Symbolic Legitimacy Boundaries

Throughout this book, we will focus on public debate, media reports, and other forms of communication that seek to shape perceptions and policies about the environment. In an important sense, the function of such communication is to help establish—or challenge—the legitimacy of actions affecting the environment. Legitimacy is generally defined as the right to exercise authority. Yet, such a right is not granted naturally. Instead, recognition of legitimacy depends upon a specifically rhetorical process. Communication scholar Robert Francesconi (1982) defines this rhetorical basis of legitimacy as “an ongoing process of reason-giving... which forms the basis of the right to exercise authority as well as the willingness [of audiences] to defer to authority” (p. 49). Importantly, legitimacy may be claimed by a person or group, but it is granted by others—voters, a group’s members, or other constituencies. Francesconi explained that rhetoric performs “a vital socio-political function by bridging the gap between legitimacy as claimed by those who would exercise authority and legitimacy as believed by those who would obey it” (p. 50).

One of the most persuasive ways to earn legitimacy is to link a policy or idea with certain values. Sociologist Talcott Parsons (1958) defined the legitimation (granting of legitimacy) as “the appraisal of [an] action in terms of shared or common values” (p. 201). For example, proposals to protect old-growth forests may be seen as more or less legitimate, depending upon public perception of the values that are at stake: Is the nation experiencing a shortage of timber supply, or is it facing a loss of biodiversity? Detailed knowledge of how a proposal works, while obviously important, may be only part of the story of its legitimacy.

One of the most rhetorically powerful claims to legitimacy in American political culture is that something is just common sense. The term is imprecise, but it generally refers to what people assume to be the views of “everybody”—what is generally agreed to be true. When politicians or others invoke common sense to advocate the use of natural resources to spur economic growth, they also implicitly draw on the discourse of the Dominant Social Paradigm, noted earlier.

The claim to be talking from common sense has become a source of legitimacy in recent debates over Western wildfires and ways to safeguard nearby homes and communities from these fires. For example, the George W. Bush administration called its proposal to thin Western forests (that is, to selectively log trees) to prevent wildfires the Healthy Forests Initiative. Rolling out his proposal, President Bush told a crowd in Portland, Oregon:

> We need to make our forests healthy by using some common sense. . . . We've got to understand that it makes sense to clear brush. We've got to make

sense—it makes sense to encourage people to make sure that the forests not only are healthy from disease, but are healthy from fire. . . . This is just common sense.” (White House, 2002, emphasis added.)

The President sought rhetorically to justify his proposal for selective logging of the forests—described as clearing brush—in terms of values that his listeners presumably shared about the caution or care they take around their own homes, summed up as common sense.

Because legitimacy is rhetorically constituted, it is also open to question and challenge. An appeal to common sense is usually an effective means of gaining legitimacy, since it purports merely to describe things “as they really are.” However, part of its power is that it also may mask other meanings or alternatives. For example, environmental groups challenged the common sense of logging old-growth trees—part of the President’s plan—as well as brush, thus beginning a public debate over the legitimacy of the President’s Healthy Forests plan.

Political scientist Charles Schulzke (2000) observes that the outcome of arguments between parties over legitimacy turns only partly on facts. Equally important are symbolic legitimacy boundaries. Schulzke defines these as the symbolic associations that politicians, business, and the public attach to a proposal, policy, or person. Symbolic legitimacy boundaries define a particular policy, idea, or institution as reasonable, appropriate, or acceptable. They also help to establish a presumption of normalcy that comes from being in the political center. For example, Paul Ehrlich (2002), the Bing Professor of Population Studies at Stanford University, attempted to locate environmental concerns inside the symbolic boundaries of science and reason when he declared, “There is little dispute within the knowledgeable scientific community today about the global ecological situation” (p. 31).

On the other hand, the symbolic associations that make up a legitimacy boundary also name what or who is unreasonable, unwise, or unacceptable. For example, when conservative radio commentator Rush Limbaugh called environmentalists “wackos” and “dunderheaded alarmists and prophets of doom” in his best-selling book The Way Things Ought to Be (1992, pp. 155–157), he was portraying those who worried about such matters as the ozone layer as outside the symbolic boundaries of common sense. As a consequence, symbolic legitimacy boundaries tell us “what or who is included or excluded in a category,” says Stone (2002). They “define people in and out of a conflict or place them on different sides” (p. 34).

As with legitimacy itself, symbolic legitimacy boundaries are not granted automatically but are constituted in the rhetorical struggle that makes up public debate and controversy in our modern-day agora, or public sphere. Stone (2002) says that, in these struggles to create public support, “symbols,