

The delegitimization of affluence in the eyes of Poles

Looking Down at the Rich?



Professor Bogdan Wojciszke, director of the PAN Institute of Psychology, has authored numerous studies on social perception, social-world beliefs, and responses to system transformation in Poland

BOGDAN WOJCISZKE
 Institute of Psychology, Warsaw
 Polish Academy of Sciences
 bogdan@psychpan.waw.pl

Only a small minority of Poles surveyed believe that the prevailing social order is valid and fair. A clear majority believe that the wealthy must have come into their affluence via dishonest means, at the expense of those who are worse off

For a social system to function effectively, its members must be convinced that it has legitimacy: that material benefits and power are distributed fairly, that those who possess them truly deserve them, that virtue will be rewarded and misdeeds punished. Such a world is safe and predictable – it is obvious what one has to do to improve one’s own fate, and such betterment only comes to those who deserve it. Such a world is easier to govern, since it is more profitable to observe the rules than to break them. Of course, it is also easy to be governed when one does not have to fear arbitrary behavior on the part of those in power.

Western believers in social order...

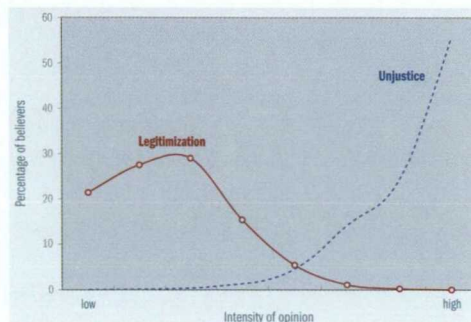
The benefits of a legitimized social order are so great that people strive to believe in the world as a rule-governed place: psychological research on the convictions of citizens in stable and prosperous democracies has shown that they even generate myths to lend legitimacy to the existing order. Men believe that women are less deserving of promotion than women; women (who are indeed promoted more slowly) share the same conviction. More poorly-paid women expect to receive lower salaries for the same work than better-paid men. Numerous American studies, carried out on large samples, have shown not only that better-off Whites believe Blacks to be unintelligent and lazy, but

that Blacks themselves likewise hold such views. Research in Canada has shown that Canadians are eager to compensate an innocent victim for the wrong committed against them, but when that proves impossible they begin to think worse of the victim – believing the victim to be guilty helps to reinstate their faith in the world order.

Observations of this sort encourage researchers to hypothesize that belief in the just world is a “fundamental illusion,” that people are equipped with a universal “ideological motivation” to defend the political and economical status quo and to legitimize the existing social order. Yet are such assertions really of general value? Common observation seems to indicate that Polish society in fact perceives its own world as lacking legitimacy, and generates myths to undermine the existing social order rather than to justify it.

...and Polish disbelievers

In order to test this suspicion, my coworkers (Wiesław Baryła, Aleksandra Cisiak, Artur Mikiewicz) and I devised questionnaires to gauge to what degree people perceive the system as having legitimacy (such assertions as: “Most of the authorities’ actions serve the common good” and “Generally speaking, the political system functions as it should”) and believe in the injustice of the social order (e.g. “People often do not get sufficient credit for good deeds,” “Many misdeeds are never punished” and “Success in life depends more on elbowing your way through, not on doing what is right”). Such questionnaires were



used to test a representative sample of adult residents of Poland (1,100 individuals) in 2004. As the diagram here shows, only 6% of Poles believe the prevailing system in Poland to have legitimacy, with nearly everyone being of the opposite opinion. Beliefs in the injustice of the social world are even more asymmetrical: as many as 56% of Poles are profoundly convinced that it is unjust, with a further 38% moderately holding the same opinion.

However, responses of this sort are only of limited value in gauging the delegitimization of the system, because they may be reflecting thoughtlessly reiterated opinions stereotypical of Polish society (it is well known to be more acceptable in Poland to speak negatively about life than positively). Nevertheless, delegitimization can also be studied by looking at the structure of people's views on the social order. In one such study, we gave 100 educated and employed individuals a list of 30 social groups (i.e.: politicians, lawyers, unemployed individuals, farmers) and asked them to assess how well or poorly each group fares in Poland, as well as how well or poorly each of them deserves to fare. Such responses make it possible to calculate, for each subject, an "analytical" (and unconscious) gauge of perceived legitimacy, in the form of a correlation between the real success enjoyed by such groups vs. the success they are perceived to deserve. A positive correlation here shows that a given individual perceives the social order as legitimately rule-governed (the groups who should enjoy more prosperity, in fact do) while a negative correlation signifies the opposite perception.

