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## Legitimation and the Construction of Social Order

### *Abstract*

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The aim of the article is to analyse selected sociological theories of legitimation. The research objective is to provide an answer to the question about the meanings and functions of legitimation in the process of the discursive construction of social order.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND METHODS:** Legitimation is analysed in the text both as a concept describing a specific state of social reality (static approach) and as a discursive strategy in which language plays a dominant role (dynamic approach).

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The first part presents the meaning of legitimation in a static approach, which depends on the theoretical paradigm used. The second part presents an analysis of the interactionist-phenomenological concept of legitimation, which reveals its basic function as an element within the construction of social order. In the third part, legitimation is analyzed in a dynamic approach, as a discursive strategy that can significantly complement the diverse conglomerate of discourse theory. The conclusion emphasizes the role of legitimation in a situation of uncertainty and social crises.

**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The study of the process of legitimation as an element responsible for the stability of the constructed social order is important especially in situations of community crisis, The most appropriate area for testing

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legitimation is discourse, and the research material would include articulations, meanings and language.

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**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** Deepening the meaning of legitimation in sociological theories can contribute to their easier and fuller use in the study of specific research materials. This can contribute not only to a better understanding of sociological theories, but also deepen knowledge about the mechanisms that govern society.

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**KEYWORDS:**

legitimation, legitimization, order, discourse, constructing

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the article<sup>1</sup> is to review and analyse selected sociological theories of legitimation. The research objective is to provide an answer to the question about the meanings and functions of legitimation in the process of the discursive construction of social order. Legitimation is analysed in this text both as a concept describing a specific state of social reality (static approach) and as a discursive strategy in which language plays a dominant role (dynamic approach). The phenomenological approach of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who treated legitimation as an indispensable aspect of constructing social reality, was considered an intermediate concept combining both approaches. Considering the 'from static to dynamic' continuum, this transition can be treated as a theoretical equivalent of social change in which dynamics and fluidity become the dominant features of reality.

Although the article is strictly theoretical, one strong recommendation may be formulated as a result. This concerns methodological issues. Underlining the gravitas and deepening the meaning of legitimation in sociological theories can contribute to their easier and fuller use in the study of specific research materials (e.g. newspaper

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articles, parliamentary transcripts, school textbooks, public speeches, legal documents, etc.). This can contribute not only to a better understanding of sociological theories, but also deepen knowledge about the mechanisms that govern society.

### STATIC APPROACH – BELIEFS, VALUES, AUTHORITY

Although legitimation (or validation) is one of the most basic sociological concepts describing elementary social processes, knowledge on where legitimation comes from and how it works is still vague (Johnson, 2004). This term, usually treated as a 'sensitizing concept', etymologically means "doing something (legally) binding," most often in relation to political systems or specific types of societies. In the social sciences, especially in sociology, this notion is understood much more broadly than in political science (Walker & Zelditch, 1993). In relation to power, not only political, legitimation is a specific arrangement, in which those who are ruled are convinced that the rulers have the right to exercise control over them, and that all members of society should submit to the orders of those who rule.

This understanding of legitimation is directly related to the theory of Max Weber (2004), who analysed three main types of legitimized authority: those based on tradition, charisma and law. On the one hand, Weber took into account the external dimension of obedience (the legalistic perspective), and on the other, the socio-psychological dimension (the perspective of individual beliefs). According to this concept, the legitimation of a particular order can be accomplished through four elements: tradition, affective faith, value-based rational faith and law.

In recognizing the weight of legalistic and psychological perspectives, while studying legitimation particular attention should be paid to the collective dimension. Sanford M. Dornbusch and W. Richard Scott (1975) found that individuals do not have to recognize or abide by certain norms in order to act in accordance with a system based on and validated by these norms. For them to act is to be aware of the existence of others who share these norms. Besides, Cathryn Johnson, Timothy J. Dowd and Cecilia L. Ridgeway (2006, p. 55) put it even more bluntly:

[L]egitimation occurs through a collective construction of social reality in which the element of a social order are seen as consonant with norms, values, and beliefs that individuals presume are widely shared, whether or not they personally share them.

Following this trail, one can recall the broad definition of legitimation proposed by Morris Zelditch, who recognized that “something is legitimate if it is in accord with the norms, values, beliefs, practices, and procedures accepted by a group” (2001, p. 33). In this approach, if the social order is justified, individuals do not question norms or authority.

