



RODNEY BARKER

# LEGITIMATING IDENTITIES

THE SELF-PRESENTATIONS OF RULERS AND SUBJECTS

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### *The Self-Presentations of Rulers and Subjects*

Rulers of all kinds, from feudal monarchs to democratic presidents and prime ministers, justify themselves to themselves through a variety of rituals, rhetoric, and dramatisations, using everything from architecture and coinage to etiquette and portraiture. This kind of legitimation – self-legitimation – has been overlooked in an age which is concerned principally with how government can be justified in the eyes of its citizens. Rodney Barker argues that at least as much time is spent by rulers legitimating themselves in their own eyes, and cultivating their own sense of identity, as is spent in trying to convince ordinary subjects. Once this dimension of ruling is taken into account, a far fuller understanding can be gained of what rulers are doing when they rule. It can also open the way to a more complete grasp of what subjects are doing, both when they obey and when they rebel.

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*For  
Helen*



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## CHAPTER I

### *Legitimacy and legitimation*

#### WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT

There is a convention sometimes found amongst academics of beginning books and articles with an inaugural lecture in reverse. Whereas the inaugural lecture conventionally opens with a series of polite tributes to predecessors, showing how the speaker is doing no more than standing on the shoulders of giants, making an inadequate attempt to fill the majestic shoes of exceptional predecessors, and simply acting as a feeble stand-in, the reverse can occur once the scholar is released from ceremonial restraints and unleashed on the wild world of monographs and journals. This reverse version lists all those who have in any way touched on the author's subject, and condemns them as theoretically impoverished, empirically threadbare, and intellectually sterile. Their crime usually turns out to have been the rather different one of failing to have contributed to the author's own enterprise because they were in fact doing something quite different. Historians of the poor law are dismissed for not having provided policy recommendations for twentieth or twenty-first-century governments, writers on political rhetoric for not having dealt with the distribution of capital, and analysts of trade unionism for having ignored conspiracies in the cabinet. So might the author of *Winnie the Pooh* be dismissed for having failed to contribute anything to the analysis of tactical voting.

I am not going to be so self-denying as to refuse from the outset to make any critical assessments whatsoever of any previous work. But my discussion of other authors will be designed to defend me against possible criticisms of the Winnie the Pooh kind, rather than

to make them. It may avoid misunderstanding if I say what I am not doing, so that no one, or at least fewer people, will complain that I have done it inadequately. This book is not about legitimacy. Neither is it a criticism of those who have written about legitimacy – I have written about it myself – although it argues that legitimacy can frequently be a misleading term, applied beyond its proper and useful scope. I begin by looking briefly at work which borders on the topic of this book. My intention is not to dismiss an existing body of work, but to mark off the boundaries, and the overlaps, between that work and the subject of this enquiry. My intention in the remaining chapters is to give a brief initial account of an aspect of political life which deserves more attention, and whose description can add to the richness of our overall picture. This book is therefore an essay rather than a detailed historical or empirical study, and relies on the work of others for its illustrative material.

The principal subject of the book is a characterising activity of government, to which Max Weber has drawn attention in his famous definition of the state as ‘the human community which (successfully) claims the monopoly of legitimate coercion’.<sup>1</sup> What is not always noticed is that Weber is talking not about some abstract quality, ‘legitimacy’, but about an observable activity in which governments characteristically engage, the making of claims. This activity is mentioned by Weber as part of a definition of the state. What characterises government, in other words, is not the possession of a quality defined as legitimacy, but the claiming, the activity of legitimation. This book begins with the question, which is provoked by Weber’s definition: ‘What are governments doing when they spend time, resources and energy legitimating themselves?’ The question is one that is often hidden or obscured in the social sciences, but is nonetheless more often present there than the attention normally given to it suggests. When Anthony Downs gave the apparently purely utilitarian account of government and politics as involving the pursuit of income, prestige, and power,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, ‘Politics as a Vocation’ in H. C. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 28: ‘From the self-interest axiom springs our view of what motivates the political actions of party members. We assume that they act solely in order to attain the income, prestige, and power which come from being in office. Thus politicians in our model never seek

