

PPE Conference 2016

Justifying Power and Decisions in the 21th Century: Rethinking Legitimacy from a PPE perspective
University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

Transdisciplinary legitimation of critical thinking in academia

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Abstract. Critical thinking and debate in academia are crucial vehicles of legitimation in a wider world of social, economic and political events and momenta. Academic experts act as legitimizers of particular policies and institutional developments. Their authority rests on the academic status and intellectual expertise. Respective qualifications and expert abilities have to be attested or legitimized in their turn. Thus, academics are involved into two-way legitimation process. They are both legitimizers and the legitimized. This general perspective implies complementary panoramas – from academia to public quarters of decision-making and the other way round.

Respective bodies of experts are to be professionally and intellectually ‘fine-tuned’ to assess and ‘legitimize’ individual policies and developments. Such bodies should be undersized both to facilitate internal debate and agreement as well as to increase the level of competence. Besides their commitment to democratic values and practices, they have to exercise intellectual and rational abilities that are compatible with those of highly specialized professional skills. A way to develop such valuable capacities is to engage into multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and, finally, transdisciplinary studies. PPE is the background and backbone of such studies and education.

Key words. transdisciplinary, PPE, legitimation, accountability, expertise, checks and balances, reflexive feedback loops, double interact

Contents

1. Introduction.
2. Legitimation crises
3. Problematic limitations of decision-making
4. Checks, balances and mutual accountability
5. Loci of expertise in decision-making
6. Problematic limitations of expert judgment
7. Mutual accountability in academia

PPE Conference 2016

Justifying Power and Decisions in the 21th Century: Rethinking Legitimacy from a PPE perspective

University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

Introduction

The conference addresses the issues of overcoming legitimization crises from the point of view of PPE. Modern science and particularly social sciences have an important role to play in overcoming current crises. Furthermore, critical thinking and debate in academia are crucial vehicles of legitimization in a wider world of social, economic and political events and momenta. This claim may sound strange. We are accustomed to applying the term legitimization to politicians of a rank or their policies. Why to apply it to experts? And why to speak of transdisciplinary legitimization of critical thinking in academia?

The paper rests on a presumption that legitimization as a typically modern development has a very special meaning. It is much broader than “making something acceptable and normative” as Wikipedia defines the term (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legitimation>). Its functional range includes also producing demands and shaping agenda of policymaking. At the same time, it is far more specific. It is not just a submissive approval of powers that be. It implies actual ability to assess critically an authority and its undertakings. It entails democratic accountability process.

Legitimation is a notion that should be applied not just to policies or their outcomes. In fact, it is a multifarious process of passing from problematic or unaccounted to reliable or positively accounted for. In this regard both the term and the respective practice fully apply to behavior of experts and even public.

Academic experts individually or collectively act as a quite specific kind of expert legitimizers of particular policies and institutional developments. Their authority rests on their academic status and intellectual expertise. Respective qualifications and expert

PPE Conference 2016

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abilities have to be attested or legitimized in their turn. Thus, academics are involved into two-way legitimation process. They are both legitimizers and the legitimized. This general perspective implies complementary panoramas – from academia to public quarters of decision-making and the other way round. Both outlooks mirror each other and trigger similar sets of questions.

Two-way legitimation perspective triggers further questions:

- Who are the legitimizers and the legitimized in specific vistas of legitimation?
- What are the criteria of legitimation in each case?
- How the criteria are used?
- What are the methods and styles of legitimation?
- What kind of results they produce?
- What are the ensuing implications?

To answer those six questions and a range of similar ones the paper splits the analysis into six subsequent parts.

The paper starts with discussion of the nature and dimensions of legitimation crises and legitimation. The crises are various and wide-ranging. While crises are universal, legitimation crises are also quite recent and distinctly modern phenomena. That makes modern critical thinking extremely instrumental in overcoming crises. Social sciences and PPE as their integral core are crucial resorts of modern critical thinking.

