# Theorising political legitimisation: From stasis to processes

## Abstract

Legitimacy remains a key concept in political sociology, and perhaps even more so in lay understandings of political processes and structures, as evidenced by conflict over territories and regimes around the world. However, the concept suffers from a rather static representation, and even when addressed in processual form, in terms of specific moments in the process, such as conditions favouring legitimacy or its effects. Building from an Eliasian perspective, we argue for a more processual concept of legitimisation to encompass the dynamic social networks (figurations) that constitute the more unintentional context for deliberate legitimation claims. As networks expand and intensify, processes of legitimisation incorporate changing and more diverse bases for legitimacy claims, as well as a greater variety of such claims and counterclaims. As the power relations between contending groups change, legitimation practices become part of the integrating functions of the state, shaping figurations and the social habitus.

The quest for, and issue of, political legitimacy has been a constant throughout the twentieth century, and now in the twenty-first it remains an element of many conflicts and/or source of tension – Ukraine, Palestine, Scotland, Ireland, Catalonia, Afghanistan and Taiwan to mention but a few. Across the social sciences, the concept of legitimacy has both detractors and supporters, and for the latter is often positioned as facilitating social order and political stability. Here we argue that the concept remains important for sociological theory, but mainly through recasting it more fully in processual form within dynamic social networks. We employ a largely figurational (Eliasian) approach to that end, though we also argue that figurational theories within sociology would be enhanced by more explicit engagement with processes of legitimisation alongside other processes such as state and habitus formation. In an analysis of theoretical approaches to legitimacy, we elaborate on how legitimacy has been predominantly understood, with

a view to developing an alternative way of seeing and using a more processual form of this concept. Consequently, drawing from figurational sociology the paper proposes a theoretical reformulation of political legitimisation as a process.

While Elias (2012a) developed a comprehensive framework connecting the largely unplanned monopolisation of physical violence over wider territory, state formation, and the emergence of a more even, emotionally controlled habitus, he placed less emphasis on the role of legitimation practices, though these are not ignored entirely. Elias mainly addresses legitimacy as an intentional practice on the part of rulers to inculcate loyalty to the state (in earlier eras conceived more as a personal possession than a collective entity under the governance of temporary rulers acting on behalf of an entire population). But beyond such recurrent intentional acts, we argue that such acts have to be placed in the flow of a process of legitimisation within fluid social networks, that is largely unplanned, similar indeed to the process of civilisation itself. Civilising processes, from a figurational perspective, cover many processes, and legitimisation can be seen within this perspective as facilitating other distinct, though inseparable processes such as state and habitus formation, as well as the monopolisation of tax collection and revenue distribution. Legitimisation is also central to the development of states in terms of territory (lands and the people inhabiting such lands) and welfare (particularly as power balances shift, thereby incorporating more and more groups into the concerns of state rulers, who in turn lose their permanence and hereditary succession due to such broadening incorporation).

Political legitimacy is usually presented as based on shared norms concerning governance across a particular community, nation, or other social group (Beetham, 2013). For example, Lipset (1959: 86) argues that legitimacy involves the 'capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society'. Here we follow Barker (2001) in using legitimation to refer to activities or claims designed to justify authority. These tools are also used by those controlling media and education, which may be more or less dependent on state regulation and resources, so intentional legitimation practices occur within largely unplanned continuous changes in networks of social interdependence. We contend that the concept of legitimacy as a stable state and of legitimation as a set of

practices should be contextualised by legitimisation as a longer-term, largely unplanned process. Though Bourricaud defines the process of legitimisation as a set of methods which lead to but never reach a state of legitimacy (Bourricaud, 1987: 57), we argue this is too intentional a conceptualisation.

## Current conceptualisations of legitimacy

Definitions of legitimacy revolve around the justification of rule and the public's acceptance of such rule. For example, Gilley (2006) defines state legitimacy as the conscious acceptance by citizens of the use of power; a state is legitimate insofar as 'it is treated by its citizens as rightfully holding and exercising political power' (Gilley, 2006: 500). Similarly, Buchanan (2002: 689) states that 'an entity has political legitimacy if and only if it is morally justified in wielding political power'. Such power includes the monopoly of law-making and enforcement. Approaches to legitimacy tend be either normative assessments of whether a government (or some other authority) has legitimacy, as though it were a static possession, or empirical studies of attitudes to governments in terms of their right to rule (Barker, 2001). Barker also notes attempts at bridging these normative and empirical approaches, as well as his own perspective emphasising the centrality of rulers' legitimation claims. More recently, Rasmussen (2023) distinguishes between 'normative political theory and political sociology', again counterposing the moral and empirical (and, like Barker, favouring a realist approach towards claims-making), while von Haldenwang (2017) also contrasts the normative tradition against the actual legitimising efforts of rulers. Here, we avoid moral assessments, but attempt to place legitimation practices within a more unplanned flow of broader social processes.