only the first member of the trilogy, income, was tangible, straightforward, and relatively unproblematic: £1 00 is £1 00, and is twice as much as £50. Power is more complicated, since it is a metaphor for describing the fact that things happen, or do not happen. Does a government minister who introduces smaller class sizes, in so doing use, or enjoy, more 'power' than one who sponsors genetically modified maize? Does the same minister enjoy more power when she broadens the 'A' Level curriculum than when she assists music in primary schools. And is power an end in itself, or a means to acquire other things, or is it better understood as neither of these, but as a metaphor to describe success in acquiring them? But the complications of power are as nothing compared to those of prestige. Prestige is the least obviously utilitarian of them all, and seems almost to slip in hidden under the cloak of its rational companions in Downs's definition.

In giving the pursuit of prestige as one of the three aims of government, Downs, far from being iconoclastic, is being thoroughly traditional. That other alleged exponent of a cynical pragmatic approach to politics, Machiavelli, gave a remarkably similar account four centuries earlier, identifying the desire for prestige as one of the motives, and ends, of rulers.<sup>3</sup> Machiavelli speaks of greatness, honour, and prestige, whilst the material resources of government are little more than instruments for achieving these ends. Political science therefore gives plenty of precedent for paying attention to the seemingly non-utilitarian activities of rulers. And though the term 'prestige' can have a wide application, what is being described is a very particular kind of prestige, the prestige which applies to princes and presidents, kings and prime ministers, leaders and rulers. The claim of rulers to special status or qualities, and the actions they take in cultivating this claim, are the central part of endogenous legitimation, of the self-justification of rulers by the cultivation of an identity distinguished from that of ordinary men and women.

If the desire for prestige, for a sense of their unique identity, is a motive of rulers, how is such prestige to be identified, what

office as a means of carrying out particular policies; their only goal is to reap the rewards of holding office *per se*. They treat policies purely as a means to the attainment of their private ends, which they can reach only by being elected.'

<sup>3</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* ([1532] Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988).

are its symptoms, how and where is it enjoyed, and by whom and under what conditions? What is the utility of such a seemingly non-utilitarian activity? It may be that the question cannot be answered, and that all that can be done is a preliminary clarification, not of an answer, but of the question. And it may be necessary to reject the question, and insist that a narrowly utilitarian account of politics is unhistorical and unempirical. Self-legitimation in the form of the cultivation of a distinguished identity may be a goal in itself. And to say that it is merely a means of justifying other goods is to leave unresolved the question of why such justification is desired or necessary in the first place. This desire or need for a very particular form of prestige was what Weber identified when he commented that 'in no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition every such system attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy.'<sup>4</sup> When rulers legitimate themselves, they claim that particular species of prestige which attaches to government. Whether or not the apparently universal feature of government, the claiming of prestige, justification, authority, reflects a psychological need of government or of governors, lies outside the scope of this study or at least lies only at its very fringes. But the character and consequences of such endogenous or self-legitimation can still be studied with that question left to one side.

The intention in this book is to construct a preliminary sketch of a theory with as wide an historical application as possible. Two qualifications must be made. First, I have drawn for illustration on the evidence from both the United Kingdom and the rest of the world, and from a wide chronological range. This of itself means that there has been no intensive investigation or presentation of a particular instance of legitimation. The second qualification is that the conceptions of state, politics, and political identity and legitimation which I develop in the following pages are not directly addressed to what for many people has been the principal question associated with the terms 'legitimation' and 'legitimacy': are there criteria, both morally acceptable to the abstracted observer, and practically effective in the specific historical context, which operate

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (London, University of California Press, 1978), p. 213.

when regimes sustain their rule over a given population? But whilst not addressing that question, I suggest answers to other questions which will not be uncongenial to those who wish to do so.

