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# Ideology Critique without Morality: A Radical Realist Approach

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**W**hat is the point of ideology critique? Prominent Anglo-American philosophers recently proposed novel arguments for the view that ideology critique is moral critique, and ideologies are flawed insofar as they contribute to injustice or oppression. We criticize that view and make the case for an alternative and more empirically oriented approach, grounded in epistemic rather than moral commitments. We make two related claims: (a) ideology critique can debunk beliefs and practices by uncovering how, empirically, they are produced by self-justifying power and (b) the self-justification of power should be understood as an epistemic rather than moral flaw. Drawing on the recent realist revival in political theory, we argue that this genealogical approach has more radical potential, despite being more parsimonious than morality-based approaches. We demonstrate the relative advantages of our view by discussing the results of empirical studies on the contemporary phenomenon of neopatriarchy in the Middle East and North Africa.

*No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment.*  
(Federalist No. 10)

*Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.*  
(Karl Marx)

## INTRODUCTION


Ideology critique uncovers flaws in our cultural practices—but what kinds of flaws, and on what grounds? There has been a renaissance of ideology critique in Anglo-American philosophy of late, with contemporary analytic methods applied to the traditional goals of Critical Theory. These philosophers, however, retain their discipline’s tendency to center morality in political theorizing and so identify ideological flaws based on moral commitments: ultimately, ideologies are flawed insofar as they contribute to injustice, oppression, and the like. In this paper we point out some shortcomings of that approach, which has been called the “new” ideology critique (Sankaran 2020). We then make the case for an alternative approach, grounded in epistemic rather than moral commitments. Our purpose is to construct an approach to ideology critique grounded in social science and devoid of the moralism found in much analytic political philosophy. We do this by

putting forward two related claims, which modify and extend the political realist approaches to ideology championed by Raymond Geuss (2008) and Bernard Williams (2002; 2005): (a) ideology critique can debunk beliefs and practices by uncovering how, empirically, they are the product of self-justifying power and (b) the self-justification of power should be understood as an epistemic rather than moral flaw.

Let us illustrate the rough idea with a toy example: a patriarchal society in which men’s power is sustained by the widespread belief that “father has everyone’s best interests at heart.” That belief is ideologically flawed to the extent that its persistence is explained by paternal inculcation—but not because fathers are oppressive or patriarchy is unjust but because the belief is the product of self-justifying power and self-justifying power is epistemically suspect: judges in their own affairs are comparable to authors refereeing their own manuscripts. That is to say, the principle that people shouldn’t be judges in their own affairs—or determine the standards by which they are assessed—is widely accepted for reasons of fairness but also for epistemic reasons: all else equal, judges in their own affairs are less likely to reach the verdict that fits the evidence best. More specifically, we will argue that self-justifying power creates ideological distortions because of an epistemic circularity vitiated by what social psychologists call politically motivated reasoning—a phenomenon whereby “individuals can be expected to selectively credit all manner of information in patterns consistent with their respective groups’ positions” (Kahan 2015, 2). The idea is that social hierarchies empower dominant groups to disseminate their motivated beliefs about their own legitimacy to subordinate groups—a circular pattern leading to the prevalence of an epistemically flawed understanding of social relations.

Note, though, that the ideological flaw isn’t due to the mere fact that one group influences the other. For

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instance, education arguably requires teachers' authority over students. But good teachers can transmit knowledge in ways that eventually transcend the need for institutionalized authority. There is something fishy about a math teacher who instils beliefs in students by appealing to her authority more than by demonstrating how to solve math problems. Inculcating respect for educational hierarchies is not enough to genuinely legitimize her position. Similarly, the legitimacy of a social hierarchy is epistemically suspect to the degree that it rests on beliefs instilled by the same hierarchy. And that holds regardless of the truth of the beliefs in question, so we can dispense with the notion of false consciousness as well as with moral judgment.<sup>1</sup>

We contend that this epistemic approach is more parsimonious than morality-based approaches: we will show that using social-scientific evidence to identify instances of power self-justification yields social critique without the need for additional judgments about justice or moral progress. To be sure, some such moral calls are relatively easy to make but, as we will argue, ideology critique shouldn't be centered on an analysis of how our beliefs and attitudes contribute to well-known moral ills, however valuable that analysis might be. The primary task of ideology critique, in our view, is to analyze our beliefs and attitudes to identify *hidden* flaws in the social fabric. Social science coupled with theoretical analysis can reveal that social reality is not what it seems and that sometimes this is due to instances of self-justifying power. The goal of this approach is to expose a social conflict despite the appearance of harmony. It is in this sense, for example, that Marx takes himself to have uncovered the "secret" of capital accumulation behind the veil of bourgeois political economy and common-sense notions of free exchange between capitalists and workers.

This reference to Marx, though, is not a claim to the mantle of Critical Theory—a rich and multifaceted tradition to which we cannot do justice here. We just stake out our position vis-à-vis the new ideology critics in Anglo-American philosophy. In so doing, we also seek to contribute to the realist enterprise of grounding normative political judgments in nonmoral commitments (Rossi 2019)<sup>2</sup> and to bring that enterprise closer to the mistrust of morality and prescriptive theory typical of much Marxism (Leiter 2015; Wood 2004). The view we put forward is, indeed, normative in the sense that it produces evaluative claims, but it is not prescriptive: it does not directly mandate actions. In

that respect, and also because our approach is genealogical in the narrow sense that it focuses on the causal history of beliefs and other cultural *technes*, the project may resemble Foucauldian critique somewhat. But we claim no affiliation with that tradition either. If anything, our approach uses insights from political realism to combine elements from both Marxian and Foucauldian critique. Like the former, it focuses on how ideologies are functional to upholding relations between social groups. Like the latter, it focuses on the causal history of ideologies.

Our broader ambition, then, is to carve out a role for social science in normative political theory that goes beyond the mere prospecting of what is feasible (Miller 2008). The idea isn't that social-scientific input can somehow allow ideology critique to occupy an Archimedean standpoint of perfect epistemic purity, above the fray of political struggle. To echo Marx again—though this time on the distinction between utopian and scientific socialism—we want to show how social critique stands to gain from fighting its main battles on the terrain of empirics rather than that of moral commitments.

In what follows, we begin our discussion by pointing out some difficulties with the use of moral commitments in Sally Haslanger and others' recent takes on ideology critique: we show, *inter alia*, that moral commitments are at high risk of ideological distortion themselves and that if moral commitments drive ideology critique there is little for ideology critique left to uncover and little to distinguish ideology critique from other forms of normative theorizing. Those difficulties do not completely damn morality-driven ideology critique, but they do point toward some desiderata for our different approach. We outline this approach by showing how empirically grounded ideology critique diagnoses circularities in the justification of power relations and thereby debunks the legitimating narratives of social practices and political institutions. We then demonstrate the payoff of our approach by discussing the empirical literature on a real-world cousin of the toy example above: the phenomenon of neopatriarchy in the Middle East and North Africa region.