The division of power

The outcome turned out to be positive for only a single (!) individual in our test group, but strongly negative for more than 80% of respondents. From this we can conclude that even Poles who are themselves well-off believe that groups who are faring well in society do not deserve their prosperity. Interestingly, when we repeated the study with another sample of participants, this time asking about how much power and influence (real vs. deserved) was exerted over events in Poland by each of the same 30 professional groups, the results were different. This time, a positive correlation was seen for as many as 61% of those surveyed – a majority thus felt that

the groups which do have influence and power are the ones that should. The division of power among various social groups is therefore seen as legitimate by most people, although the division of economic benefits is considered to lack legitimacy by a significant majority.

Immoral winners

The strength of such delegitimization of the economic order is further highlighted by a series of studies in which participants were given newspaper articles portraying various (fictitious) politicians and businessmen, after which we elicited various sorts of judgments about these individuals. For example, we described a politician or businessman who



had met with either success or failure, also providing information about how talented they were: greatly so or not very much. A successful individual was judged to be more competent than one who had failed, yet the former was also perceived as being less moral. Interestingly, this "moral dubiousness of success" was manifest not just when it had been explicitly stated that a given successful indi-

The delegitimization of affluence in the eyes of Poles

vidual was not particularly talented (suggesting they must have achieved success through shady dealings or by chance), but also when no information about talent had been given at all. This shows that the very fact someone had been successful was seen by our participants as grounds to question their moral integrity (be it a politician or a businessman).

Success often goes hand-in-hand with high social status (prestige) and wealth, factors we looked at in subsequent studies. People turn out to be more inclined to vote for a politician with high standing (a party leader) than one with low standing (a rank-and-file party member), the only reason being a conviction that the former must have greater abilities. When controlling for competence inferences, however, high status led to decreased perceptions of moral integrity (compared to low status). Another factor that strongly reinforced such negative conclusions about the morality of high-ranking individuals was affluence. These two factors, prestige and wealth, are usually strongly correlated in real life. When experimenting, however, one can attempt to tease out their individual influences, which we did by separately manipulating information

can change depending on whether a given campaign is more dominated by the issue of effectiveness or that of morality. At the time this research was carried out (2002–2004) it was effectiveness that mattered more, although it is possible that morality presently carries more weight. The problem with morality is that it can only be inferred indirectly. Our results indicate that a given person's morality is suggested more by failure than success, more by a low social standing than a high one, and more by poverty than affluence.

Life as a zero-sum game

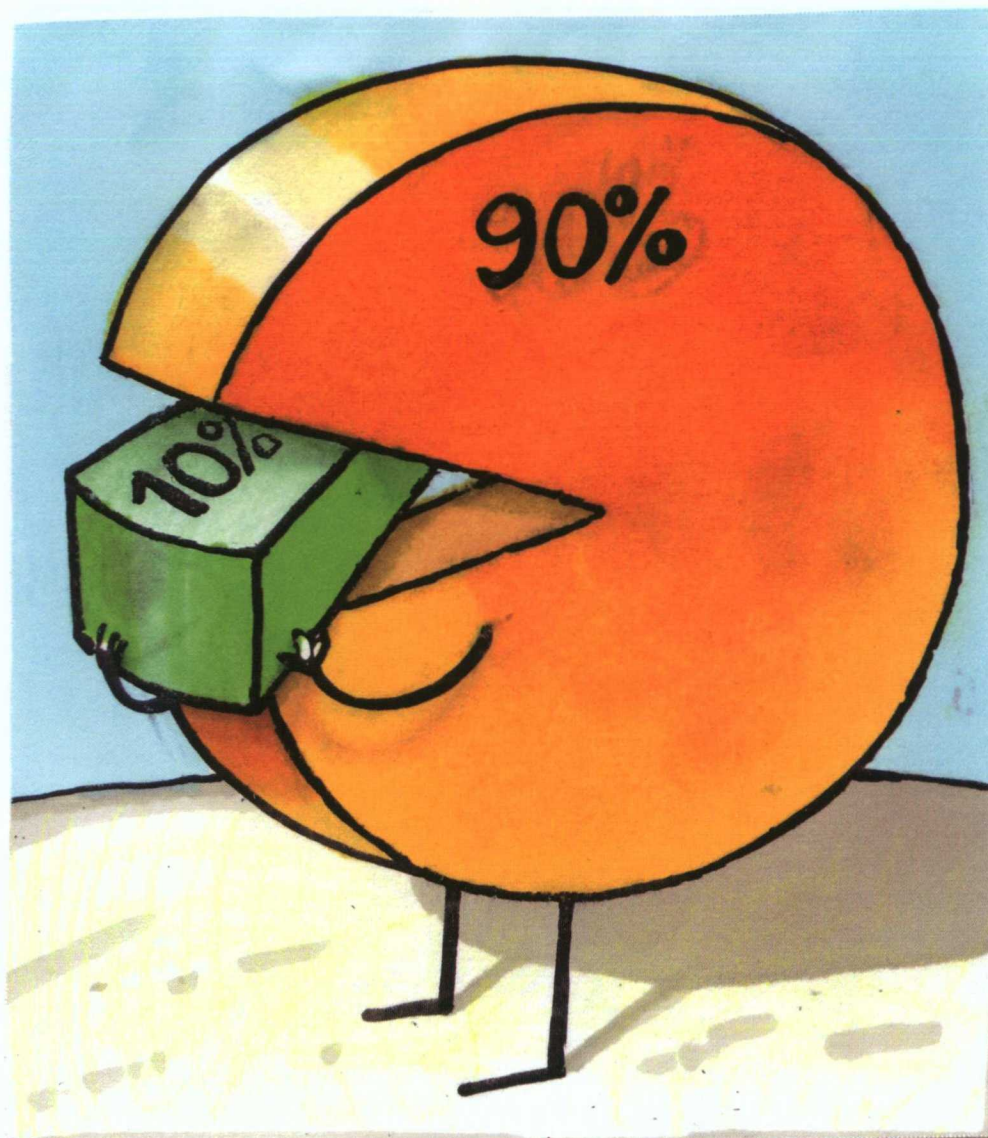
Thus it is clear that Poles are strongly convinced that the system in which they live lacks legitimacy, and that affluence is particularly strongly delegitimized: wealthy individuals are disliked and seen as morally suspect, even in the eyes of other wealthy people. Is this ill-will of a disinterested nature? Our research in fact suggests the opposite: the wealthy turn out to be particularly strongly disliked and considered immoral by those individuals who believe that one person can gain only at the expense of others ("Life is like a tennis game – someone wins only when others lose").

