



Legitimacy Defined by Others

Community's Problem of Externally "Lacking" Legitimacy

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Why is it that community is never seen as expert? Outsiders, those in power, do not view them as legitimate actors of governance.

“Environmental governance implies creation of novel interdependencies among actors and actions, and this innovation and diversity presents challenges. One of these challenges is the maintenance of legitimacy (Kraft & Wolf 2016).” Legitimacy is not just a one trick pony with one definition; indeed, it comes in many forms and serves different masters for different purposes, but in the end legitimacy’s primary function is to communicate the existence of power. Legitimacy is power that is approved of and accepted. The state has inherent legitimacy and power, the market rewards its winners with financial gains that grant them legitimacy and power; community, however, derives its legitimacy from its people which does not have the same connotation of power that is traditionally endowed to a legitimate institution.

Community is just as complex a concept in governance studies as legitimacy is, and weaving the two together is something academics are still debating. Community and the legitimacy within and how that internal legitimacy is perceived by the outside world is not necessarily aligned, which complicated analysis further. As we learned from Lemos and Argawal, community is not a homogenously thinking group; many ideas exist within these groups and also within the individuals in the community. I argue that while there might be three types of legitimacy (inherent in government, from the people, and from success in the market) these are not viewed equally. There is a (white) hegemonic idea of what is legitimate – attending an accredited institution of higher education such as Cornell creates legitimacy in the person’s ideas, for example. There is a large underlying socio-cultural problem with community legitimacy, which most likely stems from institutionalized racism and exclusionary practices of the world outside of the community. We see it as such, at least to this writer, because when we speak of community governance what we usually imply is marginalized communities fighting the status quo – we see it in land rights, food equity, housing practices, and social justice more broadly...which means we see it in the fundamental functioning of the American society and the globalized society that in built on the foundation of white supremacy just as the culture of the United States is built on the same exclusionary and dominating practices.

Community compared to traditional institutions

The strongest discrepancy of community legitimacy is that the community sees legitimacy in themselves, but outsiders do not seem the same equivalent legitimacy. These individuals and groups live in the socio-political and physical environment that is being discussed but their ability to govern themselves or manage their resources seems to continuously be questioned by the outside world. “The poor conservation outcomes that followed decades of intrusive resource management strategies and planned development have forced policy makers and scholars to reconsider the role of community in resource use and conservation. In a break from previous work on development which considered communities a hindrance to progressive social change, current writings champion the role of community in bringing about decentralization, meaningful participation, and conservation (Agrawal & Gibson 1999).” We can see this manifesting in new hybrid

planning practices like the ones we see in Adirondack Park where there is a combination of landownership and use that preserves a delicately balanced harmony that preserves the land as well as the livelihoods of the community. While communities may be innovating, they will still have to prove their success to receive outside support of their legitimacy, just at the Adirondack arrangement has and is still proving itself. Time will tell if these success stories remain effective.

Community as an equal to state and market

Community does not conform nicely to the ideas and ways we measure legitimacy in markets or government – with each community being vibrantly different, it is difficult for the lay person so see similarities other than marginalization, poverty, and race.

“Emerging forms of environmental governance that have become increasingly popular since the mid-1990s rely, on the one hand, on partnerships and, on the other hand, on the mobilization of individual incentives characteristic of market-based instruments of environmental regulation. Because they seek to gain the willing participation of a range of actors who would be subject to their regulatory effects, they are viewed by many observers as being amenable to more efficient implementation (Lemos Agrawal 2006).” A deeper dive would be needs to flush out more nuanced governance mechanism that foster legitimacy for a community. Instead, the dominant culture in the United States is more so satisfied with dismissing community representatives as non-experts or providing these representatives with a token seat at the table instead of equally valuing them in the negotiation and indeed also in the way the dominant group literally polices those group that are different and nonconforming of the expected social norms and values. The government of the United States of America has literally used its power to crush Native American opposition, African-American protesting, and caged Hispanic migrants – I wouldn't trust the government either if it behaved this way, but none of this seems to be enough to undermine the legitimacy of the US Government; instead talking heads on television find other ways of discrediting the minority groups and undermining the legitimacy of anyone who contradicts the white hegemonic norm of “(White) America First.”