## IDEOLOGY AND MORALITY

Sally Haslanger is the most influential exponent of the new Anglo-American ideology critique (Haslanger 2012; 2014; 2017; 2019), though there are cognate writings by a number of philosophers (e.g., Hänel 2018; Jenkins 2016; Jones 2014; Shelby 2003; Stanley 2015). The primary commonality of these authors is that they all hold that ideologies are particularly problematic insofar as they maintain and reproduce unjust or oppressive social structures. Nonetheless they do not employ moral values in the same way or to the same extent. For instance, Stanley's conception of ideological flaw seems purely epistemic in that it focuses on how hierarchical social structures "inhibit the rational revision of pre-existing false belief, to preserve a desirable situation for a privileged group" (2015, 199). However,

<sup>1</sup> If we understand "false consciousness" to refer to the falsity of one's beliefs about society, as opposed to false beliefs about the reasons why one holds such beliefs (cf. Shelby 2003, 170).

<sup>2</sup> Though realism's antimoralism needn't be this stark: cf. Hall and Sleat (2017). What we wish to clarify is that for realism to vindicate its central claims it need only show that it can make normative claims about politics while eschewing moral normativity, which isn't the same as claiming that there is a distinctively political normativity—a confusion that has led to a protracted and often unfruitful debate (see, e.g., Aytac 2022a; Burelli and Destri 2022; Erman and Möller 2015; Jubb and Rossi 2015; Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018; Sleat 2022).

Stanley introduces moral premises when he explains the political function of flawed ideologies in terms of their contribution to the efficacy of demagoguery, which itself is defined in relation to “moral facts” (2015, 68). Similarly, Hänel (2018, 915) and Jenkins (2016, 398) invoke the moral category of wrongfulness in their writings. Even Shelby, despite his extensive discussion of the epistemic aspects of ideology, maintains that we must first identify social oppression in order to know which forms of consciousness to target with critique (2003, 181). So, although our discussion will focus primarily on the role of morality in Haslanger’s paradigmatic view, it also applies to the other new ideology critics in varying degrees.

Haslanger alternates between descriptive and pejorative senses of “ideology.” In the descriptive sense, ideology is a “cultural *techné*” operating as “a network of social meanings, tools, scripts, schemas, heuristics, principles, and the like which we draw on in action, and which gives shape to our practices.” In a pejorative sense, ideology is a cultural *techné* that “organizes us in ways that are unjust, or in ways that skew our understanding of what is valuable” (Haslanger 2017, 159; 2012, 412). And the epistemic and moral dimensions of problematic ideologies are intertwined: bad ideologies shape and regulate epistemic resources so that agents are not capable of identifying morally relevant aspects of their social condition anymore (Haslanger 2017, 159–60).

But morality doesn’t always do all of the normative work: Haslanger is also sympathetic to epistemic critique that tests whether our first-order normative beliefs are a product of sound and undistorted processes of deliberation. For instance, her work on generics offers an epistemic form of ideology critique: it reveals how statistical generalizations about identity categories such as “womanhood” often lead to epistemically unwarranted inferences with metaphysical and/or normative conclusions—that is, about what womanhood essentially means or how women ought to be (Haslanger 2014, 22). Nonetheless, Haslanger also suggests that epistemic norms are culturally contaminated and therefore do not constitute a neutral ground. Thus she proposes to go beyond epistemic normativity:

On the view I’ve sketched, whether a cultural *techné* is ideological is to be determined in terms of the injustice of its effects and the values it promotes (or not). This assumes that there is a fact of the matter about what is just and unjust, good, and valuable. I endorse the presupposition that there are moral truths (facts), for example, that slavery and genocide are morally wrong. (Haslanger 2017, 165).

What, then, is the appropriate source of moral knowledge for the purposes of ideology critique? Haslanger offers two complementary answers to that question. First, she contends that we should turn to the claims of activists and social movements as a source of moral knowledge, in line with the recommendations of some critical social theorists (Fraser 1981; Khader 2011) and grounded normative theorists (Ackerly

et al. 2021). Suggesting that moral knowledge is always situated, Haslanger holds that the disadvantaged groups that are “directly affected by the practices in question ... are likely to have better access to morally relevant facts” because “participation in certain social practices provides us with first-person moral knowledge” (Haslanger 2017, 166–7). Second, Haslanger makes an argument from human nature: “We can draw on knowledge we have by virtue of being human under good enough conditions” (Haslanger 2017, 167). Even if we often face social barriers that keep us from fully using our moral faculties, she seems optimistic about access to moral knowledge on the gravest forms of injustice. So there are two different but intertwined senses in which Haslanger’s approach is morality-driven: (a) the idea that ideology critique should uncover moral flaws and that (b) this task can be achieved by identifying a proper source of moral knowledge—for example, the testimony of the oppressed.

It seems to us that Haslanger’s reliance on morality as a source of normativity creates at least two related problems for her account of ideology critique. Our first worry is that Haslanger’s approach is not well equipped to deal with potential cases of ideological distortion within progressive social movements. For instance, consider an elite-captured antiracist movement that overestimates the role of moral wrongdoing against certain races in the formation of unjust social structures at the cost of underestimating other dimensions of oppression—that is, class or gender (Johnson 2017; Lewis 2018; Táíwò 2020). From an empirically informed point of view, it seems more advantageous to treat the situated moral knowledge of such a group also as an object of ideology critique rather than mainly as one of its presuppositions. After all, as Raymond Geuss puts it, “ethics is usually dead politics” (2010, 42): sedimented power relations often present themselves as commonsensical moral truths. There is no good reason to think that progressive social movements are immune to such ideological distortions, at least insofar as social movements themselves contain or reflect some of society’s wider hierarchical structures. And even if one takes a movement as a whole to be oriented in the right direction, the worry resurfaces when we consider the internal politics of social movements. Just think, for example, of the tensions between liberal and radical feminists. Each side sees itself as the most emancipatory one, or even the only truly emancipatory one. Any theorist who takes the lead from social movements would have to either ignore or adjudicate this sort of dispute.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This point resonates with Michael Goodhart’s recent critical observations on grounded normative theory—an approach that shares some similarities with Haslanger’s: “Ackerly sometimes seems to imagine that a theory anchored in activist practices can sidestep difficult questions about normativity simply by appealing to that practice. [...] It’s impossible to bootstrap to validity in this way; however, one already has to share their values and commitments to identify *theirs* as the praxis to which we should look when tackling injustice” (Goodhart 2019, 894). For a related argument also see Chambers (2017).



