

[A Neurophilosophy of Legitimacy in National and Global Politics](#)

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This is the second post in a short-term series by Prof Nayef Al-Rodhan titled “Neurophilosophy of Governance, Power and Transformative Innovations.” This series provides neurophilosophical perspectives and multi-disciplinary analyses on topics related to power and political institutions, as well as on a series of contemporary transformative technologies and their disruptive nature. The goal is to inspire innovative intellectual reflections and to advance novel policy considerations. You can read the last post in the series [here](#).

Political legitimacy is one of the most powerful concepts in political theory and foundational to the theory of the state. However, while the importance of legitimacy in domestic and global settings is taken for granted, its underpinnings continue to be controversial.

Political scientists often begin from a pragmatic understanding of legitimacy, noting the effects of its presence or absence in international organizations (IOs), for example, or the mechanisms by which legitimacy is gained and lost at the level of domestic governance, and subsequently how states whose legitimacy is waxing or waning tend to fare.

Political philosophers alternatively tend to investigate the normative content to legitimacy, focusing upon definitional issues, justifications for the attribution (or denial) of legitimacy in particular cases, or which entities must be entitled to legitimacy.

These approaches offer a wealth of useful insights but most often fail to take advantage of contemporary neuroscientific research that might usefully inform their theories. Indeed, when one looks more closely at discussions of legitimacy it becomes apparent that individual and mass neuro-psychology and emotional states—directly traceable to neuro-cellular and neuro-chemical underpinnings—are essential with respect to legitimacy.

These considerations gesture toward the conceptual importance of a neuro-philosophy of legitimacy that anchors our understanding of legitimacy in a scientifically grounded understanding of human nature. More pragmatically and urgently, however, our geopolitical context poses challenges to the legitimacy of various national governments as well as Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs). A better

grasp of fundamental neuroscientific mechanisms underlying it can provide insight into policies and practices that sustain legitimacy, as it is essential to the functioning of our most important institutions.

Legitimacy in Practice

A useful [definition of legitimacy](#) is provided by Ian Hurd, which highlights the understanding that legitimacy is a consequence of intersubjectivity and therefore has direct reference to neuro-psychological states. Legitimacy on this account consists in the belief that a rule ought to be followed or a purported authority ought to be obeyed. Legitimacy is, therefore, also '*relational* between actor and institution, and defined by the actor's *perception* of the institution'. This characterization harmonizes with familiar historical examples of regimes gradually losing legitimacy as a consequence of (perceived) economic incompetence, mistreatment of citizens, failures of representation. The fall of the communist bloc, and the 1989 revolutions sweeping across Central and Eastern Europe, can be largely explained by a definitive loss of legitimacy for governments that no longer delivered essential public goods. In the ensuing three decades since then, several waves of popular movements around the world were similarly motivated by, or aggravated by, a loss of legitimacy for the state or ruling elites.

Acknowledging important differences in the individual cases, a commonality among such popular movements is the collective dissatisfaction of citizens with their leadership, rising to a threshold taken to warrant demands for dramatic political change.

Furthermore, the case of the events surrounding the so-called Arab Spring is also evocative for another reason, highlighting the complex interplay between domestic and international politics, as well as the artificiality of these traditionally distinct domains (distinct in terms of the academic disciplines that have addressed them). Among the grievances shared by many protesters then was the general frustration with foreign meddling in their domestic affairs (before or during the protests), or the complicity between their governments and outside powers.

These events also gave further impetus to the political study of network effects, and particularly their importance as a potential locus of power largely outside the state apparatus. While a literature investigating phenomena like [Transnational Advocacy Networks \(TANs\)](#) has existed for over two decades, the development of technology radically changed the nature and magnitude of networking and the formation of movements.

Technological developments and instant connectivity over the past decades exposed the importance of legitimacy in politics, yet these developments by themselves did not explain the deeper philosophical significance of legitimacy in relation to human nature. An appeal to neuro-chemistry, and a neuro-philosophical account of legitimacy, expanded upon below, is critical in understanding legitimacy as a complex sociological and political concept.

The Role of Neurochemistry and a Neuro-philosophy of Human Nature

I have previously elaborated upon the basic condition of human nature in terms of [emotional amoral egoism](#). This explanation of human nature informed by insights into the human brain illustrates that our minimal evolutionary inheritance provides us with a suite of survival instincts and is devoid of any inherent moral concepts.

