Indeed, political myths constitute much of the webs from which narratives of nationalism and other -isms, hot as well as banal, are woven (Billig 1995; Petersson 2009). They provide ideational structures for inclusion as well as exclusion and help determine who is in and who is out of a particular community.

Political myths are by their very nature supported by the powers that be, because they lend legitimacy to the authorities and to the policies that they wish to pursue (McDonald 2010). When successful, the myths become inscribed in political practices, rituals, and institutions and get entrenched in prevailing beliefs and norms (della Sala 2010). Thereby they come to

be considered normal and taken for granted; they become shielded from critical scrutiny since they are seldom or never questioned. In this respect political myths bear a close resemblance to the concept of invented traditions, once famously introduced by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

However, political myths do not remain uncontested forever and they do not exist in a vacuum. Duncan Bell (2003) has coined the concept national mythscape, which is the 'temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples' memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly' (Bell 2003:66). Bell stresses that the myths therein are constructed and shaped, often by 'deliberate manipulation and intentional action' (Bell 2003:75). In the national mythscape the myths are under continuous pressure, being challenged and contested by other constructed myths (Bell 2003; Tranter and Donoghue 2014). As a result there is what could be labelled continual 'fitness tests' (Clunan 2014) going on amongst the electorate as well as among political and other elites. There is a continuous contestation in the process of which the myths that withstand the fitness tests best prevail. When successfully performed, these fitness tests serve to legitimise the political leaders further. On the other hand, if the myths do not withstand the tests, they are redefined or replaced, maybe together with the political leaders that have propounded them. Only really influential myths remain basically untouched across lengthy stretches of time. Those are the ones that become taken for granted and are not reflected upon; like Michael Billig, without using that exact wording, reminded us in his seminal book, *The Existence of Nation-States* comprising the basic building blocks or constituent units of the political map of the Western world, has been maybe the most powerful and most taken for granted political myth of the 20th century.

Adding to the complexity, Boer (2009) suggests that political myth itself is ridden with internal contradictions and may be challenged and subverted from within. If the political elite does not deliver in accordance with the myth, the contents of the myth can simply serve to bring the incumbents down. Boer (2009, 26) describes this as "the myth's cunning." When successful, however, the myth will bring about "the fiction of a completed truth" (Boer 2009, 35), i.e. it will be taken for granted. Many political leaders aspire to establish a truth that is accordingly taken for granted and therefore legitimizes their hold on power.

To return to the question of what makes a legitimizing myth an important story one needs to revisit the issue of identity. If we stick to the notion that legitimacy is about people seeing the current distribution of power in society as appropriate, just and in keeping with agreed-upon rules, we can see that this is chiefly about assessing the record of the rulers in cognitive terms. In addition, we need to bring emotions into the picture, which means that we need to bring identity back in. To state the obvious, we-ness is not defined in cognitive terms only, but also emotive ones. Reflecting this, and as Olga Malinova reminds us (2015), taking political myth into account, political rhetoric is characterized by the close intertwining of emotive and cognitive elements. Unless the emotive glue is there no political entity will hold together in the longer run. Political leaders are sure to know this.

It is both a dilemma and a political asset for political elites that the successful construction of political myth demands the close intertwining of the myth with popular tenets of national identity. Unless this is achieved, the myth will probably not be deemed relevant and will fade into insignificance; it may even be turned into a subject of popular ridicule. Successful political myths need to accommodate and express broadly popular sentiments and represent wide clusters of societal beliefs (Bar-Tal 2000), which are relevant for the members of the community in the context of their daily lives. Viable political myths need to resound with the emotions of the populace.

All nations, big and small, tend to have their political myths providing collective directions and justifications of action and promoting we-ness. Small states such as Sweden may e.g. narrate about their exemplary uniqueness in, for example, providing for social welfare to its citizens and constructing a 'people's home' (Trägårdh 2000). National leaders in France are still insisting on the country living up to ideals of *la gloire* (Hellman 2011), and political leaders in the United States constantly reiterate the mantras of American exceptionalism, that the US is bound to lead (Lipset 1988; Nye & Alterman 2000). Moreover, political myth-making is not a phenomenon on the nation-state level only. After the Cold War the European Union has built much of its prestige and legitimacy on the premises of being a normative power which also appears as a serious attempt at constructing political myth (Manners 2002).

The setup and composition of political myths differ from country to country, not the existence of the phenomenon as such. What about Russia then? Far from arguing that Russia is unique in showing a nexus between national identity and widespread political myths, I would argue that Russia is just like most other states in this respect.

