

The Legitimation of Authoritarian Domination: Dispositions to Obey and Constellation of Interests

INTRODUCTION

Tackling the question of domination in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes by analyzing the process of legitimation may seem paradoxical, if not provocative. In fact, traditional approaches tend implicitly to contrast legitimacy with coercion, legitimacy with fear and the use of force, or legitimacy with constraint, even submission, in what is basically a traditional reading of the nature of political systems. In this reading, only democratic regimes are recognized as legitimate.¹ Even works that highlight the diversity of types of legitimate domination (legal–rational, traditional, charismatic) remain inadequate because they are often trapped in a literal and restrictive reading of the writings of Weber, too rigidly attached to showing the correspondence between the type of legitimacy, the type of domination and the type of motivations of social actions involved. By not fully exploring the ‘thickness’ of power relations, they are more an analysis of ideal types than of the reality of situations; they amalgamate different levels and targets of legitimacy and confuse ‘legitimate’ and ‘reasonable.’² In a comparable manner, the typologies produced by Europeanist work (legitimacy can be acquired by procedures, foundations or results) do not capture modes of government that do not necessarily rest on the ‘common good,’ the ‘general interest’ and ‘popular representation.’³ As Michel Dobry has noted, these two approaches consider the process of legitimation too narrowly and unambiguously as ‘a *vertical* relationship between rulers and ruled,’ in which ‘the docility of the latter has as its necessary counterpart’ the correspondence between government actions and the

‘beliefs, values, dispositions or emotions of the governed.’ This explains why this perspective does not really help us understand the ‘reality of the phenomena it seeks to explore.’⁴

The sociology of legitimacy does not appear, then, to be conducive to a description of concrete dynamics, and is incompatible with an approach committed to daily life that takes the trouble to produce a ‘political anatomy of the detail,’ especially the economic detail. The fact is that the question of processes of legitimation in authoritarian regimes remains fundamental: how are we to explain the often secondary or marginal character of violence and physical coercion in most authoritarian regimes and even, for the majority of people, in the daily life of totalitarian regimes? What lies behind the ‘insidious leniencies’ of the exercise of power? The issue of legitimacy strikes me as more important than these studies would suggest, or than the social sciences generally acknowledge. More important because legitimacy can take different shapes from those traditionally presented; it can, for example, be based on the desire for normality and the desire for the state, in all its variations and dimensions—dimensions that can be understood only from as detailed and localized an analysis as possible, and that are informed by an approach based on political economy. More important, also, because we can have a reading of legitimacy that is not opposed to violence and does indeed incorporate a dose of coercion, like that proposed by Antonio Gramsci, particularly around the concept of hegemony.⁵ More important, finally, because we can take another look at this classic problem: contrary to the admirably expressed view of Paul Veyne, even when the question of legitimacy is not openly asked—or is asked only when there is explicit contestation, precisely because it is starting to evaporate—an analysis of it will still show the ambiguity of the dispositifs and practices of domination.⁶ Taking into account the daily debates, demands, expectations, tensions and micro-clashes facing society betrays friction points that frequently allow (often between the lines) the emergence of problematics related to the legitimacy and credibility of power, forms of behavior or ways of thinking that partly reveal the way people conceive the legitimate exercise of domination. The issue is less the legitimacy (or lack of legitimacy) of a government than the nature of its legitimacy, or even more, the criteria and motives of the complex and heterogeneous processes of legitimation.

The issue of ‘normality,’ for example, enables us to measure the value of an analysis of legitimacy’s vectors in authoritarian situations. The search for a ‘normal’ life, the need to live ‘in accordance’ with the established