According to Beetham (2013: x), 'legitimate power is power that is rightful, because it meets certain normative criteria about how those in power have obtained their power and how they exercise it'. Like Gilley, Beetham argues that power is legitimate if it is considered rightful by those constituting the power relationship. Due to a normative alignment between rulers and ruled in terms of the acquisition and exercise of political office, the population generally experience a felt duty to obey (Beetham, 2013: xi). Though the work of Max Weber is often invoked in examinations of legitimacy and state

authority, Beetham argues that Weber leaves unclear why people would consider any ruling group legitimate (p. 10). Weber of course connected state formation and legitimacy through his definition of the state: 'a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory' (Weber, 1991: 78, original emphasis). He proceeds to outline three 'pure' types of 'inner justifications'. Beetham rightly highlights the inadequacy of Weber's typology of traditional, charismatic and rational-legal forms of legitimacy for examining modern political systems, but remains wedded to the logic of ideal-type classification rather than process. Going beyond Weber, Bourdieu (1994) highlights the legitimate use of symbolic violence by the state. He emphasises the need for an historical genetic view, to see that things could have been different. The state is seen by Bourdieu as an outcome of different capitals, thereby maintaining, not unlike Beetham, a rather static view of power and resources.

Another way of thinking about legitimacy concerns the social conditions favouring more legitimate governments. While open and transparent democracy, such as free and fair elections, is often considered a necessary condition for legitimacy, Rothstein (2009) argues that though democratic elections can justify subsequent actions by governments or rulers, a condition neglected in the literature concerns the output side of government policies and actions. Similarly, Lipset (1994) argues that government performance and effectiveness in meeting the needs of the population is the surest means towards legitimacy. While Innerarity (2014: 313) also acknowledges the apparent contrast between inputs and outputs, or participation and effectiveness, he argues that the effectiveness of new political systems affords time for populations to develop loyalty. As well as input and output legitimacy, others have claimed the significance of throughput legitimacy, or the justifiability of policy-making processes within state organisations, often based on the degree of fairness, consultation with interest groups, and transparency (Schmidt, 2013).

In addition to the conditions favouring legitimacy, considerable attention has been paid to the outcomes of legitimacy in terms of social order. Legitimacy is said to bring regime stability (Beetham, 2013: xi), as well as support and compliance (Schoon, et al., 2020). Without legitimacy the cost of coercing the population to comply with laws, rules, and

policies becomes too high (Beetham, 2013: xi, 28). Similarly, it is difficult to maintain rule without legitimacy, due to the higher resources required to enforce rule (Buchanan, 2002; Gilley, 2006). For Beetham, legitimate power must be limited power (p. 35), as rules must be followed in accordance with normative expectations. Lipset (1959) posits legitimacy, as well as the economy, as a condition supporting democracy, which, together with his later work (Lipset, 1994), suggests a dynamic spiral between government performance, legitimacy and democratisation. In the following section we further examine the relations between legitimacy and the formation and maintenance of states as organised networks, while suggesting figurational interpretations of these relations.

*State formation, network relations and legitimacy*

Imerman (2017) sees legitimacy as a dynamic, relational concept, seeing a reciprocal relationship between legitimacy and institutional adaptation. However, the focus on adaptation conveys too much of the Parsonian impulse towards equilibrium and the ideal of organisational stability within imagined external environments. The concern with imbalances in 'intersubjectively recognized legitimacy' (p. 76) suggests both a norm of balance and pre-existing subjects engaged in mutual recognition, rather than including identities as forming and dynamic within normally unequal power relations. An understanding of legitimisation processes within dynamic figurations is important because this allows for an analysis based on competing, and sometimes compatible, sources of legitimacy, in terms of both particular values and particular groups espousing such values.

Anderson (2012) notes that most accounts of state formation and legitimacy contain the central premise of the relations between state and society. Similarly, Lemay-Hébert (2009: 28) stresses the "mutually constitutive relationship" between state and society. Such language implies that the state is outside society, but it is more realistic to see the state as a social organisation that gradually formed as a way to control and coordinate various activities within a territory (Elias, 2006, 2012a). The primary functions of rulers in early forms of states revolved around protection from external threats. For example, military leaders were recognised by other Germanic tribes during conflicts with foreign

tribes (Elias, 2012a: 229–30). In times of warfare in particular, rulers were deemed acceptable largely on the basis of their military prowess. In Beetham's (2013) terms, here the ruler is exercising power beyond his personal interest, though fulfilling the interests of others was also a means of fulfilling his own interests and over time such interests often became indistinguishable in the eyes of autocratic rulers.