A second shortcoming of morality-driven ideology critique has to do with Haslanger's presupposition that human beings have direct knowledge of basic matters of justice under good enough social conditions. Even if Haslanger acknowledges that the current conditions are much less than ideal, she seems hopeful that the relevant forms of moral knowledge are still accessible to most people. Kate Phelan (2019) recently put significant pressure on that presupposition. But even if one accepts it, one may then wonder whether it doesn't make ideology critique redundant or incoherent. Let us explain. One might read Haslanger as saying that morality-driven ideology critique identifies the hidden links between moral truths we acknowledge and how they are embodied or undermined in particular, mystified social practices. On this reading, moral truths are widely known at a certain level of generality and abstraction, and the critic's task is to explain how particular phenomena are incompatible with general moral truths most people endorse. For instance, a socialist ideology critic would take exploitation as unjust (general moral commitment) and show that wage labor is exploitative (relevance to the specific case). The idea is that, due to capitalist hegemony, many people will tend to form beliefs and attitudes that are not coherent with some of their more abstract moral convictions. However, if we want people to correctly perceive the links between general moral truths and particular social practices, it seems sufficient to eliminate epistemic barriers (e.g., in our example, by enabling people to critically reflect on the empirical features of wage labor that make it exploitative). Once the epistemic obstacles are removed, subjects should be able to call the legitimacy of dominant practices into question using their general moral commitments. There is no need for the critic to make additional claims about what morality requires. To avoid the redundancy of the moral component of ideology critique, Haslanger would have to insist that moral truths are indispensable in ideology critique regardless of the presence of epistemic obstacles. But that indicates distrust toward the reflective capacities of ordinary people—an attitude that is hard to square with Haslanger's commitment to social actors' experience as a source of moral knowledge.

Two further, related strategies are available to Haslanger. The first one is to emphasize the link between ideologies and (constructivist accounts of) social reality. The idea here is that ideology is constitutive of social reality, and so it is a conceptual scheme that shapes our social practices. In this view, something that constitutes social reality cannot be epistemically flawed. For instance, when one argues that we need to drop a set of concepts altogether and replace them with a new set or change the well-established meaning of some term, this is not an epistemic critique revealing a distorted reality. It is, rather, an invitation to replace one form of social reality with a better one by revising our semantic conventions (Haslanger 2012, 388). In this view, meaning-making practices are prior to our epistemic norms because they are the fundamental fabric of the social world. Thus, truth- or knowledge-seeking standards might not be

applicable to ideologies that *constitute* social reality. And that would be why Haslanger holds that we should employ moral arguments to explain why a particular set of concepts is preferable to another: moral commitments allow us to weigh up the different social practices promoted by the different sets of concepts and semantic conventions. For instance, one may weigh up different concepts of "woman" based on how conducive they are to more inclusive social relations (Jenkins 2016).

But is it true that there cannot be epistemic reasons to revise our semantic conventions? Consider, for example, Carole Pateman's (1988) critique of social contract theory. In a nutshell, Pateman argues that the discourse of a free public sphere serves to obscure the subjection of women in the private sphere: "Patriarchal civil society is divided into two spheres, but attention is directed to one sphere only. The story of the social contract is treated as an account of the creation of the public sphere of civil freedom. The other, private, sphere is not seen as politically relevant," and so "what it means to be an 'individual', a maker of contracts and civilly free, is revealed by the subjection of women within the private sphere" (1988, 3, 11). Pateman's argument debunks a semantic convention according to which "private" means "politically irrelevant." She achieves that by mustering textual and historical evidence that such a patriarchal understanding of the concepts of "private" and "public" is a product of men's power in intellectual and political life, which legitimized their social position by depoliticizing the private realm.

The upshot is that we have reason to revise our understanding of those two terms—for example, by acknowledging that the personal is political. Importantly, the argument doesn't have to be understood as a moral critique of patriarchy. The mainstream use of "private" turns out to be untenable because it is the product of self-justifying power and, as we will see in more detail below, that is as an epistemic flaw: the social contract theorists and the male political leaders who adopted their terminology were judges in their own affairs.

What is more, this epistemic route to the revision of semantic conventions has an advantage over the moral route: it doesn't require an *ex ante* negative judgment over the object of its critique.<sup>4</sup> It is the evidence Pateman uncovers that reveals the epistemic untenability of the contractualist public-private distinction. That conclusion does not require a prior moral judgment about the undesirability of patriarchal social relations. Hostility to patriarchy presumably motivated Pateman's inquiry, but it is not required for her actual argument

<sup>4</sup> Standardly, epistemic reasons apply to beliefs, and moral reasons to actions. Revising semantic conventions requires a more sophisticated version of this distinction. Epistemic (moral) reasons to revise concepts do not directly apply to beliefs (actions) because transforming a semantic convention is to alter the linguistic environment, which both epistemic and moral commitments presuppose. However, much as moral reasons can prescribe conceptual change due to the practical influence of language, epistemic reasons can do the same if a concept is conducive to generating flawed beliefs (Simion 2018).

to succeed.<sup>5</sup> What matters is not the causal chain that leads scholars to an inquiry, but rather the types of reasons that justify their conclusions.

The final strategy available to Haslanger to defend morality's place in ideology critique focuses on what ideology's constitutive role in social reality does to truth. The strategy moves from the observation that "in the social domain, shared beliefs can make themselves true" (2017, 150), and thus epistemic normativity is not sufficient to mount an ideology critique and should be supplemented by moral critique. The idea is that power holders can make their preferred social structures the reference of true beliefs, and so there's no sense in which those beliefs are a form of false consciousness, to use the traditional terminology of ideology critique. But recall that our approach to ideology critique doesn't require false consciousness. Indeed, in the next section we resist this objection by showing how, even if one accepts Haslanger's constructivist picture of social reality, *justification* rather than truth can be at the center of a form of critique that can pick out the same problematic structures as Haslanger's account without relying on moral commitments.

## RADICAL REALIST SOCIAL ANALYSIS

We now present the abstract structure of a nonmoralized type of ideology critique, which we call radical realist social analysis.<sup>6</sup> As we noted, this approach draws its normativity from an epistemic account of ideological distortion, centered on a justificatory defect: the self-justification of political power.<sup>7</sup> Developing an epistemic (and nonmoralized) route to ideology critique is needed, as the problems we identified in Haslanger's approach primarily stem from her use of moral commitments to criticize cultural technes. We contend that social-scientific evidence can be used to uncover justificatory deficits in widely held beliefs, concepts, or dispositions that underlie the perceived legitimacy of social and political structures. The approach is realist because it grounds normative judgments in empirical analysis rather than moral commitments and radical because it

can question the most fundamental features of a social order.<sup>8</sup>

The general idea behind our epistemic approach to ideology critique is that self-justifying power generates epistemically suspect (but not necessarily false) cultural technes, to use Haslanger's phrase. Cultural technes are socially generated cognitive mechanisms—beliefs, concepts, dispositions, and the like—that legitimize social practices, political institutions, and other power structures. The set of all our cultural technes is our ideology, and if any of its important members are epistemically flawed we can speak of a flawed ideology. So ours is not a pejorative definition of ideology. We seek to show how ideologies become flawed when hierarchical power structures legitimize themselves. The task of our critical project is in line with other radical realists' approach: we view power *per se* as neither good nor bad, but as something that deserves our evaluative attention (Prinz 2016, 783).

