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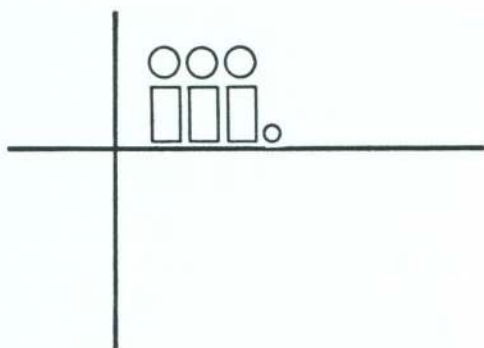
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The Communication of Legitimacy*

BY KENNETH E. BOULDING

One of the most important and at the same time most puzzling strands in the great web of society is that which constitutes the legitimacy of human relationships. It is this which makes the difference between the policeman and the bandit, the pretender and the king, the heretic and the orthodox, the bastard and the heir. Without legitimacy, no complex and continuing operation of social life is possible. Social relations become one-shot jobs, single acts of violence or even of exchange, without any continuing pattern. The struggle of rival systems of legitimation is by far the most important conflict in society, and the one with the most far-reaching consequences. The conflict of ideologies which seems so important in the world of today is only a special case of this much larger and continuing conflict of different ideas of legitimacy. Without legitimacy, armed might and the ability to carry out threats is usually as costly, if not more so, to the threatener as it is to the threatened. Hence the whole threat system, that is, the organization of social life by means of threats, rest on a foundation of bluff, and unless this is reinforced by strong feelings of the legitimacy of the threat system, the threats will be defied and the whole system fall in ruins. Legitimacy is something which is even superior to the law itself, for if the law is regarded as illegitimate, by a wide section of society, as for instance the prohibition law was regarded, it will be flouted and its enforcement will be impossible, and the law itself eventually will have to adjust to the prevailing ideas of what is legitimate. Even though the law is in many ways an embodiment, perhaps a delayed embodiment, of the

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general concept of legitimacy in a society, it is sometimes regarded as legitimate to break and defy the law. What all this means is that legitimacy is not a static phenomenon; the concepts of what is and is not legitimate are in constant flux, and different legitimacies are in continued conflict.

In view of the overriding importance of legitimacy as a social concept, it is astonishing how little attention has been paid to it and how little we really know about it. I am aware of no general theory of legitimacy, and indeed there seems to be astonishingly little interest in the problem among social scientists. Perhaps this is because there is no simple, abstract act or class of acts which constitutes the establishment and maintenance of legitimacy. In the case of economics, we have a relatively simple act, the act of exchange, around which almost all of economics is built. In the case of the strategic sciences, again we have a relatively simple act of the threat, around which again a science can be built. Legitimacy, however, is conveyed, built up, and eroded in innumerable ways, and by a great variety of acts, the common quality of which is not easily recognized. Legitimacy, furthermore, is a concept which is very hard to quantify, even though concepts of "more" or "less" certainly apply to it. The United States, for instance, has a lot of legitimacy in Hawaii and practically none in Okinawa, and almost certainly a negative quantity, if we could measure it, in Vietnam. Furthermore, legitimacy is like the air around us—we only notice it when it is withdrawn. The more legitimacy a system possesses, the less noticeable it seems to be. It is only when legitimacy is questioned or destroyed that we notice it.

In any study of legitimacy, the problem of how it is communicated must, obviously, be in the forefront of consideration. Here again, the problem of the unnoticeability of legitimation is very striking, because legitimacy is communicated mainly in the things we all take for granted. It is communicated also to a substantial extent at the non-verbal level. The handshake or the equivalent greeting in other cultures, which seems to be an almost universal cultural trait, is an interesting example of a social ritual which essentially is directed towards the communication of legitimacy. The handshake symbolizes equality, symmetry in the human relationship. That is, the essential character of the act is not changed if the parties are reversed, and this implies reciprocation, that is, what A does to B, B does to A. Even where the parties are in a hierarchical power relationship, at the moment of the handshake they stand on an equal footing. This is a reflection of a very profound social truth, that communication can only take place among equals, and that for organization, communication is necessary. Hence a purely hierarchical relationship of superior and inferior cannot create organizations except of a fairly primitive kind. This is perhaps the most fundamental reason for

the decay of the legitimacy of the inferior-superior-relationships, as symbolized, for instance, in the reverential gesture—the bow, for instance—with which we approach a king. The contrast between the bow of a courtier acknowledged by a slight inclination of the monarch's head and the handshake of the president is a profound symbol of two sharply different systems of legitimacy.