One of the ways to see legitimacy in a more processual form is to map the changing bases of legitimacy according to the primary functions of leaders. Similarly, Innerarity (2014: 314) argues that the terms of legitimacy change in accordance with the changing requirements that people make of their governments. While military knowledge and defence functions remain important, for many political leaders they have diminished in importance and other functions have risen in the hierarchy of social expectations among the people of particular states. These functions have expanded as networks of social interdependence have grown and become longer and denser. With this, the scope of emotional identification (Elias, 2010) between differently positioned groups, such as higher and lower classes, has grown, though unevenly and with resistance. This leads to a need for particular forms of legitimacy, and particular sources within the changing social structure, all of which is a function of the extent and direction of social interdependence. For example, the trajectory of the development of welfare states in Europe, though different, involved at various phases solidarity between classes, and sometime other groups, as well as some resistance, often at the initial legislative phase (Baldwin, 1990a, 1990b). Politicians did not simply accede to the demands of one particular class, the working class, acting in uniform concert and mobilising against the interests of the middle and upper classes. Solidarity emerged hesitantly and partially, and with different constellations depending on the path and outcomes of earlier policies, and politicians too shaped common interests through the modification of social policies. But as the welfare state forms, politicians (some in support, others in opposition) engage in various legitimation claims for different audiences, producing a fluid process of claim and counterclaim within a dynamic social network, all of which constitutes a process of legitimisation on the longer term. As state functions broaden beyond the largely military, and the maintenance of physical safety, to incorporate social safety (nets), health and education, new values and norms develop which become a new framework for legitimation claims. Legitimation claims can be made across a

wider spectrum of human activities, and from a wider network of functional specialists (such as doctors, teachers, social workers, architects, urban planners) speaking on behalf of diverse constituencies.

The expanding role of the state, towards versions of the welfare state, notwithstanding welfare retrenchment over recent decades, demonstrates that the state is part of society. Politicians (functional specialists) represent distinct groups and their interests; where interests and values are shared across groups, there is better scope for politicians to build legitimacy. Particularly as autocratic states change from private to public monopolies, new forms of legitimacy are required to appeal to much of the population. The more public ownership and management of the state meant even citizens were expected to take an interest and in some ways participate in public affairs (Elias, 2006: 298). So the justification of the right to rule, and for specific policies, had to become more public, entailing a wider audience.

The expansion of social interdependences across the world has also led to the need for international recognition by new governments and rulers in national or state territories. Wight (1972: 1) defines international legitimacy as 'the collective judgment of international society about rightful membership of the family of nations'. Politicians must operate within 'an international regime of state recognition' (Lemay-Hébert, 2009: 32). Recognising a new government in an adjacent territory is a way for politicians and rulers to assure counterparts that military intervention is not imminent, thereby reducing tensions. The fear of invasion by external governments could also encourage new rulers towards pre-emptive action, so mutual international recognition of legitimacy is a means of avoiding conflict, however conditional and temporary. The need for recognition from other states is also due to other international dependencies, such as economic exchanges, access to routes and resources, and so on. Politicians of existing states may fear that new states could affect their domestic cohesion and stability. According to Buisson (cited in Anderson, 2012), fragile states need to balance links with external actors and domestic groups. Indeed, Anderson (2012) notes the shift in the legitimacy literature towards a more relational approach, which corresponds with the figurational view. But there remains a rather limited conception of social networks and their dynamic character. For example, following social exchange theory, Hegtvedt and

Johnson (2009: 377) argue that 'how bystanders respond may contribute to the development of legitimacy or may undermine it' (p. 377). Following Elias, such responses can be explained within a broader, dynamic network of people (figuration), which includes how people depend upon each other for information and reassurance regarding the normative and moral dimensions of political rule.

Schoon (2016) does encompass the notion of conflict within networks; group conflict can produce different ideas and arguments concerning legitimacy, whereby the same state institution or the same act of violence can be interpreted as legitimate or illegitimate depending on the group perspective – 'legitimacy and illegitimacy must be studied as network constructs' (Schoon, 2016: 144). Indeed, following Elias (2007), one can conceive of legitimacy claims within a double bind of contending groups, each relying on the other for claims to justifiable governance, though in accordance with different rules or criteria. This is often the case in relation to armed conflict; the established government, or groups they represent, can claim moral superiority based on the rule of law and limited use of state-controlled violence, while outsider groups claim justification due to the discriminatory development and implementation of law in favour of some groups and against others, or indeed the formation of the state territory itself which they consider illegitimate.

In relation to armed conflict, Schoon (2016) notes that it is a more common approach for researchers to assess actors' legitimacy as an attribute, rather than a relational, dynamic process. Schoon argues that an audience is required for evaluations of legitimacy. Beyond this 'legitimation dyad' (p. 148), there may be a wide network of actors. Schoon et al (2020) also argue that legitimacy is not a property of actors but instead limited to those relationships involving particular actors at particular times. Schoon et al focus on the relationship between an actor as the object of legitimation and an audience evaluating the degree of that actor's legitimacy. In this respect Schoon et al refer to the 'actors' compliance with audience expectations' (p. 671), thereby reversing the direction of the compliance relationship – legitimacy is seen in terms of the compliance of those seeking to rule rather than those under rule. In effect we are left with a dynamic interaction between rulers and ruled: if rulers comply with rules and norms valued by the ruled, then they in turn will comply with the decisions and policies

of rulers. While the location of legitimacy within social relationships is consistent with our approach, we argue that the history of such relationships can confer reputational status on the people and social groups concerned, thereby enhancing positive valences to other potential relationships. Schoon et al's representation of network balance is also based upon Heider's model of attitudinal change, and does not adequately entail changing power ratios or balances between many people and groups involved in networks.