rules of life in society, are among the most important motives behind acceptance of, or accommodation to, such modes of government. This is what is suggested by concrete research on Italian fascism, East German socialism, Nazism and Soviet communism. Overwhelmingly, people seek to go with the flow, according to the ‘rules’ (whatever they are), and not to get themselves noticed. They undoubtedly season their acceptance with a dose of apparent submission, cynicism or even skepticism, but the fact that a government conveys an image of tranquility, predictability and ‘normality,’ especially after revolutionary or disturbed periods, economic crises or periods of instability, definitely gives it a certain legitimacy. It will suffice to recall how Kádár was able to build up his own legitimacy even though he had come to power in 1956 in the wake of the Soviet tanks: for the Hungarian population, he embodied predictability and the return to (a certain) normality.⁷ Similarly, when Putin came to power, he was popular among Russians precisely because he met their expectations in terms of assurance, security and a return to order—on the part of very different categories of the population: entrepreneurs, the poor, the elites of the economic and security administration, the elderly who are nostalgic for the Soviet past, and the young.⁸ Through Zimin, the hero of *The Radiant Future*, Alexander Zinoviev very clearly emphasizes that ‘[w]hen Solzhenitsyn criticizes Marxism and individual facts of Soviet life, he fails to see all the *horrifying normality* of communism [...]. The communist way of life is very profitable for a huge part of the population of the country. For the time being this society satisfies the overwhelming majority of the population. Not in all respects, of course, but by and large it does.’⁹ This quotation suggests the subtleties of the mechanisms of legitimation: the legitimacy granted is never complete and obviously has to compromise with discontent, worry, partial rejections and recriminations; it is less synonymous with adhesion, support and active participation than with accommodation; it primarily reflects a relative and intermittent judgment because individuals do not constantly ask themselves whether the state or the government are legitimate and because the rules by which they assess normality can be plural and refer to different (even contradictory) hierarchies of values.

Under these conditions, how can we make compatible questions about the legitimacy of power on the one hand, and on the other, the approach ‘from below,’ which adopts a heterogeneous and relational conception of power and is concerned by the daily life of economic practices? Even if he does not link it with these theoretical approaches to the

political, Michel Dobry provides us with a particularly interesting line of research thanks to his reading of the work of Weber, a reading that takes into account the ‘complications’ both of reality and of political theory. Legitimate domination, he says, cannot be reduced to the ‘command-obedience’ couple usually highlighted by the sociology of legitimacy: the disposition to obey represents only one mode of domination. There is a second, which Weber conceptualized in terms of ‘constellations of interests’¹⁰: domination is often ‘difficult to perceive or ascribe to social actors’ insofar as it ‘passes through situations where heterogeneous interests meet.’¹¹ Michel Dobry invites us to follow Weber in understanding domination beyond the ‘command-obedience’ couple alone and beyond the mere identification of cases of the will to dominate, while being sensitive to the individual interests and the various logics of action of the dominant. For my part, I would also read his contribution as an invitation to conceptualize legitimate domination outside the ‘will to obey’ and outside the ‘dispositions to obey’: the governed view their practices and their social relations in many different ways and give them meanings that are not necessarily those of governments; this allows them to act independently of the will of the latter. Taking ‘constellations of interest’ into account in this way has the advantage that we can understand the plurality and heterogeneity at work behind practices of domination, not equating acceptance, silence or participation with obedience or submission and not taking docility as adhesion. It also helps to link together Foucault’s analysis of power, de Certeau’s conception of practices and daily life, and Weber’s approach to domination. For this author, whose methods and concepts have strongly inspired me for this book, “domination” does not mean that a stronger force of nature somehow prevails, but that the action (“command”) of certain people is related in terms of its meaning to the action (“obedience”) of certain other people, and vice versa, so that one *may*, on the average, count on the realization of the expectations according to which the action of both sides is oriented.’ Legitimacy can thus be understood by people’s self-justifications,¹² by what actors say explicitly, but even more by a critical analysis of daily practices, behaviors and interactions between actors, by what they allow us to see that may go beyond or against what they say.¹³ In the chapters that follow, I would like to highlight the potential diversity and complexity of the mechanisms involved, taking particular account of the ‘constellations of interests’ scattered among economic dispositifs and logics.