The next section deals with problematic limitations of decision-making, particularly those of time and space as well as other that produce excessive transaction cost and reduce

PPE Conference 2016

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University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

quality of outcomes. Such limitations make contributions of experts categorically crucial and indispensable.

Then the paper highlights the roles of decision-makers, experts and general public. Relations between respective groupings and bodies shape into formal and informal checks and balances. Subsequent reciprocal interaction helps to establish or reinforce mutual accountability of policymakers, experts and public at large.

The paper further explores the function of expertise in formation of decisions and elaboration of ensuing policies. Experts and expert communities play a very special role in the course of policymaking. They are both legitimizers and the legitimized participants in the processes of interaction with political authorities and citizens.

The actual value and effectiveness of expert judgments are the next crucial point of reflection. While expertise is the service of quality and cost-effectiveness of decisions taken by politicians, specific expert judgments and recommendations are distinctly limited both functionally and pragmatically. Respective limitations in their own mirror fashion reproduce some key patterns of limitations characteristic for decision-making itself.

The focus of the paper moves to mutual accountability in academia. Contestation is a vital aspect of scientific research and academic conduct. Contestation helps to institutionalize and rationalize assessment of scholarly studies and expert judgments. An academic authority able to make expertise accountable and thus legitimized should have a relative superiority over experts. Transdisciplinarity may provide such an advantage.

Finally, the paper considers specific potential of PPE in promoting transdisciplinarity – the foremost point and outcome of the whole debate.

PPE Conference 2016

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Legitimation crises

Jürgen Habermas introduced the notion of legitimation crisis and coined the respective two-word term already in 1973 [Habermas 1973]. It got wide currency after publication of an English translation of the book [Habermas 1975]. Habermasian idea got further interpretations and misinterpretations within narrow context and specific intellectual perspectives. Original scope and dimension of the ideas remain essential and are highly relevant for the present paper.

For Habermas legitimation crisis is a very recent occurrence. The actual title of his book is “Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus” (Legitimation problems in the age of late capitalism). With all that, the German philosopher does not limit his view or analysis to momentary experience of his days. He recurses to evolutionary perspective of a range of ages or social formations – primitive, traditional, liberal capitalist and late capitalist [Habermas 1975, p.17 ff] just to make current political and social problems more manifest and clear.

Habermas links late capitalist problems with a range of crises – those of rationality, legitimation and motivation. The first two make up a complementary pair related to political domain. A rationality crisis is an output crisis of political performance with authorities failing to manage economy adequately [Habermas 1975, pp. 46–48]. A legitimation crisis is a complementary input crisis. It leads to situations when "the legitimation system does not succeed in maintaining the requisite level of mass loyalty" [Habermas 1975, p. 46]. Thus, the legitimation crisis is nothing but an identity crisis in

PPE Conference 2016

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University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

which political quarters are unable to establish trustworthy structures to help the entire system to function properly [Habermas 1975, p. 47].

Habermas attributes legitimation crisis to loss of confidence in political order and authorities that continue to use administrative institutions quite legally and routinely. As a result identity of the rulers and the ruled have eroded in a late capitalist age. That deals a blow not on identities per se but rather on roles and institutions that stand behind the identities. In a more strict analytical sense they are not just roles and institutions but far more fundamental structures and functions. This way of reasoning fully corresponds to functional analysis typical for the book of 1973 and other writings of Jürgen Habermas.

A very important advance of the Habermasian understanding of legitimation crisis would be introduction of other structure and functions than those of authorities and public. They are the structures and functions of mediation between the authorities and public. In fact Habermas make sharp hints to that effect passim without elaboration of the idea. Such perspective is vital for the present paper since it among roles and functions of mediation there are those of experts and expertise.

Problematic limitations of decision-making

Making decisions is not an easy job. There are numerous pragmatic limitations that make this vocation even more problematic. They are particularly related to constrains of time and space. They generate unwarranted transaction cost and reduce quality of outcomes. Such limitations make contributions of experts categorically crucial and indispensable.