As well as people in superordinate positions within organisations seeking to become legitimate to others outside these organisations, they often engage in self-legitimation (von Billerbeck, 2020). By seeing states as types of organisations, engaged in relations with other organisations, we can also recognise politicians as engaged in self-legitimating practices within those states, often justifying actions towards other states, which in turn can justify the position of rulers within state organisations. So even self-legitimation practices occur within the context of interdependent people and organisations. Further, Von Billerbeck argues that where there are contradictory identities within organisations, and a relative lack of social cohesion, there is a greater need for self-legitimation. However, we argue that such self-legitimation practices in the context of state organisations established to protect and enhance the interests of dominant groups can diminish cohesion, equality and the prospect of we-ideals and images across the whole state organisation. Indeed Risse and Stollenwerk (2018) note that willingness to obey can differ in relation to different objects, such as the police and the tax authorities, and in respect of different ethnic groups. Lipset (1959) argues that crises of legitimacy arise primarily due to sharp social divisions combined with the capacity of groups to organise and communicate around different values; furthermore, the transition to new social structures may entail the exclusion of some groups.

To conclude this section on current conceptualisations, it is certainly useful to distinguish between normative and realist theoretical-empirical perspectives, but even the latter approach tends to focus too narrowly on the intentional practices of rulers. Barker (2001) persuasively challenges the inward-looking focus of much of the empirical literature, whereby citizens are positioned as bestowing their approval upon their governors (legitimacy from below). However, his centre-outwards approach, with

legitimation claims emanating from the ruler, with the ruler himself or herself as the primary beneficiary and audience, is too egocentric. After the ruler, the claims are conceived as flowing out through a series of concentric circles to incorporate political and administrative staff, then rulers in other states, and finally ordinary citizens. Elias (2012b: 8–10) notes the tendency of social scientists to think in terms of concentric circles with the individual ego in the centre, constrained by the outer circles comprising family, school, state and so on. This serves to separate individuals as if already existing, who subsequently interact, and to perpetuate a static view of society, or a society ideally oriented towards equilibrium. Even where theorists such as Clark (2003: 94) criticise the reduction of legitimacy to a thing or possession producing stability, 'political equilibrium' is invoked as a condition producing principles of legitimacy. Here, we argue for a more dynamic, processual account of legitimisation, emphasising partly unplanned trajectories in the context of wider, fluid social networks (figurations).

## Towards a figurational understanding of legitimisation

Once power is invoked to understand the legitimacy of rule within social relationships, we must, as Elias (2012b) does, characterise power itself as a function of such relationships. We argue that the extent and form of legitimation practices conducted by governments and rulers depends on the power ratio or balance between rulers and ruled. The power ratio in turn is related to the degree of mutual dependence between such groups; as the power balance becomes more even then the frequency and variety of justifications for particular policies and state actions, from the perspective and interests of the ruled, are likely to increase. Following the definitions and conceptualisations of legitimacy discussed above, we posit the process of legitimisation as dependent upon social integration and cultural alignment. Cultural alignment refers to the convergence of values and norms concerning governance, while social integration concerns the process of various social groups becoming more incorporated within the figurations that comprise the state.

*Social integration and cultural alignment*

The process of cultural convergence or alignment is not a linear one, as it reflects the dynamic power balances between different groups, also in the process of change, within specific territories. So there are likely to be phases in increasing and decreasing alignment as groups become more or less interdependent, as long as such interdependence is not primarily based on reciprocal antagonism or hostility. For example, in the context of the changing relations between the bourgeoisie and the nobility in France with the rise and decline of the absolute monarchy, Elias (2012a: 472–3) distinguishes between individual upward social mobility and collective upwards mobility. In the former case, some individuals succeeded in assimilating to the standards and etiquette of the upper classes; in the latter case, there is often a common feeling among the rising class of resentment towards the assumed privileges of the upper classes. With the growing dependence between the upper and middle classes in France, and in particular the strengthening position of the bourgeoisie as French society became more commercialised, the French middle classes became more confident of their codes of conduct, though these codes had already been influenced by the nobility over preceding centuries. The resentment of these rising classes  led to increasing social tensions and amplification of cultural difference, until other forms of mutual dependence, such as economic and political bonds, eventually lead to rapprochement. This process of misalignment corresponds to a de-legitimisation phase, in terms of the general acceptance of an existing regime, but also to an incipient democratisation phase, before the institutions of state and government become more accessible to formerly excluded groups.