Another aspect of the communication of legitimacy is pomp or state, the ceremonial or ritual which is designed to establish the legitimacy of a hierarchical organization. In architecture, the Roman portico, the processional mall, and the Gothic spire alike have the primary function of communicating importance. Indeed, the use of architectural symbols in communicating legitimacy is worth a volume in itself. A great many architectural forms which otherwise seem completely nonfunctional become understandable when we conceive them as symbols of legitimation. Imagine, for instance, the Capitol building in Washington without a dome, that otherwise useless excrescence. It would convey no message of importance, no sense of the building being a focus or peak of human activity. The psychoanalytically oriented might continue the speculation on the dome as a female symbol (the government as the nurse of the welfare state) and the spire as a male symbol, whether in the form of the church or the bank, penetrating and fertilizing the mysterious universe. Both the dome and the spire, however, whatever their sexual significance, are symbols of saliency. The fact that these objects are decorated with corbel, cusp, crocket, and pillar is likewise of great significance. These decorations are like the wreath which the conqueror place on the brows of the conqueror. They are symbols of the necessity to endow power with legitimacy and with the ornaments of beauty. One of the great problems of modern architecture, incidentally, is to recover the function of ornament. In the long retreat from Ruskin, who regarded ornament as everything, to the extreme functionalists who denied all function to ornament whatever, architecture lost a sense of the true function of ornament as a symbol of the great web of legitimacy.

Clothing is another interesting example of the nonverbal communication of legitimacy. In a democratic and equalitarian society, everybody dresses alike. Differences in clothing, as reflected for instance in loud shirts and ties, reflect only individual eccentricity, and even these communicate a good deal about status. The uniform, as in the armed forces, emphasizes both the equality—indeed, almost the cipher-like equality—of those in the same rank, and also, of course, emphasizes the differences among ranks. A strongly hierarchical organization such as an army would be almost impossible without a constant reminder in the form of clothing of the nature and legitimacy of the hierarchy. The gold braid and what is sometimes irreverently

called "scrambled eggs" of the higher ranks are like the dome of the Capitol, a constant reminder of saliency and status.

A very interesting study could be made of the clothing of the clergy as a symbol of changing systems of legitimacy. The use of the word "the cloth" in English to describe the clergy collectively is itself a fascinating symbol. In a hierarchical religion we respect not the man but the cloth, that is, the clothes, he is wearing, because the clothes symbolize the role and it is the role that we respect rather than the occupant as such. In a priestly religion, the inadequacies of the person of the priest in no way diminish his capacity to perform his role. The traditionally feminine character of clerical clothes is also very interesting, symbolizing the comforting, reassuring, motherly role of the clergy in society. This is seen most clearly, of course, in the soutane or the robes of monastic orders (skirts rather than trousers), but we see it even in the vestigial feminine symbol of the clerical collar. The abandonment of clerical garb by a large number of Protestant ministers in the United States is an interesting symbol of a profound change in the clerical role, involving the abandonment of hierarchy, the abandonment of priesthood, and the development of the clerical role as essentially not very different from that of a social worker. In modern Protestantism, the cleric is no longer a priest, and he no longer has a vocation but a profession or occupation.

The clothing of the medical doctor would also provide an interesting sidelight on the communication of legitimacy. While the frock coat was the prime symbol of status, surgeons insisted on performing their operations in it, even at the cost of an enormous toll in mortality. Today the white coat has become the status symbol, and is worn by a good many people in places where it is no longer functionally necessary. The decline of the academic gown is also a symbol of a profoundly changing system of legitimacy. Like the cleric, the professor is no longer a race apart. He no longer has a divine aura around him. This is reflected in the fact that he, too, is indistinguishable from anybody else by reason of the clothes that he wears, except that by convention he is allowed to be a little shabbier and down-at-heels than other people of comparable status.

Changing styles in the communication of the legitimacy of wealth also make a fascinating study. As long as the legitimacy of wealth itself is unquestioned, it tends to be expressed in ostentation and extravagance and what Veblen called "conspicuous consumption." If, however, the legitimacy of wealth is questioned in society, conspicuous consumption disappears and its place is taken by inconspicuous consumption. We saw this, for instance, in Tokugawa, Japan, where wealth was legitimate for the lord but not for the merchant, so that as the merchants became wealthy they had to disguise this fact behind mean housefronts and dismal outdoor clothing. Similarly

in our own society, the Marxist attack on the legitimacy of private wealth has at least been moderately successful in driving it, as it were, underground into Foundations. In a society in which the principal repository of legitimacy is the middle class, ostentatious housing and even more ostentatious clothing are completely outmoded. In their housing, clothing, and deportment, even the wealthy have to say, in effect, "Well, we are all buddies together, aren't we?" Even in his own generation a man like Hearst was regarded as something of an eccentricity.

When we come to verbal forms of communication, we see here a strong tendency for the ornaments of language, like those of buildings or clothes, to convey legitimacy. The decline of a status language, the decline, for instance, in English of the second person singular, which was reserved normally for people of inferior or familiar status, is a symbol of a profound change in the structure of legitimacy. The Japanese today face a very interesting problem of a language which is exquisitely adapted to express shades of hierarchy in a society in which hierarchy has largely lost its meaning. All this points up a very important principle, that legitimacy is almost always conveyed by indirection. Nobody stands up and begins every sentence with "I am legitimate," simply because this would destroy his legitimacy. Nevertheless, every channel of the communication process is permeated with the symbols of legitimacy, and it is high time for these symbols to receive careful and systematic study. In the long run all power, even of money and weapons, resides in the ability to conform to the underlying symbolic system by which legitimacy is conveyed, created, and destroyed.