To begin to see how power may have such effect, we can illustrate our approach with a rough analogy. A scholar may be the best possible critic of her own work; nonetheless, and *ceteris paribus*, a journal editor would be epistemically reckless if they knowingly used a referee report written by this author about her own work. This epistemic recklessness is due to a justificatory deficit caused by the interaction of motivated reasoning and circularity, typically hidden under layers of history and culture (e.g., Rossi and Argenton 2021). What exactly is epistemically wrong with self-justifying power? The problem is one of epistemic circularity: *ceteris paribus*, we shouldn't take an authority at their word when they claim that they ought to be the authority. But that point may not be enough, as philosophers distinguish between benign and malignant circularity where malignant circularity typically has to do with the untrustworthiness of one's sources (Bergmann 2004).<sup>9</sup> To see why the self-justification of power leads to untrustworthiness and thus malignant circularity, then, we must turn to what social psychologists call politically motivated reasoning. Here is Dan Kahan's summary of decades of empirical results on this phenomenon:

When positions on some risk or other policy relevant fact have come to assume a widely recognized social meaning as a marker of membership within identity-defining groups, members of those groups can be expected to conform their assessment of all manner of information—from persuasive advocacy to reports of expert opinion; from empirical data

<sup>5</sup> Indeed our approach has an edge when it comes to distinguishing good from bad motivations for inquiry. Consider the claims to victimization of right-wing populists. One may well be able to show empirically that they often amount to instances of self-justifying power that preserve existing hierarchies along ethnic, economic, and gender lines. We thank Reviewer 5 for helping us clarify this point.

<sup>6</sup> Variants of radical realism include, e.g., Aytac (2022b), Brinn (2020), Cross (2021), Kreutz (2022), Prinz (2016), Prinz and Rossi (2017), Raekstad (2018; 2021), Rossi (2019), and Westphal (2022).

<sup>7</sup> Our account of ideology is loosely inspired by Williams's, but differs greatly from it: we ground the normative force of our critique in epistemic commitments, not in "an aspiration to the most basic sense of freedom" (Williams 2002, 231). Indeed we adhere to the realist commitments that, according to some, Williams failed to uphold (Aytac 2022a; Cozzaglio and Greene 2019; Prinz and Rossi 2017).

<sup>8</sup> We do not claim that ours is the best possible conception of ideology critique but just that it is preferable to morality-based alternatives because it achieves similar objectives without the risks and complications introduced by moral premises.

<sup>9</sup> Our argument concerns epistemic circularity, not premise circularity (Goldman 1999). The former is the idea that the conclusion appears in one of the premises of the argument. In contrast, epistemic circularity happens when a practice is necessary to establish the belief in the reliability of the very same practice. To the extent that hierarchical power is essential to its own justification, self-justification of power counts as a malignant form of epistemic circularity: given their incentives, we shouldn't trust the powerful that their power is justified.

to their own brute sense impressions—to the position associated with the respective groups. (Kahan 2015, 1).

A substantial body of empirical work attests to the prevalence and ubiquity of politically motivated reasoning across the main social cleavages and to its tendency to generate false beliefs (e.g., Jost, Hennes, and Lavine 2013; Kahan 2013; Kunda 1990; Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Molden and Higgins 2012).

To see how this meshes with our account of the epistemic perils of social hierarchies, consider this streamlined scenario. Society S has two social groups, A and B. Group A holds considerably more power than B, including power over B. That is to say, A is on top of a social hierarchy, H, with B at the bottom. Group A generates a cultural *techne* that buttresses the legitimacy of H—call this *techne* L.<sup>10</sup> Deliberately or not, A's power causes B to also adopt L. The prevalence of L is a primary factor in the persistence of H—that is, of S's social order. Given the pervasiveness of politically motivated reasoning, there is a high chance that L is the product of politically motivated reasoning on A's part—specifically, reasoning motivated by the reinforcement of A's social position.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, L is epistemically unwarranted (because it is circular and A is untrustworthy due to the prevalence of motivated reasoning), and so continued reliance on it is unjustified.<sup>12</sup> It is a flawed cultural *techne* contributing to a flawed ideology. This criticism is thus two-pronged: it yields a conclusive reason to reject any such cultural *techne* (and so try to limit its influence on our assessments of social relations) and a *pro tanto* reason to withdraw support from social practices legitimized by the debunked cultural *techne*, at least until new and better legitimations is offered.

The main point here is that A's power over B doesn't cause the epistemic flaw (which is caused by A's motivated reasoning), but it does cause the epistemic flaw to become prevalent. That is because A's position in the hierarchy affords them the ability to spread their perspective more effectively than other groups—hierarchy tilts the epistemic playing field. Further, the power asymmetry can even make B—the subordinate group in the hierarchy—spread and reproduce A's motivated reasoning after it is internalized. This also explains how

ideologies often operate in a diffused manner and why the subordinate plays a role in the reproduction of ideologies, sometimes even out of strategic considerations to maximize their well-being within the broader context of oppression (Kandiyoti 1988).<sup>13</sup>

Our focus on power asymmetries is why epistemic circularity plays a distinctive role in our critique in addition to motivated reasoning. Although motivated reasoning is prevalent across social groups, only the powerful have the capacity to disseminate their ideas or cause others to do so in order to legitimize hierarchical social relations in a circular manner. Without identifying the circular nature of self-justifying power, we wouldn't be able to tell how ideological distortions that reproduce hierarchical social orders differ from the ordinary motivated reasoning found in any social group, including those at the bottom of the hierarchy. By social hierarchy we mean stratification beyond the baseline needed for mere cultural reproduction. This hierarchy affords A the asymmetrical power to transmit their motivated reasoning to B, whereas in a relatively nonhierarchical social order each group's understanding of social reality—motivated or otherwise—would have to compete on a level playing field. More precisely, group A's power to shield L from contestation (relative to B's cultural *technes*) makes L both more prevalent and more likely to be biased. All else equal, shielding cultural *technes* from contestation is detrimental to their epistemic quality. It is not as though a less hierarchical society would necessarily converge on the truth as a result of its level epistemic field, but it would be more likely to curb the most biased cultural *technes*, *ceteris paribus*.<sup>14</sup> Although nonhierarchy does not necessarily track epistemic fittingness understood as a positive ideal, subjecting *technes* to contestation might at least eliminate particularly grave distortions that would otherwise be caused by A's quasi-monopolization of important cultural *technes*. But this is not because we view the democratic public as epistemically or morally virtuous. The point is just that contestation provides relative epistemic hygiene. So the critique identifies two related problems: (a) the epistemic flaw in L rendered vicious by motivated reasoning and (b) the circularity's bad epistemic outcomes—namely, L's relative protection from contestation. However, it may be worth distinguishing between two types of contestation. *Formal* structures of contestation such as those found in liberal democracies are not exempt from the ideological distortion mechanisms we criticize. Liberal rights can partially empower

<sup>10</sup> That is not to say that such cultural *technes* must be created intentionally.