For Elias (2012a), reducing class contempt due to increasing interdependence between classes follows an uneven pattern, with initial relative equalisation often precipitating increased resentment before eventual accommodation, however reluctant that may be. For the purposes of our contentions here, the initial phase of relative equalisation often leads to cultural divergence as the cultural norms, codes and values of the rising group are used more explicitly and confidently, which produces a re-articulation and exaggeration of the codes and values of the dominant group, though declining in power relations with the rising groups. As legitimacy is understand at least partly in terms of cultural alignment, especially in relation to the expectations of political rule, this process represents a phase of de-legitimisation from the perspective of the rising

groups. Depending on the reactions of the dominant groups, the outcomes may further reduce their legitimacy, or lead to cultural re-alignment or convergence if they can recognise the reality of shifting power relations. In the latter instance, accommodation to new or revised ruling mechanisms and procedures by various contending groups is part of a re-legitimisation process. The new social and political arrangements will seem right and acceptable to the extent that they reflect changing power relations. This is another reason why legitimacy is always in process, hence the emphasis on legitimisation, as power balances are usually fluid. Following Elias, Kuipers (2013) too emphasises the importance of a processual approach in relation to the development of social and cultural similarities within nation states (using the example of the national culture of cycling in the Netherlands). One of the processes that favoured increasing similarity and integration within the Netherlands was vertical diffusion of standards down through the social class hierarchy. But this process has stalled with the growing social distance between classes, due to lessening interdependences within nations and increasing interdependences between them (Kuipers, 2013), an argument advanced by Wilterdink (1995) to explain the growth in income inequalities since the 1970s. While these arguments are not made in relation to legitimisation, they do relate to processes of social integration of social classes and cultural alignment in terms of norms and values.

Of course, some dominant or established groups may cynically adopt norms and values of rising groups, perhaps around popular culture, but these can lead to de-legitimatising effects if perceived as cynical and instrumental by rising groups. The realisation on their part of the feigned performance of outsider values would reveal the continued cultural divergence between social groups. Cultural alignment can take different forms of course, apart from convergence towards middle-class codes and norms. In *Studies on the Germans*, Elias (2013) demonstrates how rapprochement of the middle and upper classes over the course of the nineteenth century actually favoured the codes of the nobility. This was due to the achievement of national unification through their military codes. Despite the many differences in norms and values between the upper and middle classes in Germany though, they converged on the national question – the desire for German peoples to be united. This alignment of a higher-level value, and the fulfilment of that value through the actions of sections of the German nobility exercising their

military ethos, produced less of a resentment towards the higher class and more a distorted emulation, as the middles classes who had attained high political office had not internalised the noble code of honour in inter-state affairs. As well as class differences, there can be cultural divergence between other types of social groupings. Elias (2013) refers to the generational conflict that emerged in West Germany after the Second World War, as social opportunities were closed off to the younger generation. Both the political establishment and sections of the young outsiders were middle class, but legitimated themselves according to different ideological values (p. 369). But the cultural homogeneity within these antagonistic groups accompanied a wide moral and normative divergence between them.

Cultural alignment is related to democratisation, as the latter can entail diffusion and merging of values. But as both Beetham and Rothstein note, there are various sources of legitimacy, and democracy is only one of them. However, if we go beyond typological analysis, we can speculate on the processes and conditions that seem to favour one source of legitimacy over another. Individual social mobility is less likely to threaten established power balances, and indeed even from the perspective of the successful social climber the painstakingly acquired upper-class manners and customs are likely to be coveted as hard-earned currency. This process of alignment will favour continued legitimacy based on authority or tradition. Collective upward mobility is more likely to involve democratisation as a route to legitimacy, as newly empowered groups seek participation in the rules binding their conduct and the resources generated through increased interdependence. There is a relational dynamic between democratisation and legitimisation here within this figurational shift, as the upper classes become more dependent on the middle and lower classes for example. The more even power balance reduces the acceptability and seeming rightness of the prevailing mode of governance and rules of succession, leading to demands for political change. So de-legitimisation of current political regimes precedes the development towards more democratic institutions and procedures for participation in such institutions, in turn leading to legitimisation of the new general form of governance and particular governments in office who have been elected according to the new rules of this form.

Elias acknowledges that there were different sources of legitimation based on relations between classes before mass democracy – an honour code for the nobility and a moral code for the pacified middles classes (Elias, 2013: 109). Here Elias writes of classes who 'legitimated themselves', but this is in terms of a more intentional, strategic practice of distinction. We suggest that such planned and executed legitimation practices occur within more unplanned processes of (de)legitimisation whereby certain aspects of state formation – such as territories governed, rules of succession and political participation – undergo variations in acceptability and justifiability depending on the distribution of power. Elias did acknowledge that values and beliefs emanating from previous power struggles between classes within the state have been used as a means to legitimise one nation state and de-legitimise another antagonistic state (Elias, 2007: 155–61), referring specifically to the case of the hostility between the USA and USSR. Here again though, the emphasis in relation to legitimacy remains on deliberate acts by leading politicians representing such states: 'Thus, in the great hegemonic conflicts at the inter-state level, one side legitimises itself by praising the freedom vouchsafed for its citizens by its own social order' (Elias, 2007: 159). So politicians can highlight cultural divergence between antagonistic states, as part of justification of plans and processes in terms of national cultural convergence.