#### THE CORONATION OF NAPOLEON

David's famous painting of the coronation of Napoleon and Josephine has two features of great interest for anyone looking at the way in which government is carried on, and the way in which rulers conduct themselves. The first feature is well known. Napoleon is himself placing the crown upon the head of the Empress Josephine. The significance of that is clear. The emperor is not ruling by the consent of anyone else: not the church, not God, and certainly not the people. He is exercising and expressing authority, his own authority. He is legitimate because he legitimates himself, and the coronation is in effect a self-coronation. This is not, in any obvious sense of the word, a democratic occasion. The second feature of the painting is less obvious. Not only is the immediate audience for this event relatively small and select, but the most important member of the audience is the emperor himself. The ritual is, above all, for his own benefit, telling him who he is, and how he is marked out from other men. The coronation serves to impress, not the emperor's subjects, but the emperor himself.

This inward-turning aspect of legitimation has until recently attracted relatively little attention. The principal interest of historians and political scientists has been in other features of the ritualistic actions of rulers. Most attention has been paid to legitimation as a means, not of convincing princes and presidents, but of convincing subjects. The self-legitimation of rulers was discussed by Weber, but has been partly obscured amongst other features of the legitimation of government, so that the complexity, and difficulties, of his account have largely been lost sight of. His account of self-legitimation slipped further and further into obscurity as attention was focussed on ways of describing politics and government which derived from other aspects of his work, or in reaction to what were criticised as its undemocratic, or anti-democratic, aspects. In a democratic century, which was at least the aspiration of the 1900s, rulers were seen as the beneficiaries of legitimation, rather than as either its focus or

its centre. Not until the last two decades of the twentieth century did a renewed interest in the non-utilitarian side of government and politics lead to a slowly growing attention to the self-confirming, self-justificatory dimension of legitimation. The recognition of this element in Weber's theory has come, in particular, in formulating accounts of the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989, though it can be found too in the work of social anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz.<sup>5</sup> What this recognition underlines is that such self-legitimation is not an unusual or unique feature of one ruler of post-revolutionary France. In the world of everyday government, the language, etiquette, and rituals of self-legitimation are ubiquitous.<sup>6</sup> They are a feature of all government, and there is much to be gained from reminding ourselves of this, and giving a preliminary account and theory of legitimation at the centre, from the centre, and for the centre. When legitimation is seen from the centre outwards, rather than from the outside inwards, dimensions of government which have languished in the shadows are thrown into new, or renewed, relief.

#### THE RE-EMERGENCE OF GOVERNMENT

One of the features of the series of changes variously described as the end of the short twentieth century, the end of modernity, the end of the cold war, or the arrival of post-modernity, was a renewed perception of government as an activity having its own purposes and ethos, one aspect of which was self-legitimation. When

<sup>5</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Language is of course a problem. The terms used in languages other than English are often only roughly translated, and sometimes misrepresented, by the word 'legitimacy'. This qualification, whilst a very real one, is not unique to the study of legitimacy. In May 1992, during the popular demonstrations in major Thai cities which led to the restoration of a form of representative democratic government after a period of military intervention, the crowds were reported as shouting 'Down with the illegitimate regime!' Saitip Sukatipan, 'Thailand: The Evolution of Legitimacy' in Muthiah Alagappa, *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 218. Whatever they were shouting, it could not have been that. A similar problem can arise whenever the language of the system being studied is not English. Hok-lam Chan observes, in a study of legitimation in twelfth and thirteenth-century China, that 'legitimate succession' is an approximate translation only of the Chinese 'cheng-t'ung'. Hok-lam Chan, *Legitimation in Imperial China: Discussions under the T'ung-chin Dynasty (1115–1234)* (London, University of Washington Press, 1984), pp. 21–2.