<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, most empirical research on politically motivated reasoning focuses on distortions engendered by social identities. We assume that positions in social hierarchies have corresponding social identities.

<sup>12</sup> One may object that even if an agent holds a belief mainly out bias toward their group, they may still be aware of good reasons in support of that belief. But J. Adam Carter and Robin McKenna (2020, 707) recently showed how a standard distinction between propositional justification—“having good reasons for one's belief”—and doxastic justification—“properly basing one's belief in the good reasons one possesses”—dispels that worry and explains the intuitive epistemic problem with motivated reasoning: even if politically motivated reasoning were reliable, it would still lack justification in the sense that the relevant beliefs would not be properly based on the relevant reasons. This chimes with our emphasis on justification rather than truth.

<sup>13</sup> This model relies on a simplification. Actually existing societies contain multiple social hierarchies. Our method targets one hierarchy at a time. We also acknowledge the possibility of interactions between domains, as we discuss in the final section.

<sup>14</sup> This point may be misleadingly reminiscent of Habermas's ideal speech situation, where “the unforced force of the better argument” prevails (Habermas 1996, 306). However, we are not committed to the view that the force of the better argument can generate political authority or that there could or should be consensus on what constitutes the better argument. We merely criticize some power structures for their deleterious effects on our grasp of social reality.

citizens to contest their governments in meaningful ways; however, they often fall short of *effective* contestation of informal power relations. Cultural technes resulting from power self-justification can be observed in a variety of informal social institutions in most societies—for example, the patriarchal family or power relations between racialized groups.

In a nutshell, then, according to radical realist social analysis a cultural techne is the result of power-self justification and so should be debunked on epistemic grounds if and only if (a) its prevalence across society is explained by hierarchical power structures and (b) its persistence is instrumental to the preservation of the social order that relies on these power structures. Empirically, however, operationalizing (a) and (b) is a probabilistic matter, given the nature of social-scientific enquiry: the more a cultural techne relies on self-justifying power, the higher the epistemic risk of ideological distortion. Whether the distortion is strong enough to warrant debunking ultimately depends on a binary judgment on whether the relevant power is self-justifying. This judgment supervenes on the probabilistic nature of the empirics and is to be rendered in line with the standards of inference of the empirical inquiry that uncovered both (a) and (b).

Note how our analysis debunks epistemically unwarranted cultural technes without committing the genetic fallacy—namely, the mistake of confusing a blemish in the causal history of a belief, concept, or practice with a lack of arguments in its support. We understand cultural technes as socially generated cognitive mechanisms, so we examine beliefs, concepts, or arguments procedurally—qua outputs of social processes rather than qua content, propositional or otherwise. This matters because different social processes can generate cultural technes with the same content: one could support absolute monarchy, say, because of childhood indoctrination or because one is genuinely persuaded by the argument of *Leviathan*. Debunking this cultural techne by identifying how it was generated by an epistemically flawed social process of indoctrination shows that the techne lacks epistemic warrant in its specific social context, but it does not directly falsify the techne propositional content, so the genetic fallacy is not triggered. Nor is it triggered when we say that debunking a cultural techne gives us a pro tanto reason to withdraw support from the power relations it legitimizes. When an epistemically unwarranted cultural techne fails to justify a power structure, this power structure can still be supported by independent reasons. Our criticism does not deliver all-things-considered judgments about the legitimacy of a power relation. It disqualifies certain ways of justifying power relations through epistemically defective cultural technes—socially generated beliefs, concepts, dispositions, and the like. This strategy probes the evidential standards of legitimation claims without reliance on moral commitments but leaves open the question of what counts as desirable or acceptable power structures. This has significant implications: withdrawing cooperation from such dominant epistemic infrastructures can shift the public's attention to

previously obscured power structures (Hayward 2020). Whether there are independent reasons to support the same power relations is not decisive: ideology critique is an ongoing process of contestation and disruption, so today's independent reasons may become tomorrow's self-justifying power.

Still, ours is a demanding test for ideological distortion: it might well damn the cultural technes that underlie many power structures people ordinarily comply with—for example, many states, corporations, and families. We take this to be a feature rather a bug of our view. Defending that feature, though, is outside the scope of this paper, so we submit it simply as the position where our argument leads. One might still ask what makes the practical outcome of such debunking preferable to the status quo. Mere epistemic improvement might not suffice: false or biased beliefs can be endorsed on the grounds of their social utility. Our reply is that the idea of “social utility” itself often functions as ideology, especially when it is propagated by elites invested in the status quo. Our best bet against that risk is precisely to equip social actors with the tools of epistemic ideology critique. Indeed, one may say that our form of ideology critique seeks to facilitate what Clarissa Rile Hayward recently termed “epistemic disruption”: a way to “withdraw cooperation from an epistemic power relationship, which enables motivated ignorance” (Hayward 2020, 455). The idea isn't that simply pointing out an ideological distortion will suffice to motivate people to change their minds, let alone enact social change. Rather, identifying the sources of ideological distortions tells us which power structures should be the focus of our political efforts.

In the next section we illustrate those points through a real-world case study. Before that, however, let us address four potential worries about our approach. The first worry is that our account of epistemic distortion may be overinclusive: what about, for example, hierarchical relations such as those between teachers and students? Arguably a measure of hierarchy is constitutive of at least some types of successful education. But note how, even if a math teacher has a motivated belief that her hierarchical position vis-à-vis students is legitimate, her belief that Pythagoras's theorem can be proved need not be similarly motivated. And if a student ultimately believes that the theorem can be proved mainly because the teacher said so, then this student hasn't really grasped the subject and the teaching process may thus be questioned. What is more, in the typical political cases that concern us here the content of the belief coincides with the justification of the hierarchy (e.g., “A are natural rulers, B natural subjects”), so the motivated distortion goes all the way down, unlike in teaching and other examples of epistemically benign hierarchy. To make that more concrete, consider the example of scientific expertise. In many cases—for example, physicians—citizens' epistemic trust in experts is mainly rooted in “the rational belief in the efficacy of the knowledge they possess” (Turner 2001, 140). Although citizens have no direct way of assessing experts' epistemic authority, they can indirectly justify



their trust in the scientific institutions by looking at their valuable outputs and compare those outputs to those of available alternatives (e.g., faith healing or homeopathy). In this sense, deference to scientific authority is not necessarily the product of self-justifying power: citizens' compliance is often motivated by additional pragmatic reasons to endorse the epistemic authority of scientific institutions. These pragmatic reasons do not necessarily derive from the scientific discourse itself. Besides, the bulk of scientific knowledge does not target preserving a hierarchy between experts and lay people. So, in cases where scientific claims are not about the legitimacy of the scientific-institutional hierarchy, expert authority, or other similar examples, it is not relevantly analogous to our discussion of self-justifying power.