Elias's (2008) work on parliamentarisation also implicitly relates to processes of social integration and cultural convergence. For example, the decline of the free peasant class in England made for an ease of social relations based on a common understanding of social hierarchy where everyone knew and accepted their place. This implies a convergence of norms and values. The declining cycles of violence between various groups contending for political power enabled and propelled greater agreement of rules regarding access and occupancy of government positions and functions. Over time the value and expectation of non-violence in relation to the acquisition and exercise of political authority was assumed across the major interest groups in society. These factions, in the English case, 'came to legitimise and identify themselves as representatives of different political principles or philosophies, ... [competing] with each other according to agreed rules and the demands of a gentlemanly code of sentiment and conduct which Whigs and Tories shared' (Elias, 2008: 15).

Within parliament and other policy-making contexts, the verbalisation of conflict through rhetoric and persuasion required greater all-round self-restraint. The emphasis here on persuasion echoes one of the common themes of the literature on legitimacy (Beetham, 2013; Buchanan, 2002; Hechter, 2009). The former reliance on military skills and strength can be seen as a form of coercion as opposed to persuasion. The transition to the dominance of verbal skills in the resolution of social conflicts represents a relative shift to persuasion. This often involves justification of actions and policies, which itself implies a more even power ratio between contending groups. Mutual fears and suspicions arise in figurations without an agreed 'common code of norms' (Elias, 2013: 156), and the social distance between German nobility and middle classes 'stood in the way of the formation of a unified, model-setting central society' (Elias, 2012a: 32). Following these insights, we argue that decreasing social distance allows for a sense of common culture and purpose, contributing to legitimisation in terms of cultural alignment between rulers and ruled. While "civilisation" was treated as a standard to distinguish European countries against "inferior" people and groups (Elias, 2012a: 425), the idea of more deliberate attempts at civilising others, including children, not only involves the social constraint towards self-restraint, but also the alignment of moral and normative standards, and therefore a central element of any process of legitimisation.

As states became more and more democratic (at least in the sense of widening the electoral franchise) rulers and politicians could no longer govern without taking many interest groups into account (Elias, 2009: 66–7). As the reciprocal control between the governed and governments shifted over time in favour of the former, 'Rulers in every country had to legitimise themselves in the eyes of their subjects by means of relatively impersonal principles and ideals concerning the ordering of social conditions' (Elias, 2012b: 62). But depending on the power distribution within the state and the degree of common interests across various interest groups, the deliberate acts of politicians to justify their continued rule through ideology could lead to quite divergent outcomes across the population in terms of the acceptability of governments. Legitimation practices aimed at one group could result in de-legitimisation in the eyes of another. This becomes all the more likely in divided states, or those with histories of ethnic

conflict and tensions that may have produced a particular version of the state and its territory favouring particular groups.

Though the process of legitimisation is related to changes in social interdependence, and subsequent power balances, some people occupying more central positions in the shifting figuration have greater scope than others to engage in legitimation practices attracting a believing audience. For example, leading politicians are tasked with co-ordinating, regulating and organising other people within their jurisdiction engaged in other social functions. Such regulation clearly affects other people's activities, so legitimation practices become more routine and expected. The development of mass media also expanded the figuration of interlocking people and functions as journalists and editors amplified and communicated the policies and actions of politicians (see Dunning, et al., 1988). Figurational changes produce not only power shifts but needs for new means of orientation to navigate and make sense of different social landscapes. Legitimation practices (and indeed attempts to de-legitimise alternative governance structures and procedures) can seek to interpret and communicate the consequences of figurational shifts to delay or displace recognition of power shifts. Thus, people are dependent on others to make sense of changing mutual dependences – a sense-making dependence borne of other prior forms of changing social interdependence. In the context of more explicit social conflict, one group may depend less on another for the recognition of acceptability, thereby withholding legitimacy to their adversaries, who in turn may be locked out of rule-making structures and processes. This then becomes a source of power, defined by Elias (2012b: 76–7) as the relatively greater capacity to compel another's moves than vice versa, and also greater control over the game itself. In Elias's discussion of power using game models, he argues that one person's higher control over another tends to allow that person to set the rules of the game, or the nature of their continued interactions. As applied to legitimacy, this would mean that where rulers have a greater capacity to control the choices, decisions and actions of the ruled than vice versa, then the rulers would also be able to determine political processes and the means through which the ruled engage with state organisations and functionaries.

But the capacity to compel within a more complex network of mutual dependence also involves the need to justify and persuade, essential elements of legitimation practices. Elias was fully aware of the '*polymorphous nature of sources of power*' (Elias, 2012b: 88, original emphasis), but the power to persuade and justify, within changing social contexts of justifiability, remains relatively implicit in his framework. As '*the functional differentiation of chains of interdependence outpaced the corresponding process of integration*' (Elias, 2012b: 137, original emphasis), we argue that legitimation practices became an important part of the integrating functions of the state.

In situations of less violent hostility, parliamentary processes entail negotiation and changing alliances between political parties (Elias, 2006: 299). So the network of alliances and oppositions becomes more multi-polar and complex, and we argue that in these network dynamics justifications of policies and actions have to become more flexible, and more regular. In this context, and amid wider processes of functional specialisation and social integration, politicians not only become governing and co-ordinating specialists, but to an increasing degree they must become legitimation specialists. Of course they are not the only occupation or role engaged in legitimation practices, but at least in the operations of state in a more complex, multi-polar and relatively democratised society, they must justify actions to more audiences, or more people engaged in other specialised pursuits. In more 'dictatorial states' the 'state monopoly of information' (Elias, 2010: 162), reduces the need for justification, at least on an ongoing, contestable basis.