First and foremost, the claim to be recognized as a great power always and regardless of the circumstances is closely intertwined with Russian national identity (Lo 2002, 20; Prizel 1998). This is the predominant political myth upon which much national we-ness clearly builds. The phenomenon was epitomized in the oft-quoted statement by Vladimir Putin early on during his first presidency that 'either Russia will be great or it will not be at all' (Shevtsova 2003: 175). In the words of one observer, 'the great power identity is fundamental, not only in an identity perspective but for the very prospects of the regime of remaining in power' (Vendil Pallin 2009:268). In other words, the trustworthiness of being keeper of the great power tradition is a fundamental key to the legitimacy of the Putin administration. It is in this light one has to assess the assertive actions on the international arena of recent years, be they directed at Georgia, Ukraine or Syria. Other political myths can be discerned in the Russian mythscape and are of considerable significance for the analysis of the dynamics of contemporary politics, even if they may not be of equally paramount significance as the great power myth. The firm belief in the primary value of political stability upheld by a strong hand at the helm of power to ward off otherwise periodically recurring times of trouble is another one. Also, I believe that Olga Malinova would argue that the belief in a superior Russian spirituality eternally beset and beleaguered by aggressive Western scheming would be a third type of forceful political myth in today's Russia.

Finally, we need to return to the distinction between long-term legitimacy and short-term popularity (McDonough et al 1986; Bratton and van de Walle 1992; Rose, Munro and Mishler 2004). In general, the former is more systemic and firmly anchored in commonality of values between rulers and ruled, whereas the latter rests primarily with individuals and their characteristics, rather than institutional arrangements. If we continue to discuss along the lines of the Weberian triad we will find that popularity seems to be most akin to the charismatic ideal type of legitimacy. Charismatic legitimacy and popularity are notoriously difficult to differentiate, but basically one may argue that they can be separated in terms of the time horizons involved. Popularity can be a short-term commodity as evidenced every

time a government finds its poll rates decline just a few months after an electoral victory. Charismatic legitimacy is the least lasting variant of legitimacy, but it is still more firmly entrenched than simple popularity. Charismatic legitimacy may be elusive but it is not likely to vanish overnight; rather it will gradually be drained from the political leaders wielding it. Again, following the Weberian script, it would seem to make sense to strive to cash in charismatic legitimacy for legal-rational legitimacy as the latter is more firmly anchored in institutional arrangements and therefore seem to be better able to withstand the tests of time.

However, as several scholars testify, it is not simply the matter of there being a chronological and one-way transition from popularity over charismatic legitimacy and further on to legal-rational legitimacy. Indeed, legitimacy and popularity may be antithetical as some scholars warn. Thus, Vladimir Gel'man (2010) has argued that President Putin's reliance on personal popularity and high rates of approval may be an obstacle to the development of legal-rational legitimacy of state institutions. This would then be a cannibalistic kind of relationship between the two. This is of course problematic; President Putin's high approval ratings coexist with consistently low trust in the state institutions (Chen). This is a situation that can hardly be sustainable in the long run.

When discussing contemporary Russia, Gel'man (2010) and Steven Fish (2001) both suggest that supposedly less enduring legitimacy can be offered by default, through the absence of viable alternatives. But is this really a matter of legitimacy or should it rather be seen as acceptance? At any rate it would represent a kind of legitimacy far away from the Weberian ideal type of legal rationality, even if it may seem distantly related to Weber's traditional legitimacy. This would represent a precarious balance. If things do not run smoothly then disillusion may spread, ultimately serving to identify contenders where there previously were none. From the leaders' point of view the remedy would seem to be to continue to uphold the magic, appeal to emotions, and thus try to benefit from popularity or be it charismatic legitimacy. Like pointed out earlier, this may be the ugly downside of legitimacy, as behavior consistent with prevailing political myths may be condoned and accepted even if they would seem to be outright immoral by an external spectator.

There is a fundamental dilemma tied to political succession as not even charismatic leaders live forever. Can legitimacy that is not entrenched in perceptions that arrangements of power are appropriate, just and in keeping with agreed-upon rules last across different generations of political leaders? Above all, can it be transferred when the relay stick is passed over from one incumbent to his/her successor? Weber's traditional legitimacy by definition had that capacity, but arrangements of power relying on charismatic legitimacy would seem problematic here.

Therefore, a leader that has not been able or willing to sustain legal-rational legitimation processes and has not founded a dynasty to inherit him may despite his efforts to the contrary provide the grounds for protracted power struggles if not conflicts of succession once he retreats. New contestants will be likely to launch political offensives to attract a following, using emotive appeals to define new legitimating political myths or latch on to old ones. This is a process with uncertain outcomes as the whole board game as well as its rules have to be defined anew. It will be a most sensitive period of political processes with uncertain outcomes, where domestic and external observers alike may find themselves longing intensively for the materialization of the benevolent Weberian ideal type of entrenched legal rational legitimacy with its well established rules of transition.