From the logical standpoint, of course, furthering one's own interests and assisting those of others are independent of one another (one can seek one's interests via rivalry, but one may also try to maximize the benefits to others at the same time, via cooperation). It is only when there is a conflict over a scarce resource that a "win for you" entails a "loss for me," and the entire situation boils down to what is known as a "zero-sum game" (where the tally of wins must equal the tally of losses). There is no way to objectively determine what portion of human interactions take the form of a zero-sum game, although many thinkers have expressed very explicit views here. For advocates of the tragic vision of human nature, dating back at least to Hobbes and characteristic of right-wing ideologies, people are egoistic by nature, their interests are immanently at odds with one another, and rivalry and conflict are an inseparable part of the human condition. For advocates of the utopian vision, on the other hand, dating back to Rousseau and typical of left-wing ideologies, people are noble and virtuous by nature, their interests are fundamentally synergetic, and cooperation with others is an inseparable

Poles are strongly convinced that the system in which they live lacks legitimacy and that affluence is morally suspect

about status and affluence in a press profile. The bigger culprit of the two here proved to be affluence: information that an individual was wealthy had a seven times greater impact on judgments about their morality than information about prestige. Poor individuals of low status were perceived to be the most moral. Note that in all of these studies, we also found that while our respondents do have greater respect for wealthy, successful individuals of high status, they are more fond of poor, unsuccessful individuals.

On the basis of high status and affluence, therefore, people draw positive conclusions about perceived persons' competence yet negative ones about their moral integrity. Because the former type of inference is somewhat stronger than the latter (a political candidate's abilities have more of an influence over election choices than their morality), people are on balance more willing to vote for wealthy politicians with high social standing. However, that



Marek Raczowski

part of human existence. Our research has shown that the views of “ordinary” people on this issue differ just as broadly as those of the philosophers: some feel that life is a zero-sum game more than others. Such a zero-sum game approach to life is particularly prevalent among those who are worse off, i.e. less educated, older, with lower incomes. This suggests that the advocates of such a view are “losers,” and their conviction helps to rationalize their own failure (“I lost out because others took from me”). It is no wonder that those who take such an attitude to life are particularly strongly convinced that the wealthy are egoistic and immoral.

One commonly-encountered opinion is that the lack of belief in the legitimacy of Poland’s social order (and the lack of legitimizing myths) is a consequence of the country’s unsuccessful socioeconomic transformation, which has excluded too many social groups from benefits of the new system. However,

analysis of the late Communist period shows that then, too, Poland had a serious problem with a lack of social-order legitimacy. After a decade and a half of transformation we now have a completely different system, yet it continues to lack legitimacy. Polish society is therefore either unable to construct a legitimate social order, or unable to legitimize its existing order, perhaps regardless of what it may be. ■

Further reading:

- Wojciszke, B. (2002). *Człowiek wśród ludzi. Zarys psychologii społecznej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Wojciszke, B., Baryła, W. (2005). *Kultura narzekania, czyli o psychicznych pułapkach ekspresji niezadowolenia* w: M. Drogosz (red.) *Jak Polacy przegrywają, jak Polacy wygrywają* (s. 35-68). Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.
- Wojciszke, B. (2005). Morality and competence in person and self-perception. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 16, pp. 155-188.