As well as processes favouring social integration, we can posit processes that can contribute to social disintegration or at least the blocking of integration, which jeopardises cultural convergence and thus legitimisation. The significance for processes of (de)legitimisation is that power dynamics and social tensions between groups whose identities develop accordingly provide the explanatory basis for conditions shaping political legitimacy. According to Elias and Scotson's (2008) established–outsider model, leading members of community groups often feel threatened by the arrival of other groups, fearing for their positions in local community organisations. This leads to exaggeration of the moral shortcomings of the new group, and reaffirmation of the moral superiority of the established group. If we apply this model on a larger social

scale, we can see how the expansion of state territory, thereby incorporating more diverse social groups into a particular jurisdiction, or the immigration of groups into an existing state territory with a relatively homogenous population in terms of norms and morals, could lead to cultural divergence. The amplification of such difference, far beyond actual initial difference, by leaders within the more established group develops further social distance and disintegration or fragmentation. In a vicious circle, this distance encourages further amplification of cultural and moral difference. Leading politicians may stigmatise outsider groups to curry favour with more established groups, thus legitimising themselves for those groups, but in doing so they de-legitimise themselves for outsider groups. For example, in the late nineteenth century British Conservatives promoted the rights of Protestants in Ulster to undermine the prospects of Irish Home Rule (Goddard, 2006). Their concern was the integrity of the British empire rather than the position of Ulster Protestants, but their actions served to legitimise and unify this constituency, ultimately contributing to the partition of Ireland and the establishment of a territory designed to ensure unionist dominance. This in turn left the Irish nationalist minority within Northern Ireland as outsiders in terms of status, access to certain resources and opportunities, with a national and ethnic identification that could not align to the new jurisdiction. The absence of state legitimacy of this group and the experience of 'collective victimization' (Cavanaugh, 1997: 39), as well as the religious segregation of the education system hampered the prospect of social integration or cultural alignment. Ethnic and religious antagonism contributed to the feeling within the nationalist minority that the police (expected to fulfil the basic state function of maintaining physical security) represented the needs and interests of the unionist majority (Human Rights/Helsinki report cited in Cavanaugh, 1997: 48). The emergence of a peace process in the late twentieth century in part developed from established politicians refraining from vilification towards the legitimising of representatives of nationalist republicans through secret and then public dialogue (Goddard, 2006; Toros, 2008).

As social interdependence grows, there is a tendency towards relative equalisation, or functional democratisation in Elias's (2012b) terms. Such relative equalisation can also be interpreted as part of a process of legitimisation; there is a greater willingness to

consider legitimacy claims of others, rather than dismiss them spontaneously as unacceptable. Of course, highly unequal societies also produce legitimation claims by rulers, but their form is different. Relative equalisation favours legitimation claims based on sameness, while highly unequal societies favour legitimation based on difference (stronger, braver, wiser, purer). The more "natural" the power and social difference between elites and subordinate groups seems, then the more right or just such arrangements become even in the minds of the oppressed. This brings us to an important aspect of legitimisation processes, which concerns the embodiment of common culture or learning. This habitus formation from childhood onwards enables people to accept as common sense, or second nature, the claims of others provided they fit the interpretive capacities of existing cognitive and emotional structures and experiences.

*Habitus, emotions and acceptance*

While there are different conceptions and definitions of habitus (King, 2005), the concept is useful for connecting different levels of social integration and the individual, for example relations between the state and the citizen. For Elias habitus can be conceived as second nature, such that the fact of learning has been forgotten and the knowledge acquired through learning seems natural (Mennell, 2015). More specifically, 'social habitus' refers to learning which is common across the personality structures of members of the same social group (Mennell, 1998: 30). Both conceptualisations are relevant to processes of legitimisation. Firstly, the more standards of conduct, and ways of thinking and feeling, seem natural to someone, the less prone they are to critical interrogation and reflection. If government actions and policies accord with expectations, norms and values deeply ingrained in the habitus, the more right they seem, and the more justifiable they become. Compliance is more likely through 'voluntary' acceptance following an internal logic of common sense, and coercion becomes less necessary. Conditional acceptance on the part of the citizenry becomes more automatic and less questioning under conditions of alignment with the habitus. This is all the more so when values and expectations are shared, or in other words part of the 'social' habitus, which can be conceived as the national habitus in the context of the nation-state figuration. Even where knowledge, learning, and values have not been

deeply ingrained in the personality structure of particular individuals the shared nature of such knowledge and values provides mutual confirmation through conversation and discussion. Particularly as nation-states become more cohesive and integrated through commonly experienced social institutions such as schools, churches and other sociocultural organisations, there is greater commonality across the still diverse habitus formations among the population. But once educated, people could only really be controlled through themselves, through their own beliefs, and secularisation led to the use of 'secular religions' like nationalism as a way to rule (Elias, 2013: 300–1).