The Weberian tradition emphasizes both the cognitive and the normative dimension of legitimation (Beetham, 2001). In the light of this approach, legitimation is an effort undertaken to convince the public that given social institutions are best for them (the most appropriate and suitable), and then the category of values comes to the fore. The main subject of validation are principles on the basis of which the social order is constructed, closely related to the cultural background of the groups in which legitimation occurs. An important complement to this perspective is the definition proposed by Mark S. Suchman, who claims that “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (1995, p. 574).

As a result, the situation of axiological pluralism, and even the dynamics of social change, makes it impossible to legitimize social reality using only one system of values. In this context values are understood as concepts referring to an ideal of society that acts as a guide and compass for groups and individuals. This means that legitimation, expressing a kind of collective sense of reality, is in democratic societies the effect of an arrangement between society and power: society inclines towards authority that promises to introduce and maintain an axiologically well-established and long-term social order (Blau, 1964, pp. 199-223). This has certain consequences for legitimation: authority has social support for as long as the benefits from its exercise are collective and are not reserved exclusively for a few members of a privileged group (Zelditch, 2001).

Such a situation is typical of deliberative democracies, based on the conviction that decisions made by rulers are important and do

not require any additional political support (e.g. referendum). In such societies, legitimation is effective inasmuch as it is the result of arguments that avoid all forms of violence. However, there are also alternative concepts of legitimation, which are based on conflict theories of society:

These models argue that groups within society are in conflict over valued resources and favored identities. Each group seeks to gain dominance over others, with the result that institutional arrangements and legitimizing ideologies favoring one group are often not beneficial to those within other groups. (...) Hence, from this perspective, widespread deference to legitimate authorities is beneficial only to those in the dominant group who seek to perpetuate their privileges by using their hegemonic control over culture to create ideologies, myths, and rituals that legitimate their favored position. Subordinate groups would be better off rejecting existing authorities and institutions and challenging the status quo by seeking social change (Tyler, 2006, pp. 391-392).

As one may observe, freedom from violence does not take into account 'symbolic violence', which – instead of physical strength – is based on unequal access to various forms of social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Every communicative and social situation runs its course to reveal different (often conflicting) interests and relationships between domination and subordination. Simply put, in order to participate in any form of social discourse, an individual or group must have access to a position from which it may speak and be heard by others.

## THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH – FROM CONSTRUCTION TO STABILIZATION OF SOCIAL ORDER

An alternative approach to traditional and static theories of legitimation is the constructionist perspective, initiated by the famous book by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). Both authors also developed an understanding of legitimation in their individual work, focused on the analysis of religion. Taking into account the definition

formulated by Berger (1969, p. 29), legitimation is knowledge, serving to clarify social order, giving answers to any questions about an institutions' right to exist, which has objective character, independent from ordinary individual reflections. Legitimation is both cognitive ('what the world is') and normative ('what world should be').

According to the paradigm of 'social construction of reality,' legitimation is the process of explaining and justifying the socially created institutional order through accumulating knowledge that is objective and integrated. This means knowledge of what is 'right' and 'wrong' within this order. Validation tells the individual why they should take such and such action, and not any other; it also explains why things are as they are. In other words, in the validation of an institution, "knowledge" trumps "values."

It often happens that legitimation itself takes the form of an ideology that gains a certain autonomy and even the power to establish subsequent institutions in relation to the justified reality. Ideology may be mentioned when a connection exists between a definite definition of reality and the specific interest of the authorities. The condition for the emergence of an ideology is a situation featuring a multitude of definitions of reality – that is, worldview pluralism. In this sense, ideology is synonymous with hegemony, while hegemonic practices are an example of political articulation that involves the attachment of diverse identities into one common project (Howarth, 2000).

Legitimation operates at a lower, intermediate level. It is an indispensable element of stabilizing and perpetuating shaky and inherently contemptuous meanings in a relatively ordered and predictable discourse. Without the theory of legitimation or an analysis of the validation process, it would be difficult to conceptualize and comprehend how society works. The importance of hegemony is not limited to the political dominance of one group over another (as in the classical approach to politics), but covers all practices through which the dominant ideology is reproduced and broadcast, mainly through educational and cultural channels. Hegemony is neither stable nor immutable, as it is open to a society that is its main endorser.

Stripped down to its most basic level, legitimation is a process of constructing meaning (Luckmann, 1987, p. 109). This specifically concerns making sense of power. It is thanks to legitimation that authority takes on meaning both for its subjects (Luckmann calls

them 'producers and beneficiaries' of legitimation), as well as for its objects (here he speaks of 'consumers and victims'). In this way, legitimation and power remain in a dialectical relationship: on the one hand, power comes from legitimation, and on the other only those who have power possess the tools to justify their advantage over others.

