



## **Legitimizing Identities. The Self-presentations of Rulers and Subjects**

Rodney Barker

*Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, 170pp.*

*ISBN: 0 521 00425 X.*

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2003) **2**, 113–115. doi: 10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300039

This slim but compelling book sets out to take seriously a relatively unnoticed aspect of Weber's famous definition of the state. The monopoly of legitimate coercion is not something that simply belongs to the rulers of states but rather is something that is *claimed* by them, and the success of this claim depends on how, where, when, by whom and for whom it is made. Barker argues against seeing the business of legitimation solely as the function of a property called legitimacy, which is possessed by governments in the eyes of their peoples and which therefore exists for political theorists to squabble over. Legitimacy in this sense does not exist, since legitimation is a series of acts, or claims, which are themselves constitutive of the thing being claimed, and it is the activity itself that Barker is interested in. In particular, he is concerned to highlight a neglected feature of this activity, that it is as often undertaken to convince rulers of their own legitimacy as it is to convince their subjects. To have power is to have confidence in one's own powers, and much time and effort in politics is devoted to reassuring rulers that they are who they think they are. 'Presidential palaces', Barker writes, 'are to impress presidents, not subjects'. And presidents who appear on the balcony of their palaces, as Ceausescu did in 1989, visibly uncertain of what they are doing there, do not hand over legitimacy to the people so much as lose it in the act of claiming it.

Hence the significance of the 'self-presentation' described in the title. Rulers need to believe in themselves, and this involves more than just the public appearance of authority; what takes place in private, or the semi-private of a court setting (and all leaders have their courts), can be just as important. Indeed, there is no other way to explain why so much weight is attached to forms of legitimation that can only be appreciated by the select few who witness them. Trajan may have known the details of what was depicted on Trajan's column, but without the aid of binoculars it is unlikely that his subjects did. 'Self-legitimation' can lie in the esoteric details of public performance, but is as often to be found behind closed doors, in front of a mirror or carefully shielded in the formal and informal observances of a small group of intimates (the U.S. television series *The West Wing* is a study in the self-legitimizing informalities of formal power).



But Barker does not limit his account to the measures undertaken by or on behalf of rulers to persuade them of their capacity for rule. The opponents of political rule — ‘rebels and vigilantes’ — also have their need for forms of self-legitimation, which is why they so often end up emulating the rites and rituals of the people they seek to replace. So too do ‘the people’ themselves, whether as ‘subjects’ or ‘citizens’, and even crowds have a role to play in their own eyes. On this account, the act of voting, for example, is as much about the self-legitimation of the identity of the voter as it is about conferring legitimacy on the recipient of the vote. It is when the self-presentations of rulers and subjects pull in different directions that the most serious problems arise, and Barker uses this claim to found a defence of democracy, as the political system best able to reconcile the self-images of a range of political actors. Barker distinguishes two models of democracy, each capable of doing this, though in very different ways. The first, which he categorizes as the politics of ‘vision’, uses the strong, mutually reinforcing identities of ruler and people to forge a common language of legitimacy; its tools are majority rule, powerful party machines and popular mobilization. The second, which Barker calls a politics of ‘voices’, is more open-ended, and is designed to find the conditions for a diverse range of political self-identifications; it does this best in tolerant, pluralistic and broadly federal political communities. Barker’s own preference is for the second of these models, but he can see the attractions at various moments of the first.

Inevitably, in a work of this length on such a rich theme, more questions are raised than answered. Barker is not claiming to do more than ‘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’, and this the book unquestionably does, with considerable style. But even in so brief an account there is a striking omission, and that is any discussion of the ways in which the different forms of self-legitimation can be understood in the language of representation. Where it is discussed at all, representation emerges in this book as rather a narrow and narrowly democratic idea, denoting the conventional dependence of the representative on the represented. But a similar criticism could be made of this conception as the one Barker makes of conventional understandings of legitimacy: it places too much attention on one particular function of modern political life, and ignores the ways in which representation is an activity that can encompass a wide range of relations and understandings, including the understandings that people have of themselves. ‘Self-presentation’ is, after all, a form of representation: it is the representation of the self. How this is done, and how if at all it correlates with the more familiar structures of representative democracy, is a theme worth pursuing if the picture is to be as rich as it can be.

It could also be said that Barker overstates the extent to which the themes he discusses in this book have been neglected elsewhere. They may have been



neglected by too many English-speaking academics, but precisely because the concept of legitimacy is so hard to describe, it is the activity of legitimation which has been the focus of theatrical, literary and cinematic representations of politics. Barker writes about artefacts which are themselves designed to legitimate — buildings, paintings, clothes — but not about works of art which are studies of the business of self-legitimation. No academic treatment of this subject could hope to compete with the treatment it gets from Shakespeare in so many of his plays, and it is probably wise not to try. But the forms of self-legitimation are repeatedly described in low (or lower) art as well as high. It is hard to think of a more telling account of the private side of public legitimacy than that provided by Wes Jordan, Tom Wolfe's fictional black mayor of Atlanta in his 1998 novel *A Man in Full*, set amidst the new racial politics of the American South. The lengths to which leaders will go to seek personal confirmation of their political legitimacy is also a persistent theme in film, which is perhaps the best medium in which to reproduce the private circumstances of public authority. These range from the most sophisticated (for example, Roberto Rossellini's *La prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV* [1966]) to the least (Walt Disney's *A Bug's Life* (dir: John Lasseter [1998]) is essentially an account of the relation between political power — in this case, the power of a small group of grasshoppers over a colony of ants — and legitimation, and legitimation is understood throughout as an activity both grasshoppers and ants perform for themselves.) To make these comparisons is not to trivialize the subject matter of Rodney Barker's stimulating and provocative book. It simply reinforces just how rich the overall picture might be.

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