NOTES

1. Thus the book edited by A. Hurrelman, S. Schneider and J. Steffek, *Legitimacy in an Age of Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) [1], to take one example, does not even refer to non-Western non-democratic countries. Likewise, the latest book by Pierre Rosanvallon discusses democratic legitimacy, with the implication that the mainsprings of legitimacy in non-democratic situations do not in the least arise from the same problematic. See his *La Légitimité démocratique. Impartialité, réflexivité, proximité* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2008) [2]. The older book by Maurice Duverger, *Dictatures et Légitimité* (Paris: PUF, 1982) [3], starts out from the hypothesis that dictatorship is by nature a break with legitimacy. Almost all texts spend more time showing the diversity of types of dictatorship and the way the meaning of this word has developed over the course of time than on analyzing the processes of legitimation that might have existed in those regimes. Recent studies that try to tackle the question in more general terms are trapped in the great fashions in political science, and relapse into quantification, classification and the adoption of an extremely institutional and formal vision of the political: see, for example, B. Gilley, *The Right to Rule. How States Win and Lose Legitimacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) [4].
2. J. Lagroye, ‘La légitimation,’ in M. Grawitz and J. Leca (eds), *Traité de sciences politiques 1. La science politique, science sociale, l’ordre politique* (Paris: PUF, 1985), pp. 395–467 [5].
3. N. Luhmann, *La Légitimation par la procédure* (Quebec; Paris: Presses de l’Université de Laval and Éditions du Cerf, 2001) [6]; F.W. Scharpf, *Governing in Europe. Effective and Democratic?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) [7].
4. M. Dobry, ‘Légitimité et calcul rationnel. Remarques sur quelques “complications” de la sociologie de Max Weber,’ in P. Favre, J. Hayward and Y. Schemeil (eds), *Être gouverné. Hommages à Jean Leca* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003), pp. 127–147 [8].
5. See his *Prison Writings and Selections from political writings (1921–1926)*, translated and edited by Quintin Hoare; with additional texts by other Italian Communist leaders (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978) [9]. See also the discussion by H. Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, with a

new preface by the author (London: Sphere, 1969) [10], J. Habermas, in *Legitimation crisis*, transl. Thomas McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1976) [11], P. Bourdieu and J.C. Passeron on the question of the legitimacy of symbolic violence in their *Reproduction in education, society and culture*, transl. Richard Nice, 2nd edition (London: Sage in association with Theory, culture & society, 1990) [12], Lagroye in ‘La légitimation’ and Bayart, ‘Hégémonie et coercition en Afrique subsaharienne.’ This is also apparent in the new readings of Weber’s work by the authors mentioned in note 2 of the Preface. For a similar approach, see also K. Hammou, ‘Le troisième protagoniste des rapports de domination. Resituer la direction administrative au cœur de la *Herrschaftssoziologie* de Max Weber,’ *Tracés*, 14 (January 2008): 129–151 [13].

6. Veyne, *Le Quotidien et l'Intéressant*, where he says: ‘A regime [...] is always presumed legitimate and the necessity of proof falls onto the party that might question this, as he will often be described as a hot-head and who will bring repression down on everyone [...] In a situation of uncertainty, of an unknown future, in other words all the time (in politics at least), there is an intellectual regression: the tried and tested status quo is preferred to any innovations,’ p. 99.
7. A. Capelle-Pogăcean, ‘Hongrie des pères, Hongrie des fils,’ in P. Michel (ed.), *Europe centrale. La mélancolie du réel* (Paris: Autrement, 2004), pp. 81–96 [14].
8. G. Favarel-Garrigues and K. Rousselet, *La Société russe en quête d'ordre. Avec Vladimir Poutine?* (Paris: Autrement, 2004) [15].
9. Zinoviev, *The Radiant Future*, p. 187 (my emphasis).
10. See Weber, *Economy and Society*, and Dobry, ‘Légitimité et calcul rationnel.’
11. Dobry, ‘Légitimité et calcul rationnel’, pp. 130 and 131.
12. L. Boltanski and L. Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; new edition, 2006) [16]; L. Boltanski and È. Chiapello, *The new spirit of capitalism*, transl. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007) [17].
13. P. Veyne, *Le Pain et le Cirque. Sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1976) [18]. There is a version in English, but it is unfortunately abridged: *Bread and circuses: historical sociology and political pluralism*, transl. Brian Pearce (London: Allen Lane, 1990) [19].

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