The second worry is that we may be smuggling some negative moral evaluation of power imbalances into our epistemic argument. But that would be to misidentify the flaw we criticize: the flaw is not in the power asymmetry or imbalance *per se* but in their epistemic effects—that is, in the tendency to spread motivated reasoning through power self-justification mechanisms. To be sure, identifying power raises a host of contestability problems familiar from the philosophy of social science. However, we do not need a full-fledged theory of power. All we need is to identify cultural *technes* that can be traced back to the groups and power structures they justify. We don't need a full theory of power to see that certain types of cultural *technes* are crucial to the preservation of the status quo and could be traced to a group that is at the top of the social hierarchy. It's the epistemic flaw of self-justification that points us to a problematic power imbalance, not the other way around.<sup>15</sup>

A third worry may come from pragmatic encroachment epistemology (Stanley 2005) and concerns the political contestability of epistemic normativity. One may observe that epistemology is probably not politically innocent, or not entirely so. Earlier we discussed Geuss's realist observation that "ethics is usually dead politics: the hand of the victor in some past conflict reaching out to try to extend its grip to the present and the future" (2010, 42). It is reasonable to suspect that sometimes epistemology is dead politics too, and we neither wish nor need to deny that. All we need is the claim that epistemology is considerably less politically compromised than ethics—a claim that holds even if we acknowledge that power does shape our ways of acquiring and justifying beliefs and other cultural *technes*. For one thing, typically morality doesn't even try to be politically innocent, whereas

epistemology does. And so, as Quill Kukla recently put it in an overview of literature critical of epistemic purity, "We cannot do epistemology without fundamental, central attention to social identities, power relations, and the social institutions and structures within which epistemic practices happen. But [...] this result is of no threat to our usable notions of objectivity, justification, and the like" (Kukla 2021, 37). That is not a conclusion we can thoroughly defend here, but this is the rough idea. Power tends to distort our normative capacities in a degree proportional to their importance in sustaining the social order, and it is undeniable that our norms for acquiring and justifying beliefs play such a role. But it is equally undeniable that our norms for regulating interpersonal interactions play that role to a much larger extent. Epistemic norms are less likely to be distorted by political power structures because they are more distant from the *practical* categories of obligation, compliance, and the like—whereas an ideology's ability to sustain the social order centrally relies on those categories. So, at least in the context of politics epistemic norms are significantly less distorted than moral norms. That quantitative difference is all we need to establish the preferability of epistemic over moral ideology critique.

A fourth, related, worry may come from philosophers of science who suggest that contextual values (including moral values) play an ineliminable role not only in formulating research questions but also in evidence collection and hypothesis confirmation (Anderson 2004; Turnbull 2018). So one might conclude that empirically informed epistemic inquiry is affected by moral commitments all the way down, which would make epistemic judgments insufficiently distinct from moral judgments. Yet in a more fine-grained understanding of the matter, that conclusion doesn't follow. Philosophers of science often acknowledge the lexical priority of evidence over contextual values. That presupposes a qualitative distinction between evidence and values (Hicks 2014). Contextual values play a legitimate role only to the extent that they do not clash with evidential considerations. Similarly, Douglas (2009, 96) contends that only evidential considerations can play a direct role in science, constituting a *reason* to accept an empirical claim. In contrast, contextual values play an *indirect* role, informing judgments about how demanding our evidential standards should be. Our epistemic conception of ideology critique, then, can accommodate the influence of contextual values in science. This is because our exclusion of moral values mainly pertains to what type of *reasons* support evaluative claims about cultural *technes*—namely, epistemic reasons. Although it may be that the level of evidential standards and the type of research questions that yield such epistemic reasons are influenced by moral or other contextual factors, this does not amount to claiming that beliefs or other cultural *technes* are ideologically flawed because of moral reasons. At any rate, the proof of any theory of ideology is in the pudding of actual social critique, so that is what we will turn to in the next section.

<sup>15</sup> The debate on whether power can be defined without reference to moral properties is ongoing and lies beyond the scope of the paper. Still, it may be useful to draw attention to a distinction that straddles the debate—namely, the distinction between whether constructing a concept of power necessarily requires moral input and whether it has negative ethical connotations due to undesirable outcomes power often generates (Dowding 2012, 124). The latter is not a problem for our argument because we are only interested in the epistemic outcomes of power.

## A CASE STUDY: NEOPATRIARCHY

We are now in a position to demonstrate how radical realist social analysis evaluates actual social orders. Our case study is neopatriarchy—a term often used to analyze sociopolitical orders in the Middle-East and North-Africa (MENA) region. With this choice we wish to move away from the hegemony of Eurocentric examples in political philosophy and center a political question endemic to the Global South, though one might discern similarities between the phenomena described in the MENA-specific neopatriarchy literature and the familist corruption of political institutions manifested by populist leaders in Europe and the Americas. But even within the MENA region, to be sure, our presentation of the case study will not do justice to the particularities of the many different societies commonly described with the neopatriarchy label. Our trade-off between ethnographic detail and generalization targets reaching a level of abstraction that enables us to speak of ideological distortion rather than just zoom in on particular instances of distorted beliefs or practices. At any rate, we do not seek to say anything new about the social orders of the MENA region. We simply demonstrate our approach to ideology critique with a case study that proponents of other approaches are likely to judge in a similar way in order to show how we can reach comparable normative conclusions without relying on moral commitments.

Scholars characterize neopatriarchy as a particular type of merger between traditional social structures and a modernizing state apparatus. This phenomenon is often observed in the context of the oil-dependent, authoritarian capitalist systems of the MENA region:

Conceptually, neopatriarchy spans macro, meso, and micro levels: state and economy; institutions and organizations; households, families, attitudes, and interpersonal relations. The modernizing neopatriarchal state introduces policies for women's social and spatial presence—public education, employment in the government sector, the vote—but retains patriarchal family laws that bind women and girls to the family and to protection (or control) by male kin. (Moghadam 2020, 469–70).<sup>16</sup>

In addition to state-reinforced submission of women to men, neopatriarchal society is characterized by power asymmetries between the youth and the elderly, reflecting the hierarchical structures within families, tribes, and religious communities that are the basic building blocks of the social order (Sharabi 1988, 45). Modeled on the analogy between father and ruler, authority figures across different scales of these patriarchal units maintain and reproduce many of the norms that are first promoted in the early socialization of children within patriarchal families (1988, 43–5). Despite the

hierarchical and authoritarian power asymmetries within such neopatriarchal networks, even impotent actors like women or young men “can gain a hearing at the centers of wealth and power,” as neopatriarchal networks take care of their compliant members, providing them with material benefits and social protection through the mediation of family and other social connections (1988, 46; see also Rodríguez 2018; Ugur-Cinar 2017).