the floodwaters of the short twentieth century (as Eric Hobsbawm has described the years from the Russian Revolution of 1917 to the collapse of East European and Soviet communism after 1989) retreated,<sup>7</sup> they revealed the hulks of government much as they had been when they were obscured by the waters of economic and social revolution eighty years before. The same priorities of rulers re-emerged, the same symbolic self-protection of government not only from outside doubts and the opinions of subjects and citizens, but from internal uncertainties of the kind that lead not to revolution but to abdication. If the great engagement of the twentieth century with the politics of class left behind the politics of place, religion, and nationality, it also obscured politics and government as self-generating activities, occupations with their own rewards, and their own justifications and legitimations. Not that these dimensions of government activity were absent during the short twentieth century nor that much sceptical writing was not eager to draw attention to them.<sup>8</sup> But ruling as a distinctive activity with its own aims, justifications, and culture was obscured by seeing government solely or principally as an instrumental activity. The three great standpoints of twentieth-century political science each sustained this vision. For Marxists, the state was either the instrument or the higher intelligence of capitalism; for democrats, it was the reflex or channel of popular or social pressures; for economic liberals it was, when behaving properly, the guardian of markets, and when behaving improperly the captive of socialists or the prisoner of socialist misconceptions. For none of them was it the institutional form of one of the major activities of humans and of human society, the exercise of power over the general affairs of other people.

#### EXISTING WORK

In the last twenty years of the twentieth century, political legitimation and political legitimacy attracted an increasing amount of

<sup>7</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century: 1914–1991* (London, Michael Joseph, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> A variety of writers, from Michels and the early elitists to Orwell and the sceptical critics of power, from anarchists to post-Spencerian critics of bureaucracy, have identified the exercise of power as just as important as the objects for which it was ostensibly employed.

attention amongst political scientists, social scientists, and historians. This was in part in response to the end, and the circumstances surrounding and following the end, of the short twentieth century: the replacement of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union by various forms of democracy; the emergence, particularly with the development of the European Union, of new forms of transnational governance; the conflicts between democratic movements and party and military despotisms in Asia; and the need to restate the conditions under which regimes legitimated themselves in a world where the simple polarities of communist/capitalist, totalitarian/democratic, had either evaporated or been intertissued with the dimensions of ethnicity, religion, and national identity.

Within this growing body of literature on legitimacy and legitimation,<sup>9</sup> there are three principal strands: normative assessment of legitimacy as a quality or possession of government;<sup>10</sup> the study of popular attitudes towards and support for rulers as a basis for analysing and predicting regime stability, both at national and transnational level;<sup>11</sup> and the interweaving of the first two to form a bridge or an alliance between is and ought.<sup>12</sup> Each strand is in

<sup>9</sup> The literature is extensive, and I have given samples only in the following footnotes.

<sup>10</sup> William Connolly (ed.), *Legitimacy and the State* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1984); Leslie Green, *The Authority of the State* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988); Tom R. Tyler, 'Justice, Self-Interest, and the Legitimacy of Legal and Political Authority' in Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Self-Interest* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 171–9.

<sup>11</sup> Muthiah Alagappa, *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995); David Beetham and Christopher Lord, *Legitimacy and the European Union* (London, Longman, 1998); Grainne de Búrca, 'The Quest for Legitimacy in the European Union', *Modern Law Review* 59 (1996), 349–76; Soledad García (ed.), *European Identity and the Search for Legitimacy* (London, Pinter, 1993); James L. Gibson and Gregory A. Caldeira, 'Changes in the Legitimacy of the European Court of Justice: A Post-Maastricht Analysis', *British Journal of Political Science* 28, 1 (1998), 63–91; Simon Hix, 'The Study of the European Union II: The "New Governance" Agenda and its Rival', *Journal of European Public Policy* 5, 1 (1998), 38–65; Juliet Lodge, 'Transparency and Democratic Legitimacy', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 32 (1994), 343–68; Heinz Käufeler, *Modernization, Legitimacy and Social Movement: A Study of Socio-Cultural Dynamics and Revolution in Iran and Ethiopia* (Zurich, Ethnologische Schriften Zürich, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (London, Macmillan, 1991); Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. T. McCarthy (London, Heinemann, 1976); David Held, 'Power and Legitimacy in Contemporary Britain' in Gregor McLennan, David Held and Stuart Hall (eds.), *State and Society in Contemporary Britain: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Polity, 1984); David Held, 'Crisis Tendencies, Legitimation and the State' in J. B. Thompson and D. Held (eds.), *Habermas: Critical Debates* (London, Macmillan, 1982).