



# Governing the Cairngorms National Park – Revisiting the neglected concept of authority



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## ABSTRACT

This paper draws attention to the neglected sociological concept of authority, arguing that fresh attention to authority, and its relationship with legitimacy, is needed to extend our understanding of the practices and outcomes of rural governance. However, the foundational theory of authority needs updating to recognise the multiple modes of authority and attention should be paid to how they are enacted, by whom and in what circumstances. The paper updates debates on whether there is a missing category beyond Weber's traditional tripartite distinction between traditional, charismatic and legal-rational authority. The paper uses empirical evidence from a five year ethnographic study of the development and implementation of a strategic National Park Plan to explore what is meant by an 'enabling Authority' and the difficulties experienced. The results suggest that a portfolio of modes of legitimate authority are enacted, drawing attention to how authority and legitimacy are more complex and hybrid than the foundational theory suggests. The tensions in utilising multiple sources of authority speak to wider discussions about rural governance of multi-functional spaces and places.

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## 1. Introduction

Governance is a central theme for rural development, as illustrated by the growing back catalogue of papers looking at the issue in this journal. The interest in governance reflects a perennial interest in how power is exercised and resisted in particular spaces and places. Governance itself is a response to crises of legitimacy in the State (Hackett, 2013; McDonald et al., 2013; Bocher, 2008; Connelly et al., 2006; Shucksmith, 2010), and considers how decisions are made and implemented through complex multi-level and polycentric exchange networks that engage with pre-existing hierarchies of government. In the recent burst of governance scholarship, researchers drew attention to the irony of fixing crises of State legitimacy through opaque, complex networks of public, private and 3rd sector interests, generating new democratic deficits and disrupting traditional sources of legitimacy. This literature explored how to balance inclusion with delivery; transparency with the practice of poly-centric decision making; and mediating contested claims to legitimacy (e.g. Aarsaether et al., 2011;

Goodwin, 1998; Griffin, 2012; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2007; Hodge, 2007; Kelly, 2012; Pan, 2012; Penker, 2009; and Pierre, 2000).

This paper draws attention to a surprising silence in this discussion – the lack of attention to the sociological concept of authority. If, as Sikor and Lund (2009, following Scharpf, 1998) argue, authority is power that is defined as legitimate, surely rural sociologists should be intrigued by authority in contemporary governance? Very few scholars seem to define authority, or consider the practices and sites of authority, yet it is often referred to when discussing the way in which governance processes unfold. For example, Bennett et al. (2013); Verbrugge et al. (2015) and Ojha et al. (2014) offer tantalising glimpses of Weberian authority types but do not develop or critique these categories. Therefore, we agree with recent authors (e.g. Hackett, 2013; Boelens et al., 2015; Jeffrey et al., 2015) that a renewed focus on the ideas of authority and legitimacy is required.

This paper focuses on the fact that the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) has self-identified as an 'enabling Authority' – a State organisation that delivers its remit through facilitating others to act. This speaks to the recent interest in the 'enabling' State (Shucksmith, 2010). However, we are interested not just in the actions of the Authority (organisation); but also how they sustain their authority (ability to direct actions of others). The notion of both enabling others and retaining authority within a complex

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multi-level governance structure speaks to the 'rights' and 'responsibilities' to coordinate, integrate and/or dictate the actions of other actors. Therefore, this paper presents a brief review of how the concept of authority is discussed in literature; putting this in the context of theories of governance, governmentality and legitimacy. This gives rise to the following research questions for the paper:

- How is authority enacted by the Cairngorms National Park Authority?
- Is there analytical value in the neglected concept of authority?

The paper then introduces the case study and methodology for data collection and analysis before presenting the results. The implications of the results, including the answers to the above questions, are then discussed before a summary of main findings and avenues for further research are presented in the conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical context

We believe the concept of authority is interesting as it provides a new perspective for ongoing debates regarding the role of the State in governance processes. Authority (with the uppercase 'A') is a formal title for an organisation given legal dominion over certain geographic areas or civic functions. These legal powers confer upon them the authority (with the lowercase 'a') to act. This two-fold use of the term draws attention to the link between authority and government as it is government who designate Authorities. However, the exercise of authority is often mediated through governance structures and processes involving both the State and non-State actors (Pierre, 2000). Thus, our exploration of authority needs to be set in the context of governance processes and structures, which are multi-level, poly-centric, complex and often opaque (e.g. Kallis et al., 2009).