Neopatriarchal social orders display an impressive degree of intertwinement among economic, political, and social institutions with reciprocal causal effects on each other. On the one hand, authoritarian political institutions in their different variants—including electoral populism or one-party states—engage in top-down interventions to reproduce and even strengthen existing patriarchal norms, especially within the family and economy, by means of legislation and executive policy making (Moghadam 2004, 145; Walby 2019, 425). On the other hand, the very same political actors legitimate their power by appealing to existing patriarchal discourses and using neopatriarchal networks to allocate resources clientelistically (Rodríguez 2018; Sharabi 1988, 45–8). And, crucially, the particular shape and form of the economy—for example, increasing precarization of labor and chronic unemployment—further reproduce the neopatriarchal relations of dependence, as employees often compensate their lack of socioeconomic rights by submitting to local authorities of religious communities and/or family connections, which in turn offer them social protection (Durak 2012, 73–81).

After this brief characterization of neopatriarchal orders, it will be important to zoom in on one of the cultural techne that help legitimizing them. The cultural techne we wish to focus on is the use of patriarchal discourses to consolidate the authoritarian traits of a regime. Social scientists have long argued that patriarchal discourses and analogies are commonly employed as justificatory narratives by political power holders across a wide range of contexts beyond the MENA region:

The imagery and language of father and family are widespread. [...] They form part of a culturally valid and largely implicit comprehension of the limits of political legitimacy based on a complex and largely unarticulated moral matrix of legitimate governance derived from an idealised vision of patterns of authority and behaviour within the family. (Schatzberg 1993, 451).

A striking and more recent example from the MENA region is the authoritarian populist transformation of Turkey in the last 15 years. Characterizing patriarchy as the blend of male domination and the rule of the elder, Ugur-Cinar (2017, 330) highlighted that Turkish political life has been increasingly structured along the lines of these gendered and paternalistic aspects of patriarchy. Drawing on extensive analyses of Turkish president Erdoğan's speeches, Ugur-Cinar (2017, 335) identifies patterns of patriarchal framings that marginalize antigovernment opposition by portraying protesters as unruly women and youngsters who do not respect the norms defining roles and behavior

<sup>16</sup> Our conception of neopatriarchal order is wider than Moghadam's and includes non-oil-dependent countries. For us, it is sufficient that the social order rationalizes its authoritarian leaning through patriarchal discourses and partly relies on traditional patronage relationships (Çinar 2019; Durak 2012).

appropriate to their position in a patriarchal hierarchy. Similarly, Erdoğan often portrays the relationship between him and his constituency through a structural analogy with intrafamily ties, mobilizing emotional resources to legitimate his position as the father of the nation (335–6).

The legitimation strategy here stems from the broader patriarchal culture that is being instrumentalized by political elites. Insofar as such norms and discourses already have significant influence and appeal, their effective use contributes to the legitimation of power holders' actions. This includes how power holders deal with their political opponents, who are marginalized largely as a result of their exclusion from the moral universe defined by patriarchal values embedded in the broader culture.

We submit that there are two distinct problems of power self-justification—and thus of circularity vitiated by politically motivated reasoning—in this cultural techné. First of all, as highlighted above, patriarchal norms and values that political elites use to justify their governance are partly the product of the very power of those elites. A major characteristic of neopatriarchal orders is indeed that state power is used to reinforce existing gender roles and intrafamily relations of authority (Moghadam 2004, 145; Walby 2019, 425). For instance, the preservation of conservative family laws contributes to the marginalization of women in intrafamily relations as well as in the labor market. It is also worth noting that the exercise of state power is not only observed in the decisions of executive and legislative branches. The absence of certain decisions—that is, *nondecisions*—is another way power is exercised, by excluding certain claims from the political agenda. Thus, the mere but deliberate maintenance of existing social structures pertains to the way state power is exercised, as it is a product of an active use of political power to exclude certain alternatives from the domain of policy making despite various actors' demands—for example, the demands of feminist movements. Political elites have special interests in the preservation of the status quo that are very likely to motivate their reasoning. And so, if the persistence of patriarchal norms and values depends on the support of the elite exercising state power, then the former cannot be a trustworthy source of legitimation for the latter.

However, we do not know if the effect of state power is the sole determinant for the maintenance of existing patriarchal norms. Although this degree of circularity is sufficient to cast some epistemic doubt on the political use of such norms, evidence of additional mechanisms of self-justifying power will strengthen our case. This second body of evidence of motivated reasoning and circularity can be found in empirical studies on the reproduction of patriarchal norms within the family itself. Sharabi (1988, 41–8) suggests that the early intrafamily socialization of children is a crucial factor explaining why the broader culture of neopatriarchal orders is so conducive to the creation of obedient behavior with respect to authority figures. Further empirical evidence suggests that patriarchal traits such as intimate partner violence are intergenerationally

transmitted (Islam et al. 2014). Not only behavioral dispositions but also explicit norms and gender roles are often considered transferrable from one generation to another via early socialization in the family (Platt and Polavieja 2016). The primary ethos of neopatriarchal orders is premised on dependence on family and respect for paternal authority and the elderly rather than on the ideal of autonomous citizenship. As a result, the cultural reproduction of patriarchal norms within the family is essential for the stability and legitimation of the social order. Extensively hierarchical and authoritarian intrafamily relations are the basic building blocks from which other meso- and macro-level relations derive legitimacy.

We believe this model of cultural reproduction also suffers from the problem of self-justifying power. The creation of the neopatriarchal subjectivity—a particular model of personhood with specific social identities and internalized norms—is largely a product of the neopatriarchal family—an environment in which the autonomy of children and teenagers is severely curbed in comparison to its functional equivalents—that is, other family types that still ensure cultural reproduction but with less hierarchy. The reproduction of norms and values is traceable to the exercise of power and authority within one of the institutions of the neopatriarchal order—the hierarchical power of the father and other senior figures over the young. As the very same norms and values are being instrumentalized in the legitimation of the seniors' authority, there seems to be a case of self-justifying power in the neopatriarchal family. Further, as these pro-patriarchy value orientations are also used in the legitimation of broader social institutions, one can also say that the social order as a whole is rationalized through the use of certain premises that are circular in themselves. Our contention is that social orders cannot be genuinely legitimized by circular narratives where hierarchical power relations generate their own acceptance. The epistemic circularity generated in the neopatriarchal family is particularly malignant: those who primarily enforce and inculcate these cultural technes tend to have an interest in the preservation of the status quo, which is a trigger for motivated reasoning.