In cases where the state is no ally to community, then perhaps the private sector might offer a valuable partnership or at least an answer to the power wielded by the government. “A partnership with private actors may also appear attractive to civil society actors and communities historically strapped for funding. However, a number of observers of changing environmental governance have raised concerns about the degree to which increasing recourse to market actors and processes undermines social goals related to higher levels of democratic participation, creates problems of unequal access to resources, and raises the specter of lack of accountability (Lemos Agrawal 2006).”

Communities are standing their ground more and more, but there is still a lot of progress needed before external forces fear a community walking away from a deal. Only through experimental arrangements will communities find the mix of power and dynamics that will strengthen their own power and legitimacy.

Hybridity – community managed resources and the future.

Institutional Hybridity is an analytic concept that we can use to make sense of the arrangements we see and want to see. It is also a description of the world we live in. By realizing that synergy and complimentary partnerships can exist between government and market and community to achieve efficiency and effectiveness we can begin seeing hybridity as a possible path to a more inclusive and interconnected future of environmental governance. "Community must be examined in the context of development and conservation by focusing on the multiple interests and actors within communities, on how these actors influence decision-making, and on the internal and external institutions that shape the decision-making process. A focus on institutions rather than "community" is likely to be more fruitful for those interested in community-based natural resource management (Agrawal & Gibson 1999)," and therefore more fruitful for environmental governance as a whole. Hybridity allows us to combine markets, government, and community in new and creative ways.

Radical ideas are needed to move governance forward, as governance is usually linked to the government, it is slower to evolve. Legitimacy likewise takes time to develop. There are so many changes emerging in the field of governance in general and so many new partnerships to analyze in environmental governance. In just this course alone we have been visited by financial experts, coalition builders, and market wielders that all want to change the way we traditionally govern and use the environment. The common thread in these guest lectures has been hybridity. Each speaker saw something that was no longer functional and decided to change the traditional ways of doing business. Institutional hybridity is proving to be an equalizer for communities. If the community does not like the private sector actor, then they can reach out to the government and vice versa. In this way, community is starting to create its own active legitimacy, where the community is leveraging the legitimacy of the people, to force change by pitting market and government against each other via their right to exclude. Vatn writes that "Governance is to prioritize which values and interest to protect... someone wins while others lose (Vatn 2015)," but I am skeptical of this. To me, if we do not find a way to embrace community as a legitimate governance model and a legitimate governance actor then we cannot possibly hope to manage ecosystem services, social justice, or even dwindling natural resources in our towns and neighborhoods without the help of the people that live in these communities. "An ethical concern for democratic participation and more equitable outcomes in environmental governance is a welcome development when environmental governance mechanisms emphasize collaboration for greater efficiency. An exclusive focus on greater efficiency in emerging efforts at environmental governance, especially where natural resources are concerned, may yield the unanticipated outcome of increasing modification of nature (Lemos Agrawal 2006)." It is imperative for the survival of the greater planet that we begin legitimately supporting community as the dominant and most viable actor in the coming climate crisis for we do not know how technology will help or hinder us, markets could fail; we simply do not know what will happen as we consume the resources of our finite planet at an alarming rate. Strength

through community and legitimate governance can create the arena we need for a more sustainable and cohesive hybrid system.

Acknowledgement

This author acknowledges first and foremost that she is White and grew up affluent, in civil war heritage areas in Virginia and in Louisiana. Many of the ideas for this document came from her viewing and, unfortunately, participating in exclusionary practices during her time of ignorance. It is imperative that White America reflect on their sense of fear, where does it come from? Why is fear so prominent in our discourse? Understanding that Whiteness can be and often is synonymous with oppression is vital to understanding our own journey as individuals and as a part of the evolution of the culture that we must accept that we belong to. Our silence is our seal of approval of the status quo. We must continue to practice self-interrogation to discover and confront the biases that remain from generational and cultural learning. It is time to break cycles. It is a hard road, but it is the right road. Thank you to my White friends who helped show me that I am my own protagonist, in control of my story.

To my friends of color, my LGBTQA+ community, THANK YOU! Without your bravery, your expert articulation, and your willingness to share (more) knowledge with me, this awakening would never have happened. I am grateful to so many people who challenged me, who taught me truth, and who helped me learn how to create authentic space for others to foster equitable exchanges or exchanges in which I gave more. Their generosity stimulated social change that in turn elicited a deeper change within me. I will be forever grateful for the time invested in helping me grow into someone who is willing to stand for planetary justice and a brighter, more equitable future.

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