An on-going paradox is the role of Government within a governance process; and how State authority is mediated by the multiple interests of the other actors in the governance network. Some have argued that governance processes may result in the State ceding power, or at least control, and becoming more adaptive and resilient rather than trying to command and control our modern societies in the era of 'liquid modernity' (Baumann, 2000). However, political theorists have highlighted the ongoing role of the State in governance processes (e.g. Jessop, 2015; Suchman, 1995) leading to debates regarding different perspectives on State regulation theory. Recently, some authors have straddled the divide between those taking a structuralist perspective and those more interested in a relational perspective and brought these debates into the rural domain (Pemberton and Goodwin, 2010). These ideas require us to consider the micro-processes and sites by which authority is produced and sustained when the State is not the sole source of legitimacy (Welch, 2002; Bennett et al., 2013).

The word authority means the 'power or right to enforce obedience' or 'personal influence based on qualifications' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1978:47). In this paper, we focus on the sociological concept of authority as linked to the concepts of power and legitimacy – in other words, when an individual or organisation has a socially sanctioned right to influence another's actions; and people obey as they believe they should (Bruce and Yearley, 2009). Thus, authority can be seen as a form of institutionalised power; categorising individuals into the position of dominance or subjection (Dahrendorf, 1959:165). Post-structural theories of power update the language of domination, such as Allen's (2003) definition of authority. This is remarkably similar to Dahrendorf in that authority is seen as a form of power 'over' but updated as authority has to be conceded by those governed, not imposed.

Weber (1991, 1968) highlights three forms of legitimate authority. Firstly, traditional authority, which draws on long-established customs and practices passed through generations; often aligned with a sacred creation story that confers authority on a particular family or group. Secondly, charismatic authority, where the sheer force of personality and/or the appeal of their narrative is sufficient to override traditional authority. This phase is considered temporary as it unsettles traditional authority but generally facilitates a transition to the third type. Finally, rational-legal authority, which characterises most modern capitalist democracies, draws attention to the fact that Governmental authority is established and maintained through a network of formal laws and policies, enacted by State Authorities.

Initially, rational-legal authority seemed most relevant to our case study. Some institutional researchers have critiqued its over-emphasis on formal institutions, highlighting the interplay of formal laws with informal practices in the process of conferring legitimacy (Hodgson, 2006:11). As such, norms, tradition and culture start to creep into the process of sustaining rational-legal authority. These institutional critiques mirror the post-structural notions of power as an enacted relationship, rather than a given capacity to the powerful (Foucault, 1982; Purdy, 2012). If power can be influenced by personal as well as structural characteristics; charisma may actually sustain not pre-date rational-legal authority. In other words, recent developments in social theory start to question the boundaries between each type; suggesting there may be new and hybrid forms of legitimate authority.

More recently, there have been various attempts to expand Weber's categories, including Willer (1967) and Spencer (1970) who introduce the category of 'ideological' and 'value-rational' accordingly. These papers identify a 'missing' type of legitimate authority. This missing type relates to the Durkheimian idea of 'moral authority'; whereby the State has a role in providing a moral regulating framework, to engender collective cohesion (Giddens, 1995). Thus, there is a 'missing' type of authority from Weber's types. It is a type of authority that is premised on normative foundations; using shared social agreement on what 'ought to be' to gain symbolic resources to direct or order actions by others. Willer's (1967) idea of ideological authority is intriguing as it resonates with the more recent idea of governmentality (see below). Willer argues that ideological authority is legitimated by agreement with the norms underpinning the ideology rather than the laws in the case of rational-legal authority. Spencer (1970) also draws attention to norms and values in his argument that the fourth type of authority should be called value-rational. He argues that such authority stems not from laws, but from 'extra-legal absolute values'<sup>2</sup> (1970:131).

Bocher (2008) and Boelens et al. (2015) also draw attention to the fact that authority requires the legitimate right to evoke and enforce both legal and moral standards. As already implied, authority is co-constituted with legitimacy, as 'legitimacy presupposes authority' (Bekkers and Edwards, 2007:37; see also Biermann and Gupta, 2011). As with authority, legitimacy is often used in governance studies but it still proves difficult to define (Connelly et al., 2006; Jeffrey et al., 2015). Many definitions follow Morris' (1998) distinction between legitimation based on laws and rules or on moral basis. Legal legitimacy has also been labelled 'formal', and moral legitimacy has also been labelled 'social' (e.g. Carter and Scott, 1998). In both legal and moral cases, legitimacy is granted if the outcome of the issue to be legitimised concurs with either the formally or socially defined norms. However, Luhmann

<sup>2</sup> As a post-modern sociologist, I automatically corrected this quote to values, but the original text states 'value'.

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