Introduction: Legitimacy and legitimation of political authorities – why and how?

The subject of this book is what many consider the ‘sick man’ of our time, namely authority. Of course, when we talk of a crisis of authority, or of those problems associated with the exercise of authority, we may be referring to a broad, generic variety of situations. These include the crisis of moral, religious, or intellectual authority, of educational institutions, or of parental authority, among others – all of which, in one way or another, express a common historical process of reflection, since the crisis in question is one that affects, and is shared by, all of the aforesaid forms of authority, and thus renders them all excellent material for analysis.

Nevertheless, this book is going to focus on a specific kind of authority, that is, political authority, which to some degree anticipates and contains all the previously mentioned varieties. It consists of those positions of supremacy and dominance permitting the exercise of political power, and entails the calm, knowing acceptance of the said authority on the part of all of those subject to it who agree to its exercise. As the epigraph to Melville’s Moby Dick, cited at the beginning of the current work, states, subordinates’ behaviour contributes towards ‘authorising authority’.

Political authority, like other forms of authority although perhaps much more so, has been experiencing a serious crisis worldwide, which has patently affected democratic systems for at least 40 years now.

The crisis we are referring to here relates to citizens’ degree of acceptance of those institutions tasked with exercising authority over them. Citizens attribute varying degrees of recognition and validity to such institutions, but overall this recognition and validity is (significantly) in decline, when not indeed plummeting.

This loss of trust in political authority, together with its diminishing credibility, is both serious and all encompassing: it does not only regard one specific aspect of the political system, but the entire system as a whole. It assails institutions, parliaments and, in particular, governments, public administrations and public policies; all of which require authority in order to operate in a coercive manner. However, it also concerns the entire political community, political representation, political parties, the forms of political participation and the political leadership.
It is as if society had gradually lost sight of not only the value of the previously mentioned forms, but also of their sense. In fact, regardless of the specific adhesion that the aforementioned questions may engender, all of these political authorities, in order to be successful electorally or when governing, need to be deemed credible and trustworthy first and foremost. They need to be recognised as capable of performing their function: and here lies the problem, since apart from individual fates and specific trajectories, both political institutions and political actors are characterised by a crisis of recognition such that it offers ample room for analysis and reflection.

So, rather than authority per se, or indeed those vested with such authority, the problem regards above all the ways in which authority is vested with its role, the reasons for, and the sense of, its being and its operation, and the mechanisms underlying its endorsement. These mechanisms are the subject of the present work, and they take the name of processes of legitimation.

The study of the authorisation of authority goes back in history to the time when politics was desacralised, and it has revealed to people the problem of its justification of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. This is the political problem par excellence, namely the dilemma of legitimacy.

The major ideas of political theory have emerged in the wake of this problem, and in the social sciences the construction of the concept of legitimacy and its sources was of course one of the main focal points of Max Weber’s theory; but it has also been the subject of reflection of various other important theorists, such as Berger, Lipset, Beetham, Barker, Pizzorno, and so on.

The reason for this is that legitimacy is a founding principle of the political order and of collective living, and its main aspects shall form the subject of the analysis presented in this volume. Those principal aspects are the causes, the type and the related effects of legitimacy. The concept of legitimacy implies, in fact, a series of consequences that have been formally stated by responding to the same question: what is a legitimate authority and what factors legitimate that authority?

With regard to this question, what has remained implied to a greater degree, both in theory and in research, is the question of how legitimacy is shaped; that is, the question of what processes favour the development, maintenance, transformation or loss of the requirements pertaining to the acceptance of authority, as the contingent context and conditions change.

The concept of legitimation attempts to offer an answer to this question. The processes of legitimation comprise those political dynamics sustaining the initial legitimacy of authority, questioning that legitimacy, or indeed offering reformulations of, or a break from, the said legitimacy and its institutionalisation or de-institutionalisation. In other words, legitimation bestows sense and duration that go beyond the initial legitimacy in question, thus favouring
political change. Legitimation is to legitimacy what dynamic is to static, or film to photography.

For this reason, legitimation appears an extremely topical phenomenon and concept, more so than legitimacy. While legitimacy is experiencing something of a crisis, the processes of legitimation could come to its aid; in fact, it is true that a significant share of legitimacy’s crisis is rooted in the processes of legitimation (and de-legitimation): in their various capacities to lend further sense to an authority, to render that authority acceptable even when its credibility begins to wane and it is no longer recognised as such, and thus begins to lose value or be subject to denigration.

The present volume focuses on both legitimacy and legitimation, but gives greater importance to the latter of the two concepts. It does so with two principal aims in mind: on the one hand, it aims to systematise and organise the concept of legitimation in regard to that of legitimacy, to which it is indissolubly bound; and on the other hand, it aims to offer an analysis of legitimation in terms of its definitions, forms and main dynamics, through its classification and exemplification.

Naturally, compared to the concept of legitimacy, legitimation is an extremely contemporary concept, and for this reason probably still in its infancy compared to the former, which is rooted in modern thought: in other words, legitimation can be seen as something of a dwarf compared to the giant that is legitimacy; however, as a dwarf on a giant’s shoulders, perhaps it offers us the opportunity to see somewhat further than legitimacy itself does.

This volume is a further development of a previous Italian publication of mine entitled *Dinamiche di legittimazione politica* (The Dynamics of Political Legitimation) published in 2019. Compared to this previous work, the present volume is more concise and focuses specifically on the analytical aspects of the question. The present work is concentrated in a mere six chapters. The first chapter sees legitimacy in contemporary democracies as a problem in relation to the various aspects of political authority and to the crisis of legitimacy present in various fields. Chapter 2 then offers an exhaustive overview of the concept of authority and power in social science theory, which in turn enables us to develop, respectively, the concepts of legitimacy (in Chapter 3) and legitimation (in Chapter 4). The final two chapters represent the most original part of the work, as they propose a separate typology of the dynamics of legitimation (Chapter 5), accompanied by a series of examples and contexts; together with a concluding chapter focused on the politics of legitimation, which comes full circle and offers a number of analytical ideas to be reflected on and for teaching purposes.