It also, however, acknowledges the fundamental role of our emotions in reacting to circumstances, given the direct mediation of our emotions by neurochemistry. This view equally amends the classical view of John Locke who described human beings as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate. While Locke was entirely justified in his push toward parsimony and denying inborn moral concepts, my account of a [predisposed tabula rasa](#) more accurately acknowledges our drive —widely shared among living beings— to preserve and promote our own survival and flourishing. We are, therefore, *predisposed* in one fundamental sense, and that is in our pursuit of survival and actions that maximize our chances of survival. It follows from this description both that human beings have egoist tendencies (the pursuit of survival is a basic form of egoism) but also that our emotionality allows for social valuing and the recognition of benefits to group membership, in part for good evolutionary reasons. Philosopher [John Searle](#) concluded on this last point, “The selectional advantage of cooperative behavior is, I trust obvious. Inclusive fitness is increased by cooperating with conspecifics.”

These basic features in our biological nature speak directly to the possibility of cooperative arrangements, as well as the criteria for setting up such arrangements. It is crucial to recognize, however, that our biologically inherited predispositions, and our emotionality are bound to inform (at least part of) our attribution of legitimacy.

At both the individual and social levels attributing legitimacy can be undermined by various forms of perceived threat or even uncertainty. Given our neurochemical makeup, a basic condition for the breach of legitimacy is related to threats to survival. However, before spiraling down to that critical point, legitimacy is also diminished or lost, or conversely, gained in correlation to other factors.

In addition to the provision of security, governance oriented towards human dignity needs is essential to the preservation of legitimacy. I define [dignity](#) beyond minimalist understandings of ‘lack of humiliation’, as a more comprehensive set of critical needs, which are: *reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness* (discussed at length in a [previous post](#)). These dignity needs are tightly linked to the *emotional, amoral* and *egoistic* features of human nature, and each of these fundamental human traits comes with corresponding dignity needs.

Dignity needs are instrumental for stable conceptions of self-worth, placing them very close to our neuro-chemically mediated emotional core. When these needs are upended or denied, a populace begins to lose faith in leadership (or analogously, in international organizations). If larger institutional frameworks or political offices lose legitimacy, abridged forms of legitimacy are likely to emerge, becoming increasingly defined in exclusionary terms, like those symptomatic of extreme nationalism, whereby ‘outsiders’ are scapegoated for any and all domestic imperfections. At the limit, “legitimacy” can become reduced to slim majority of ‘true believers’ who dismiss all potential criticism of their government out of hand, and believe the tragically familiar narrative that it is a hostile world, with hostile barbarians at the gate, and that only their government preserves them from final annihilation.

More optimistically, our deep-going emotionality potentially equips us for empathy and the capacity to recognize the benefits of cooperation. Yet the willingness to increase one’s vulnerability by providing an opening to those ‘outside the tribe’ is entirely dependent on dignity needs being met in the first place.

National versus Global Legitimacy

While I have gestured to the complex interplay between national and global politics, it would be misleading to characterize the forms legitimacy takes in each of these domains as identical.

As a first observation, the legitimacy of national politics answers to a more narrowly circumscribed set of interests. Recalling [Benedict Anderson's seminal work on nations](#), these entities are necessarily limited in the sense that by definition they include some and exclude others; in the language of evolutionary neuropsychology, nations demarcate [in-groups and out-groups](#), first collectively imagining and then institutionalizing them.

As [a number of scholars](#) in related fields have argued, these facts set up ethical conditions in which the treatment of those understood to possess membership in one's group will naturally diverge from the treatment of outsiders, unless a long process of cultural education becomes ingrained. Consequently, when it comes to national legitimacy, this implies that constituents must believe their unique national interests are diligently pursued; nearby looms all the familiar dangers of rabid nationalism which subscribes to zero-sum thinking, wherein not merely the promotion of one's own nation is desirable but so is the denigration of others.

Global politics, as manifested in Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) like the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions, for example, must appeal to a more diverse constituency, and are tasked with a higher level of coordination problem-solving.

The legitimacy of such global actors thus depends to a greater degree not only on their efficiency, but significantly upon the perception that they are representative in relevant ways. The difficulties of sustaining this legitimacy can be gleaned by considering some of the suggested [reforms of the UNSC](#), and the challenges represented therein. Another critical element for international legitimacy is the double standard applied by the UNSC, including the highly selective use (and misuse) of the veto system. If the veto system or its rules cannot be modified or abolished, then there must be at least some commitment by the five permanent members to waive their veto right in cases of injustices and large scale violations such as foreign occupation, genocide, ethnic cleansing, human rights abuses, breaking of international law.