Legitimation generally applies to four levels (Berger, 1969). The most basic is the level of self-identification – i.e. a pretheoretical justification along the lines of 'this is how it is', included in the structure of language. The second level consists of practical legitimation, explaining reality using typical phrases, proverbs, myths, legends, fairy tales, etc. Only on the third level does legitimation appear consisting of theories that explain and justify the social order. The fourth, highest level of legitimation, integrates all minor legitimations, taking the form of a symbolic universe.

For Berger and Luckmann, religion was an important element in their research on legitimation. Religion was the most common and one of the most effective legitimations in history because it cast the sense of social reality outside society in a transcendent reality. The effectiveness of religious legitimation is also connected with its ability to explain extreme situations: disasters, wars, epidemics, social upheavals, and on the existential level it also justifies death. In turn, secular legitimation not only means having to construct a social reality without religion, but it is often in radical opposition to the legitimizing role of religion, especially in its institutional forms – e.g. the Church.

The need to maintain social reality, and thus the need to launch the validation process, arises primarily in situations of conflict, crisis, threat or alternation – a situation that often results from the tension between religious and secular legitimation. The need for legitimation manifests itself most expressively when the existence of social institutions becomes problematic or is directly questioned when factuality is challenged by its opponents (Berger, 1969).

Both in their joint and independent texts, Berger and Luckmann repeatedly emphasized the role of language in constructing and maintaining social order. Within it they found a structure that both legitimizes and delegitimizes reality:

Language builds up semantic fields or zones of meaning that are linguistically circumscribed. Vocabulary, grammar and syntax are geared to the organization of these semantic fields. (...) the sum of linguistic objectifications pertaining to my occupation constitutes another semantic field, which meaningfully orders all the routine events I encounter in my daily work. Within the semantic fields thus built up it is possible for both biographical and historical experience to be objectified, retained, and accumulated (1966, p. 40).

At every stage in history, 'social heretics' appeared, who introduced and promoted an alternative definition of reality. This is a situation characteristic of pluralist societies in which the position of traditional definitions of reality is demonopolized. The development of complex legitimations occurs most often when the credibility of the world is in some way threatened. Luckmann connects the situation of 'alternative interpretation' with the process of world desocialization, in which the boundaries of social reality are re-established (1989, pp. 305-318). The basic tool for such a reformulation is the discourse that sets these boundaries.

## A DYNAMIC APPROACH – MEANINGS, LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE

The question organizing this part of the article regards how social order is possible at all – how is it created and sustained? One of the most valuable sources of answers to such questions, initiated by interactive-phenomenological concepts, is the theoretical and methodological conglomerate, which is discourse theory. There is no space here to draft a list of the numerous and complex variations of this trend (many studies are available for this purpose – e.g. Howarth, 2000 or Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For the requirements of this article, attention will be focused on the concepts and their empirical applications that directly refer to the concept of legitimation and treat them as a tool for understanding reality.

Theo Van Leeuwen (2008) proposed one of the most widely used concepts of legitimation in the theory of discourse, whose unquestionable advantage is its applicability – i.e. the possibility of applying specific textual data (quantitative and qualitative) to the analysis. This



perspective is close to critical discourse analysis (CDA), moving to the level of studying texts as a tangible representation of discourse and using linguistic microanalysis for this purpose. This is an approach ideally suited to transcending the micro-macro dichotomy that still plagues sociology, especially since the representatives of discourse theory “aim at theory development, [and] do not include so many practical tools for textually oriented discourse analysis. As a result, it can be fruitful to supplement their theory with methods from other approaches to discourse analysis” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 24).

Van Leeuwen, who originally developed his ‘grammar of legitimation’ in collaboration with Ruth Wodak (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), distinguishes four basic strategies of legitimation: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation and *mythopoesis*. The first acts as a reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law or people; the second is linked with the usefulness of knowledge-based ventures; the third, contrary to rationalization, refers to value systems that form the moral basis of legitimation, and finally, the fourth is conveyed in narratives (constructed along the past-future axis). There are numerous modifications of Van Leeuwen’s proposal (including Vaara & Tienari, 2008, where the authors even distinguished a fifth strategy, normalization), but it still seems to present the best set of the linguistic methods of legitimizing discourses.