The process of moral acceptance, central to legitimisation, has both individual and historical/collective aspects. The habitus formation of each person must align with the normative structure of the prevailing state organisations, in order for those organisations to seem acceptable to that person. Also, social habitus of the group in question must develop towards greater alignment with that normative structure over time, or the normative structure must adapt to the social habitus, or of course some combination of the two. There tends to be ongoing processes of legitimisation because conflict between different social groups, roles and occupations within any political territory is normal, generating a dynamic of changing social standards, norms and expectations. Habitus formation in one historical period may not entirely align with the normative structure of the following period, heightening the need for legitimation attempts. It can take several generations for the habitus to become more attuned to the changing social structure, for example in moving towards a more democratic, multi-party regime (Elias, 2013: 39). So the process of legitimisation often therefore entails misalignment with changing social structures and changing personality structures; rapid social change can lead to divergence of values across generations.

The formation and functioning of the habitus become more individualised as figurations become denser and wider, or as social interdependences become both more extensive, involving more people, and often more intensive, depending on people for the fulfilment of more complex needs. Individualisation processes loosen the grip of the more "external" conscience informed by religion (Elias, 2010: 91). Such individualisation processes partly internalise legitimacy, requiring the thought and consent of individual citizens. The relative decline of external moral authority is also connected to new forms

and sources of legitimacy that consider personal autonomy and conscience. Individualisation processes are connected to the growing complexity of figurations and the associated increase in choices, and the necessity of choice-making facing people (Elias, 2010). People are expected to choose from a greater range of occupations as functional specialisation proceeds, and as intergenerational occupational mobility advances. The lengthening chains of interdependence means people rely on others beyond local communities, though local ties remain for certain needs and functions. As social interdependence grows within state boundaries, a transfer of functions from clan or village to centralised states occurs: 'The groups' cohesion breaks down as they lose their protective and control functions' (Elias, 2010: 110). The advance of the welfare state also expands the functions of state, increasing expectations of state support for some people, while simultaneously threatening continued electoral support from others. Declining cohesion at local level could also mean growing cultural divergence, and legitimacy claims more closely aligned to party political ideologies, as well as values cutting across enough people to attract political support. As people develop mutual dependencies at various levels of social integration – from the local to the global – different and perhaps competing legitimation claims overlap as institutions at various levels appeal to relevant constituencies.

In modern societies many people experience ambivalent emotions in relation to power elites, having both shared feelings and interests, as well as a sense of hostility towards governments (Elias, 2013: 303). Thus habitus formation tends to be contradictory. Elias further notes that unity is often attempted through nationalism, enabling some sense of emotional identification with rulers (p. 303). So values, norms and emotions may be partly aligned and partly divergent, thereby requiring a continuous process of legitimisation to maintain levels of convergence sufficient for effective governance. We can see this in the case of attacks on the West German state in the 1970s by younger groups, predominantly of middle-class upbringing. They did so partly on ideological grounds and because they challenged the legitimacy of the governments of the day.

**Conclusion**

Greater equality means greater willingness to consider the legitimacy claims of others. To the extent that other groups form figurations with successful legitimacy claimants, they may press other claims, so a dynamic emerges as the unforeseen consequences of acceding to initial claims. Thus, the process of legitimisation should be seen as a largely unintentional process, though comprised of interrelated sequences of deliberate legitimacy claims. The relative success of claims and counterclaims, and compromises, are also shaped by the history of social relations between groups, particularly in the context of (post)colonial relations with the likely legacy of perceived superiority and inferiority dynamics.

The literature on state legitimacy asserts that the appeal of legitimacy for rulers is the ability to rule without complete reliance on coercion (Buchanan, 2002; Gilley, 2006; Hechter, 2009; Imerman, 2017; Turner, 1982); if the ruled think that their rulers are legitimate, that their form of rule is valid and right, then they are more likely to comply with government decisions and policies. This echoes Elias's central theme of the processes of civilisation – namely the social constraint towards self-restraint – though of course this occurs in many other social formations apart from states. As Elias argues however, state formation proceeds along with other processes that together produce greater and more even social restraints across more social situations and interactions. As states become nation states, meaning that the offices of governmental power become public rather than merely the private possessions of competing noble households, then a greater scope of emotional identification develops among and between most people within the territory of the state. This public ownership of the state is a process encouraged by more even power balances between social groups, which of course leads to demands for political democratisation.

Intentional legitimation practices, repeated over time and thus constituted as a process, occur within broader legitimisation processes involving the selection of principles of political rule within the convergence of major social groups around common values and beliefs. Thus processes of legitimisation can be understood as intertwined with figurational dynamics – the changing interdependences between people organised as groups (thereby comprising figurations themselves at a lower level), through which the values and means of orientation of such people also adapt. But this is a relative

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adaptation towards new social realties, and a movement from previous positions, not a newfound equilibrium based on consensus. Divisions remain and even multiply, though in more muted and channelled forms, as new dependences develop. In this perpetual social dynamic, processes of legitimisation persist.

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