

Module 3: Society and Culture: Resources and Legitimation of Knowledge

Lecture 15

Social Legitimation: Meanings, Interests, Values and the Modern State

Legitimation is the act of providing legitimacy. It refers to the process whereby an act, process or ideology becomes legitimate by its attachment to norms and values in a specific social setting. It is the process of making something acceptable and normative to a group or audience.

Science is a social institution about which there is a great deal of misunderstanding, even among those who are part of it. We think that science is an institution, a set of methods, a set of people, a great body of knowledge that we call scientific, is somehow apart from the forces that rule our everyday lives and that govern the structure of our society. We think science is objective. Science has brought us all kinds of good things. It has tremendously increased the production of food. It has increased our life expectancy from a mere 40 years at the beginning of the 20th century to around 65 in India. It has put people on the moon and made it possible to sit at home and watch the world go by.

At the same time, science, like other productive activities, like the state, the family, sport, is a social institution completely integrated into and influenced by the structure of all our other social institutions. The problems that science deals with, the ideas that it uses in investigating those problems, even the so-called scientific results that come out of scientific investigation, are all deeply influenced by predispositions that derive from the society in which we live. Scientists do not begin life as scientists, after all, but as social beings immersed in a family, a state, a productive structure, and they view nature through a lens that has been molded by their social experience.

Above that personal level of perception, science is moulded by society because it is a human productive activity that takes time and money, and so is guided by and directed by those forces in the world that have control over money and time. Science uses commodities and is part of the process of commodity production. Science uses money. People earn their living by science, and as a consequence the dominant social and economic forces in society determine to a large extent what science does and how it does it. More than that, those forces have the power to appropriate from science ideas that are particularly suited to the maintenance and continued prosperity of the social structures of which they are a part. So other social institutions have an input into science both in what is done and how it is thought about, and they take from science concepts and ideas that then support their institutions and make them seem legitimate and natural. It is this dual process--on the one hand, of the social influence and control of what scientists do and say, and, on the other hand, the use of what

scientists do and say to further support the institutions of society--that is meant when we speak of science as ideology.

Science serves two functions:

- (a) First, it provides us with new ways of manipulating the material world by producing a set of techniques, practices, and inventions by which new things are produced and by which the quality of our lives is changed. These are the aspects of science to which scientists appeal when they try to get money from governments or when they appear on the front pages of newspapers in their public relations efforts to maintain their prosperity. We read repeatedly about how "science has discovered" something, but more often than not those announcements are hedged with qualifiers. Biologists discover "evidence for" genes that "may, one day" lead to "a possible" cure for cancer. While their over-optimistic reports breed a certain cynicism, it is nevertheless true that scientists do actually change the way we confront the material world.
- (b) The second function of science, which is sometimes independent and sometimes closely related to the first, is the function of explanation. But if scientists are not actually changing the material mode of our existence, they are constantly explaining why things are the way they are. It is often said that these theories about the world must be produced in order, ultimately, to change the world through practice. After all, how can we cure cancer unless we understand what causes cancer? How can we increase food production unless we understand the laws of genetics and plant and animal nutrition?

Consider one of the most famous examples of scientific agricultural change: the introduction of hybrid corn all over the world. Hybrid corn is said to be one of the great triumphs of modern genetics in action, helping to feed people and increase their well-being. Yet the development of hybrid corn and, indeed, almost all plant and animal breeding as it is actually practised has been carried out in a way that is completely independent of any scientific theory. Indeed, a great deal of plant and animal breeding has been done in a way indistinguishable from the methods of past centuries before anyone had ever heard of genetics.

The same is true for our attempts to cope with killers like cancer and heart disease. Most cures for cancer involve either removing the growing tumor or destroying it with powerful radiation or chemicals. Virtually none of this progress in cancer therapy has occurred because of a deep understanding of the elementary processes of cell growth and development, although nearly all cancer research, above the purely clinical level, is devoted precisely to understanding the most intimate details of cell biology. Medicine remains, despite all the talk of scientific medicine, essentially an empirical process in which one does what works.