In brief, proposed additions to the permanent membership of the Security Council have been shown almost universally to benefit some, while harming others. Additionally, the metrics both for efficiency and representation are unlikely to be agreed upon by candidate countries.

To illustrate the problem of representation more concretely, one suggested measure to ensure a more "representative" nature of the UNSC permanent membership has been to take GDP into account, so that Japan and Germany became likely add-ons. Alternatively, inattention to population distribution might be thought the most egregious oversight of current arrangements, in which case India—not only the 2nd most populous country in the world but the largest democracy by far—should be thought a prime contender. Then there are questions about historical exclusion, emphasizing, for example, that not a single African or South American country enjoys such representation, thus reinforcing largely outmoded conceptions of the "Global North" and "Global South" (in this particular case tracking actual geography, as well as development). In short, while UNSC reform undoubtedly remains desirable, executing such reforms in effective ways has proven contentious and challenging.

Neuro-philosophy: lessons for national and international legitimacy

Despite the complicated nature of national legitimacy (along with its potential complicity with nationalism) and difficulties of construing international organizations in ways that buttress their legitimacy, a neuro-philosophical perspective recommends some clear palliatives.

First, given the right background conditions, our neurochemically-mediated emotions promote social cohesion and cooperative behavior. The critical limit is of course set in terms of those who we take to be our “conspecifics,” which is often not an easy answer for us as human beings living in highly complex social and cultural settings —like the boundaries of nations.

This requires, in addition to the careful provision of dignity needs discussed above, specific programs of historical and cultural education which soften, rather than intensify perceived groupings and cultural boundaries. As discussed in a [previous post](#), education focused on transcultural history emphasizes deeper historical connections, which were frequently cut from contemporary narratives that tend to focus on divisions reified by nation-states or belonging to different ‘civilizations’. This is largely the case, for instance, for the relations between the West and the Arab-Islamic world, which shared centuries of exchanges and mutual borrowings – which contributed, among others, to Europe’s rise and era of scientific progress during the [‘Enlightenment’](#).

With a more accurate account of history, and more transcultural understanding, domestic legitimacy would – hopefully – rely on fewer exclusionary practices and reinforcement of divisions.

A second upshot requires thinking somewhat more carefully about the relation between emotions and rationality. As I have [discussed previously](#) (and [elsewhere](#)) and as has been confirmed by a number of [scholars](#), the unchallenged position long given to rationality has significantly overestimated both its influence and its primacy; not only are our purported rational decisions shot through with emotional influence, “rationality” is often supplied as a post-hoc justification for the initial impetus supplied by the emotions.

Equally important, some of our most fundamental concepts invoked in analyzing the world partake of both simultaneously. The rational demand for consistency, for treating like cases alike, is inextricable from the emotional perception of fairness. Throughout the latter-half of the 1970s, superpowers of the two dominant geopolitical blocs condemned and criticized each other for committing similar ills, the US condemning Soviet violations of sovereignty in Cambodia (for backing the Vietnamese invasion), while largely tolerating the ongoing massacres of the Khmer Rouge, and supporting the latter maintaining their seat in the UN.

The appeal to a self-selected standard of respect for sovereignty in the Soviet case, but not in others rightly angered [the international community](#) in its inconsistency and unfairness, significantly undermining the legitimacy of the US as an actor in the international system. To be sure, the US is not singular in lack of consistency on the global arena and similar examples could easily be invoked.

The 21st century will, to an ever-greater degree, continue to create conditions in which the legitimacy of both national and global politics is understood in terms of fairness, reinforcing the importance of policymaking that acknowledges its ultimately emotional and neurochemical underpinnings. It is for that reason that states must be strongly concerned with the kind of power they want to project in the international arena. Previous concepts of “hard”, “soft”, or “smart” power leave the question of

legitimacy insufficiently – or superficially – addressed. The only sustainable form of power in the 21st century is *just power*. While Machiavellian practices cannot be expected to vanish completely, it is increasingly evident that meaningful and enduring leadership in the 21st century must be accompanied by responsible behavior and conduct that is largely perceived as ‘just’ and in respect of international law.



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