PPE Conference 2016

Justifying Power and Decisions in the 21th Century: Rethinking Legitimacy from a PPE perspective

University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

No politics and no meaningful human endeavor are possible without making decision on matters of common concern. Who is to do the job? The answers varied throughout centuries, but in our democratic age the rights to participate in decision-making are imperative. Modern democratic principles imply that all those affected by an issue should have a share in decision-making. Well in the Autumn of 1647 at Putney Debates Colonel Thomas Rainsborough formulated this democratic idea vigorously and unequivocally, “For really I think that the poorest hee that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest hee; and therefore truly, Sr, I think itt clear, that every Man that is to live under a Government ought first by his own Consent to put himself under that Government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that Government that he hath not had a voice to put Himself under” (Putney Debates record book 1647, Worcester College, Oxford, MS 65. Spelling and capitalisation as in the original manuscript).

Who is to participate in decision-making? All those who are concerned. This answer sounds fair and democratic. Still it would be too easy an answer. Our experience suggests that the level of judgment would be commonplace and mediocre in such case. Duncan Black’s formula of competent decision $v^{h-k} / (v^{h-k} + e^{h-k})$ implies that the result be 50/50. Is it possible to raise the efficiency? Yes, by referring the decision to ever-smaller groups of ever-wiser experts.

It is evident that the public is less competent then the experts to make a proper evaluation. A possible solution would be an alternative expert group acting on behalf of the public. Broad public or its institutional representative is to select competent groups the public can rely upon.

PPE Conference 2016

Justifying Power and Decisions in the 21th Century: Rethinking Legitimacy from a PPE perspective

University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

What would be the criteria for such a selection? The most obvious ones are professional status and experience. The problem is that many very specific issues may not have a ready body of professional experts. Some issues are too broad and complex for professionally impeded and rigged experts.

Problematic limitations of decision-making generate need for competent small groups able to do the job. Politicians are just one such cluster. Experts are another. That alone makes the role of experts essential and necessary. In other word, competent groups act to maximize the quality of legitimation on behalf of broad public. Academic experts are one of the competent groups. Being a mediating group, they are equally helpful either to public or to authorities.

Checks, balances and mutual accountability

The functions of the leaders, experts and public are manifestly dissimilar. The first have to make decisions. The experts are supposed to provide prefabricated assessments of the state of affairs, to evaluate policy options and make conclusions on their implementation outcomes. General citizen corps and public groups are expected to voice opinions on the relevance of policy options for their interests and desires.

Interactions between policymakers, experts and public structure into a system of checks and balances. Operational arrangements of this kind are typically modern. They provide not only to constitutional separation of powers but also to legitimation and accountability in wider contexts of modern social arrangements. Actually, it is a pattern of checks and balances that helps to establish or reinforce mutual accountability of decision-makers, experts and public amalgamations.

PPE Conference 2016

Justifying Power and Decisions in the 21th Century: Rethinking Legitimacy from a PPE perspective

University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

Mutual accountability makes legitimation more subtle and versatile. It can and should be applied not only to notorious governors versus the governed modality but all kind of social arrangements. It has been stressed at the beginning of the paper that legitimation goes far beyond and above the consent of the governed to powers that be. Asymmetric and hegemonic patterns of top-down hierarchical rule are pre-modern and traditional. Modern set-ups imply reflexive arrangement between actors involved into reciprocal legitimation processes.

This brings back the issue of mutual or reflexive accountability of the interacting groups involved into modern legitimation processes. Reflexive accountability rests on feedback loops or rather reflexive feedback loops. Their functional logic infers double interact loop [[Weick](#) 1979]. This notion crowns a sequence – act, interact and double interact that lays at the bottom of any organization. It is equally topical for reciprocal accountability and legitimation processes.