One might object that our criticism is overinclusive: it ignores the basic tendency of all functioning social orders to reproduce their norms and value systems over time. Our reply is to highlight that particularly hierarchical forms of cultural reproduction are likely to exceed what is needed for a functioning social order, where function is understood in terms of ensuring long-term stability and social cooperation without reference to moral concepts such as rights or fairness (Burelli 2022): there is a baseline level of hierarchy below which the organization of social life would crumble, but we contend that power holders often use mechanisms of cultural reproduction above and beyond what the baseline requires. We do not claim to know where exactly the baseline lies or how contextual factors may affect it. However, we suggest that, all else being equal, the more hierarchical a social structure, the higher the chance of surpassing the baseline. This is basically

because, as Cohen (2014) puts it, more hierarchical structures create special interests for those who are at the top of the hierarchy. The best way to preserve those interests is to hinder social change and overemphasize the importance of existing cultural norms—that is, reinforcing status quo bias. Crudely, steep hierarchies create privilege, and privileged groups have more vested interest in distorting that level—a pattern one can observe in neopatriarchal societies. As more egalitarian family models seem to be a genuine empirical possibility in certain cultures or subcultures, the belief in the necessity of neopatriarchal families with steeper hierarchies is more likely to be shaped by motivated reasoning. And it is the epistemic distortion generated by this motivated reasoning that we deem problematic, not the existence of privilege and hierarchy per se. This is not a moral condemnation of anything above baseline hierarchy (as there might be good arguments to support a nonnecessary hierarchy) but a warning that powerful elites tend to overestimate the functional necessity of hierarchy.

To be sure, subjects may have other reasons to endorse neopatriarchy as a legitimate order. We do not hold that uncovering the self-justification of power directly reveals the illegitimacy of a particular social order. It rather shows that certain narratives and/or mechanisms are not warranted to function as genuine legitimation. If one wants to legitimize neopatriarchy or any other social order, one needs to find some other noncircular argument. A diagnosis of flawed ideology does not entail an all-things-considered condemnation of any practice or institution. Our radical realist social analysis is normative but not prescriptive: it issues evaluations but not prescriptions, though it may inform prescriptions. Insofar as definitive action guiding condemnation of a social order is desirable, we envisage a division of labor between ideology critique and other branches of political theory.

With our analysis of neopatriarchy in place, let us conclude by briefly considering how Haslanger may deal with the same phenomenon. It seems to us that Haslanger would face several difficulties in trying to identify an adequate source of moral knowledge to criticize the ideology of neopatriarchy. First, both the considerable intercultural variation in moral intuitions and the hierarchical social structures of neopatriarchy make it difficult for social actors to recognize the basic matters of justice and moral goodness. In the context of steep hierarchies, “there is little opportunity for people to develop an ability to see the general perspective of others” (Clark and Gintis 1978, 316). Because such social relations are commonly characterized by threat, antagonism, and fear, the conditions for individuals to develop proper moral attitudes seem inadequate. Second, the claims of the relevant social movements are not particularly likely to function as a sufficiently univocal source of moral input. There are simply too many different movements with competing moral commitments. Although they can form pragmatic political alliances, there is hardly enough overlap in their normative commitments to get a critical theoretical project off the ground. For instance, it is far from obvious that

feminist movements with a degree of pluralism—including liberal, nationalist, Islamic, and socialist groups—have the necessary degree of homogeneity to present a shared moral foundation for the ideology critique of neopatriarchy. Islamic feminist movements have a considerably different approach to the moral evaluation of patriarchal institutions such as the family (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008). Instead of diluting the critical potential of our debunking projects with endless processes of adjudicating competing moral claims, our approach relies on a thinner epistemic commitment, and one that is not bound to the perspective of any particular social movement.

What is more, as we have seen in our earlier discussion of Pateman, our approach does not rest on a prior negative moral judgment on its object. It is the empirical discovery of self-justifying power that generates the negative evaluation. A prior commitment or an encounter with any of the relevant social movements may have led us to the empirical literature on the pertinent social phenomena, but ultimately the evaluative judgment comes from our analysis of the empirics, not from our normative priors—except for basic epistemic ones, which Haslanger is also committed to upholding, presumably, as she relies on the same types of empirical evidence we use. It is in this sense that radical realist social analysis is more parsimonious than moralistic ideology critique: the former may need moral commitments to formulate questions but not to provide answers, whereas the latter relies on morality throughout.

One might question the sense in which our approach is parsimonious, as the critique of self-justification of power involves complex empirical claims. We do not deny that establishing such claims is a daunting task. But empirical research establishing claims at the level of complexity required by our model does exist. Our aspiration is to guide social scientists in devising contextually appropriate empirical research questions that can zero in on the phenomenon of power self-justification. At any rate, our approach is *comparatively* parsimonious—certainly in the qualitative sense of the term, and possibly also in the quantitative sense. Qualitative parsimony is a property of theories that posit fewer different *types of entities*, whereas quantitative parsimony is a property of theories that posit fewer *individual entities* (Baker 2003).

Haslanger needs *both* empirical claims as complex as the ones we invoke (backed by epistemic normativity) *and* moral premises, whereas we can dispense with the latter. So we need just one type of normativity. This simplicity results in qualitative parsimony. Epistemic and moral norms are subject to different kinds of skepticism, so qualitative parsimony is an important advantage because it minimizes a theory’s exposure to different types of attacks on its sources of normativity. This is an advantage even if one disregards the various difficulties engendered by moral commitments discussed above.

There may also be a quantitative parsimony advantage to our approach. Haslanger (2012, 388) needs to first identify the “operative concepts” within cultural



technes that convey information about the actual use patterns of ideological concepts (which, according to Haslanger, often diverge from language users' conscious interpretations). Such inferences require large datasets about language use and extensive network analysis, which are at least as complex as the empirical literatures we use. Besides, Haslanger (2012, 313) needs to collect extensive empirical evidence to demonstrate that certain cultural technes produce consequences that match her conception of harm (hers is not a deontological view that criticizes cultural technes on grounds of disrespect and similar moral categories). As a result, even if both approaches are comparably complex in matters of empirical inquiry, ours is more parsimonious to the extent that we avoid relying on moral criteria. At any rate, even if one were to question whether this is an actual gain in quantitative parsimony, one would at least have to acknowledge the distinctiveness of our epistemic approach.

Still, and to conclude, radical realist social analysis is in principle open to complementary forms of normative theorizing: a critique of the epistemic problem of power self-justification may even be bolstered by moral advocacy against the relevant power structures. And so there may be a place for moral theory alongside our approach, including perhaps the "new" Anglo-American social criticism which, in any case, is barely distinct from other forms of moral theorizing. But, as we have seen, that pairing would not be without risks, including the very risk of ideological distortion.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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