Let us consider the relationship between scientific biology and changes in life expectancy. It is not at all clear that a correct understanding of how the world works is basic to a successful manipulation of the world. But explanations of how the world

really works serve another purpose, one in which there has been a remarkable success, irrespective of the practical truth of scientific claims. The purpose is that of legitimation.

Regardless of one's political view, everyone must agree that we live in a world in which psychic and material welfare is very unevenly distributed. There are rich people and poor people, sick people and healthy people, people who have control over the conditions of their own lives, work, and time (like professors who are invited to give lectures on the radio and turn them into books) and those who have their tasks assigned to them, who are overseen, who have little or no control over any psychic or material aspect of their lives. There are rich countries and poor countries. Some races dominate others. Men and women have very unequal social and material power.

Different forms of inequality of status, wealth, health, and power have been characteristic of every known society. That means that in every known society there has been some form of struggle between those who have and those who have not, between those with social power and those deprived of it. The uprising of Blacks in America in the 1960s and 1970s, in which there was vast destruction of property and a radical redistribution of consumer goods, and the armed struggle of Mohawks in Canada to prevent the encroachment of commercial and state power on their lands, are only the most recent events in a long history of violent confrontations between those with status, wealth, and power and those without. Repeated peasant uprisings in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries resulted in the wholesale destruction of crops and buildings and the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. The deeds of peasant rebels like Pugachev and Stenka Razin live in song and story. In the United States just after independence from Britain, the farmers of western Massachusetts, led by Daniel Shays and still in possession of their muskets, occupied the general courts to prevent bankers from obtaining judgments to confiscate farmers' property for debt. The bankers in Boston succeeded in getting Continental troops to put down this rebellion, but all at the cost of considerable social upheaval. It is obviously in the interest of those who have power in society to prevent such violent and destructive conflicts, even if, with the police power of the state, they are sure to win.

As such struggles occur, institutions are created whose function is to forestall violent struggle by convincing people that the society in which they live is just and fair, or if not just and fair then inevitable, and that it is quite useless to resort to violence. These are the institutions of social legitimation. They are just as much a part of social struggle as the rick-burnings and machinery destruction of the Captain Swing riots in Britain in the nineteenth century. But they use very different weapons -- ideological weapons. The battleground is in people's heads, and if the battle is won on that ground then the peace and tranquility of society are guaranteed.

For almost the entire history of European society since the empire of Charlemagne, the chief institution of social legitimation was the Christian Church. It was by the grace of God that each person had an appointed place in society. Kings ruled *Dei gratia*. Occasionally divine grace could be conferred on a commoner who was

ennobled, and grace could be removed. Grace was removed from King Charles I, as Cromwell noted, and the proof was Charles's severed head. Even the most revolutionary of religious leaders pressed the claims of legitimacy for the sake of order. Martin Luther enjoined his flock to obey their lords, and in his famous sermon on marriage he asserted that justice was made for the sake of peace and not peace for the sake of justice. Peace is the ultimate social good, and justice is important only if it subserves peace.

For an institution to explain the world so as to make the world legitimate, it must possess several features. First, the institution as a whole must appear to derive from sources outside of ordinary human social struggle. It must not seem to be the creation, of political, economic, or social forces, but to descend into society from a supra-human source. Second, the ideas, pronouncements, rules, and results of the institution's activity must have validity and a transcendent truth that goes beyond any possibility of human compromise or human error. Its explanations and pronouncements must seem to be true in an absolute sense and to derive somehow from an absolute source. They must be true for all time and all place. And finally, the institution must have a certain mystical and veiled quality so that its innermost operation is not completely transparent to everyone. It must have an esoteric language, which needs to be explained to the ordinary person by those who are especially knowledgeable and who can intervene between everyday life and mysterious sources of understanding and knowledge.

In the next lecture, we shall discuss how social legitimation in science through its methodology.