Professionally competent experts should not act as if they are exclusively accounting and legitimizing agents of their own. They should be accountable themselves. Their knowledge, skills and expertise generates dangerous concentration of power. Experts should be accountable to broader public as well as to policymakers and other involved groups. This is true of any small groups.

Mutual interaction of pluralist public and alternative groups of experts becomes a key requirement of effective evaluation of policies and institutional developments. To make this interaction possible we need people that are able to act as moderators and mediators. Competent small groups and particularly academic experts are the best candidate to make the job.

PPE Conference 2016

Justifying Power and Decisions in the 21th Century: Rethinking Legitimacy from a PPE perspective

University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

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Problematic limitations of expert judgment

General constraints and limitations on decision-making apply to expert judgments. To be more precise it is the general principle of supplementary costs burden that apply. In the case of political decisions, this principle works primarily in transaction costs of space and time coupled with deficit of information. In the case of expertise, transaction costs are also a restriction but often not the main ones. Far stronger restraint is deficient quality of information and other cognitive resources.

Both types of restrictions – qualitative and quantitative – are interrelated and valid for all the partners in legitimation processes and include policymakers, experts and public. Still functional demands and expectations are quite different for various groups and agencies. Politicians have to make clear-cut and operational decisions in a timely and resolute manner. Experts are to provide politician with higher quality of information and to suggest novel and accounted for ways to solve the relevant problems. Public at large, civic groups and individuals are to interrelate their concerns and expectations with policy options. Naturally each of the partners has to evaluate how their counterparts actually do their jobs.

In this perspective, the actual merits of expert judgments depend upon specific factors and resources applied in doing the job. Its quality is restricted in a number of ways.

PPE Conference 2016

Justifying Power and Decisions in the 21th Century: Rethinking Legitimacy from a PPE perspective

University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

Corresponding limitations in a complementary fashion mirror restrictive patterns typical for political decision-making per se and public appraisal of policy options.

Expert judgments and recommendations are distinctly limited both functionally and pragmatically. Policymakers expect expertise to be coherent and recommendations original and rational. Public long for expert evaluation of complementary options and advice on reasons for their selection. Experts have to satisfy all those expectations. They also have their own requirements and imperative demands. They are essentially quality centered. Renowned criteria of external, internal and other types of validity fully apply.

Can we think of some common hazards of expertise and detriments of its validity? They are several but probably two are most topical: lack of critical thinking and excessive specialism. While both may have a broader appeal, it is the academia itself that is most concerned with deficiency of internal criticism and excesses of disciplinary specialization. To meet the challenge of both academia resorts to its own internal practice of accountability.

Mutual accountability in academia

Common sense concurs that critical thinking and debate in academia are decisive means of legitimation in its broadest meaning. They are even more topical for academia itself. To this effect, traditions of scholarship and scientific research engendered and institutionalized respective practices and their premises. Contestation helps to account and assess critical thinking. Perspectives of common problem-solving and method-application help to overcome excessive disciplinary restraints.

PPE Conference 2016

Justifying Power and Decisions in the 21th Century: Rethinking Legitimacy from a PPE perspective

University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

Contestation constitutes an essential property of scientific investigation and academic practice. It allows to institutionalize and to rationalize valuation of scholarly studies and expert judgments.

Problem oriented studies have double effect – internal and external. They allow to focus on issues particularly relevant to policymakers and public. Their effect on legitimation is evident.

Methodological domain provides a new extradisciplinary dimension. It helps to distance from the subject matter of research and consolidate respective skills and cognitive abilities.

What academic resort may help to make expertise accountable and thus legitimized? It is interdisciplinarity and even more so transdisciplinarity. They are extremely helpful. Academically they are embodied in our educational programme “Politics. Philosophy. Economics”.

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PPE Conference 2016

Justifying Power and Decisions in the 21th Century: Rethinking Legitimacy from a PPE perspective

University Witten/Herdecke, 6th – 8th May 2016

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