Legitimacy Crisis: Again?

Since the dawn of time, it seems, social critics have been warning of a "crisis of legitimacy" in the political world. Manuel Castells repeats this ageless battle-cry in his 2004 Ithiel de Sola Pool lecture (*PS*, January 2005, 9–16), warning darkly of an "increasing alienation of citizens" that "threatens to undo the democratic system" (9). As proof, he offers an array of point-in-time survey results from Western countries in recent years, as well as anecdotal evidence of "the expression of political protest" in places like California and France (9). Yet, none of this shows anything except the fact that states are imperfect creations for the expression of political community and, as Isaiah Berlin might have added, the timeless costs of social life. Castells gives no evidence that today's "legitimacy crisis" is worse than the same crisis claimed by Pye and Habermas in the 1970s (Pye 1971; Habermas 1975), or the earlier crisis claimed by scholars like Mannheim in the 1930s (Mannheim 1936). Perhaps it is worse, but how would we know from the litany of woes he offers? In fact, there is a strong argument that in global terms, political legitimacy has never been so high because of the democratizations of the last quarter century and the overall improvement in global governance that has accompanied it. Is Castells suggesting that Latin Americans, to whom he devotes special attention, felt closer to their political rulers during the 1960s? Cries of "legitimacy crisis" may turn heads, but like the proverbial boy who cried wolf, they leave us vulnerable to ignoring a crisis of legitimacy when it really happens.

Bruce Gilley,
Princeton University

References

Habermas, Jurgen. 1975. *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Mannheim, Karl. 1936. *Ideology and Utopia*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.

Pye, Lucian. 1971. *The Legitimacy Crisis: Crises and Sequence in Political Development*, eds. L. Binder et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096505050134 Published online by Cambridge University Press