There are several theoretical proposals that show discursive strategies conducive to legitimation and delegitimation. One was offered by Vaia Doudaki (2015) who, based on an analysis of the financial crisis in Greece, distinguished several linguistic strategies legitimizing the reconstruction of neoliberal hegemonic ‘dictionary’ that marked the Greek bailout: naturalization, symbolic annihilation, omission, condemnation, trivialization, mystification, simplification, objectivation, expertise, quantification and reification. Importantly, Doudaki based her analysis on conflict discourse theory, complementing it with the dimension of legitimation: “meaning and definitions of reality are never fixed, but are constructed and re-negotiated (...) in discursive (power) struggles, the acceptance and maintenance of the hegemonic order depends largely on its legitimation (Doudaki, 2015, p. 2).

The naturalization, maintenance or limitation of antagonisms and the reconstitution of unambiguity is precisely the result of linguistic

strategies of legitimation that can be revealed and analyzed in the area of specific discourses that may be treated as research data. The analysis of these discourses should not be limited solely to the rhetorical dimension where the only relevant is what is said. The discursive approach emphasizes the role of a wider context of legitimation, whereby its effectiveness is determined by the practices of the authorities – for example, the majority and minority perspective. This means that legitimation should always be viewed in relation to the political struggle in which the dominating and the dominated often look to each other for legitimation (Martin-Rojo & van Dijk, 1997, p. 528).

The concept of 'legitimation strategies', i.e. specific ways of mobilizing discursive resources in order to create a sense of legitimation or immorality (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 98-100), was popularized by discourse theories, especially CDA. These strategies may take the form of deliberate and conscious language operations, but they also act on the level of automatic superimpositions placed by individuals and groups on a particular dimension of reality, especially in situations of uncertainty and lacking knowledge. Legitimation thus plays an orientating and ordering function. It is difficult to assess to what extent this function is the result of the oppression and domination of one over another, or the socio-evolutionary mechanism of coping with the uncertainty and natural chaos of the surrounding world.

## FINAL REMARKS

An important element of this article was the demonstration of legitimation as a concept dependent on the wider theoretical paradigm in which it occurs. In classical models, from Weberian to conflict theory, legitimation is treated as a state of the social (or mainly political) system in which the constitutive relation is authority, understood classically as legitimation itself: a relationship between the ruling and the ruled. Legitimation in this arrangement is a state preserving this imbalance – the more durable this state is, the more this imbalance is treated as an element of 'social nature.'

In turn, in constructionist paradigm, initiated by the manifesto of Berger and Luckmann, and developed in the discursive paradigm,

legitimation takes the form of a process that is directed not so much at achieving described state of affairs, as at preventing the anomie that arises from the unpredictability of institutional and human act. The order in which we operate is contingent and shaky, and as such is conducive to social and personal crises. Legitimation is a 'social glue,' a fixative that, at least temporarily, distances the perspective, when the system of meanings would be somehow 'unraveled.' The strength and effectiveness of legitimation is manifested particularly in problematic and difficult moments as well as turning points, which are an ideal subject of analysis for researchers interested in the issue of legitimation.

There are proposals for this difference in the meaning of legitimation to be reflected in the nomenclature. Daniel Gaus in an article meaningfully entitled *The Dynamics of Legitimation. Why the study of political legitimation needs more realism* (2011) postulates that 'legitimacy' or 'validity' should refer to the above-mentioned 'state' whereas the process should be called 'legitimation' or 'validation.' The gist of it involved differentiating the legitimacy held by those ruling in order to exercise power from the process of legitimation whereby such legitimacy is obtained. In this sense, this distinction is undoubtedly important for political sciences, which focus too much and too frequently on legitimacy, and too little and too rarely on the (social) processes that go far beyond the classical relationship of power.

Finally, it is worth asking why the concept of legitimation is so important for sociology? How can it be researched and what can this research give to sociologists? The study of the process of legitimation as an element responsible for the stability of the constructed social order is important especially in situations of community crisis, its disintegration into opposing tribes, living close to each other physically, but distant cognitively. There is no doubt that the most appropriate area for testing legitimation is discourse, and the research material would include articulations, meanings and language.

Legitimation can be studied in two ways. Firstly, at the micro level, as an element of social texts and conversations, interactions and meetings. Secondly, at the macro level, as a discursive practice tangled within a network of complex power relations. The complementarity of both perspectives is relevant. An analysis of legitimation should

not stop at the level of individual statements and should never be reduced solely to an act of language. Neither should an analysis of legitimation drift in an abstract detachment from reality, so it should never be merely political.

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