The question of legitimacy – who gets to rule and why – is perhaps one of the oldest problems in politics. From ancient tribal councils to the modern European Union, rulers have always been preoccupied with transforming “strength into right and obedience into duty,” as Rousseau put it. Ruling through naked coercion, though clearly not impossible, is difficult, costly, and subject to the ever-present threat of rebellion. The right to rule, therefore, has always come bundled with justifications that reflect the tenor of their times, from the divine right of kings to democratic consent in the present day.

The strange alchemy of transforming strength into right is the subject of Bruce Gilley’s book, and while it offers interesting contributions in some areas, it is not without important weaknesses. Gilley rightly notes that political scientists often either ignore legitimacy because it seems so nebulous an idea, or assume it away by folding it into bigger concepts. Weber’s famous definition of a state, for example, defines it as a territorial monopoly on legitimate violence, which equates states with legitimate states and prevents any discussion of why some states are more legitimate than others. (Of course, Weber spends a lot of time discussing the sources of legitimacy in other writings.) Likewise, the concept of democracy is often conflated with legitimate rule, which ignores the fact that some democracies enjoy greater legitimacy than others.

Gilley aims to correct this shortcoming by dissecting the sources and consequences of legitimacy. In a clear and succinct discussion, he provides a three-part definition of this often-contested concept. The first component of legitimacy is legality, or the state’s exercise of power according to established and consistent laws, rules, and customs. The second is justification, which entails ruling in a way that reflects the moral consensus of the governed. If legality refers to the process of rule, justification refers to the content of rule. Legality is insufficient because, as Gilley puts it, “citizens may believe that states are following the rules but may have grave doubts about the rules themselves” (p.6). The third component is consent, which refers to concrete actions that express the citizen’s recognition of the state’s right to rule, and includes acts like voting in elections, reporting crimes to the police, and paying taxes.

Based on this definition, Gilley aims to place a normally abstract concept onto a more positivist and empirical foundation. The book’s biggest and perhaps most
original contribution is a 72-country legitimacy index that incorporates citizen attitude surveys, incidence of violence in political protests, the degree of the state’s reliance on easily-avoidable taxes, and voter turnout. Some results are predictable; others less so. Western Europe dominates the top of the rankings, albeit with some significant variation. Japan comes in at a surprisingly low twenty-seventh place (fourteen spots behind China); Azerbaijan achieves a strikingly high ninth place, on par with the United States. Poor and developing states congregate toward the bottom, for the most part, with Russia coming in dead last, behind Pakistan.

The operationalization of legitimacy, laudable in its scope and ambition, is not without a few flaws. The poorest and weakest states lack the data required for inclusion in the dataset, which biases the index (as Gilley acknowledges) toward stronger, richer, and thus more legitimate countries. The African sub-sample consists of only five states, the Middle East of only seven, making it impossible to generalize the findings across these regions (which does not, nevertheless, stop the author from doing so). The book does not break down the scores into its three subcomponents, even though there is bound to be wide variation within them. Nor does the index track change over time; it is a frozen snapshot of legitimacy in the waning years of the twentieth century, which leads to some anomalies like Russia’s placement at the bottom despite Putin’s sustained popularity and his reassertion of the state since 1999. These are not crucial flaws, however, but reflections of the paucity of empirical data on this subject, and the author is to be commended for this incipient attempt to wrangle the concept into charts and numbers.

The book is not without a few factual errors. For instance, the author confuses Armenia with Albania (p.89). The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict lasted from 1988 to 1994, not 1985 to 2003 (p.159). If there was a “steep decline in international conflict in the early twentieth century” (p.197), I am unaware of it (indeed, the sources Gilley cites for this claim actually refer to the late twentieth century). And by no reasonable definition of the word can the IR scholar Robert Keohane be called an “arch-realist” (p.197).

The latter error points to a larger problem, which is the author’s apparent lack of expertise with international relations theory. The book is strongest in comparative methods and normative political theory; it is on much shakier ground when discussing the interaction of domestic and international legitimacy. For Gilley the two move in parallel; regimes that pursue domestic legitimacy should also be expected to create legitimate international institutions and construct “legitimate relationships with other state and nonstate actors in global politics” (p.195). He does not bring up the much more interesting possibility of tensions and contradictions between the two projects. Strengthening domestic legitimacy through xenophobic nationalism or military/nuclear build-ups may actively undermine the state’s legitimacy in the eyes of its peers, as in the case of, say, North Korea. Nor is there much discussion of how external shocks may affect
domestic legitimacy. The Soviet collapse, for example, undermined the legitimacy of Communist regimes around the world; the Great Depression undermined the legitimacy of liberal democracy and led to a wave of authoritarian transformations in the 1930s. For Gilley, however, the factors shaping legitimacy are all internal, a shortcoming shared by many comparative studies of domestic transformations. Moreover, the book all-too-curtly (and in this reviewer’s view, unconvincingly) dismisses the material factors that shape the process of global legitimation. Without rehashing the hoary debates between realists and constructivists, it is surely not too controversial to claim that international institutions like the World Bank, to use the author’s own example, reflect not only norms and ideas but also the material interests of its constituent members. Here, though, the author lands squarely on the side of normative legitimacy as the prime mover rather than as one of several components that shape the evolution of global institutions.

The book devotes one of its six chapters to a long and detailed analysis of Uganda since 1986. And while the case study is useful for illuminating the mechanics of legitimation within a specific institutional context, the theory would have been better served by a paired comparison of two otherwise similar countries that differ widely in their legitimacy scores. For instance, why does corrupt and undemocratic Azerbaijan rank ninth while its neighbor and fellow ex-Communist state of Armenia rank a lowly seventieth? Why are the Scandinavian countries, which occupy four of the top seven spots, such over-achievers compared to, say, France, which comes in thirty-third? For a book interested in sustained cross-country comparisons, focusing on a single country robs the case study of some of its analytical leverage.

In short, the beginning of the book offers a useful and long-overdue attempt to define and measure the important idea of legitimacy, but the rest of it falters in examining its sources, consequences, and relationship with the international system. People interested in the concept might want to read the entire book; for everyone else the first two chapters will suffice.

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