## Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Being realistic and demanding the impossible

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> The greatest artist does not have any concept
> Which a single piece of marble does not itself contain
> Within its excess, though only
> A hand that obeys the intellect can discover it.
> *Michelangelo Buonarroti*

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Fidelity to the facts in political theory is often associated with a conservative slant, or at least a tendency to prefer incremental reformism to radicalism. Political realism—both in its classical manifestations and its contemporary revival[1]—is frequently linked to that tendency. For instance, in recent works we read that realism can lead to a "collapsing of the space for serious challenges to major social and political institutions (Markell, 2010, p. 176), that "the closer political theorists are to politics the more their own judgment and frailties will be tested" (Philp, 2012, p. 646), and that "realism will inevitably tend to nudge us towards a greater acceptance of the status quo, towards more modesty in the change that we are prepared to propose or demand" (Finlayson, 2017, p. 271). In this article I resist those claims, and contribute to the project of reclaiming the radical potential of political realism (Brinn, 2019; Cross, 2019; Honig & Stears, 2011; McKean, 2016; McQueen, 2016; Prinz, 2016; Raekstad, 2016; Prinz & Rossi, 2017). I develop a form of realism as genealogy–both debunking and vindicatory–and show how it can be more radical than both ideal and nonideal approaches to normative political theory. I arrive at this conclusion by addressing two related, partly methodological and partly substantive challenges facing realism.

The first challenge concerns the very possibility of a realist *normative* political theory: if characterizing realism by contrasting it with moralism means that political judgment is not to be derived from pre-political moral commitments, what other sources of political normativity are available? The second challenge is status quo bias: does realism's fidelity to the facts condemn it to some form of conservative complacency?

I argue that there is an important sense in which realists can support radical and even unachievable political change—one *can* be realistic and demand the impossible, as the *soixante-huitard* slogan goes. To see how that may be

the case one needs to characterize realism by contrasting it with both nonideal theory and utopianism (in a pejorative sense of the term, as I shall clarify). In a nutshell, realism differs from nonideal theory because it need not be concerned with feasibility constraints, and it differs from utopianism because it eschews plans of the perfect polity or for the correct course of political action. Utopianism, realism and nonideal theory are all technical terms, so my definitions will by necessity be stipulative, though, it is to be hoped, not overly controversial. With those distinctions in place it will become clear that moralism is at greater risk of status quo bias than realism because of its relative blindness to ideological bias. Whereas realism, I argue, is an approach grounded in our best social-scientific accounts of politics, but not in such a way as to jeopardize the transformative potential of our political imagination. The upshot is that, if we set aside the quasi-technocratic aspirations of a political theory geared to generate immediate policy guidance, realism (rather than nonideal theory) emerges as the best bet for those sympathetic to many of the concerns about fidelity to the facts of real politics raised in current methodological debates (e.g., Estlund, 2014, 2017; Freeden, 2012; Hamlin & Stemplowska, 2012; Horton, 2017; Miller, 2016; Mills, 2005; Rossi, 2016; Valentini, 2012; Wiens, 2012).

That, however, this not true of all forms of realism. In fact, after briefly characterizing realism in the next section, I move on to distinguishing between ordorealism, contextual realism, and radical realism. I then show how each approach draws on different sources of normativity and, relatedly, exhibits fidelity to a different set of facts about politics. I associate ordorealism with the prioritization of peace and stability, contextual realism with practice-dependent norms, and radical realism with a form of ideology critique. I then contrast realism with nonideal theory and discuss utopianism and the prospects for a radical realism. I characterize a version of radical realism with a distinctive epistemic normativity, which has radical potential that surpasses what is found in moralist political theory and also opens a new option in the debate on the status of normativity in Marxism. That is because, while radical realism avoids potentially ideological moralizing, it can inform open-ended social critique as well as lend support to concrete forms of prefigurative politics. To be sure, that is not sufficient to establish the superiority of realism to moralism, and not even to identify the all-things-considered best form of realism. My aim here is more modest: I want to show that, pace some critics (Erman & Möller, 2015a; Estlund, 2017; Leader-Maynard & Worsnip, 2018; Scheuerman, 2013), contemporary realism is a distinctive and consistent position in normative political theory, and that at least one of its variants does not suffer from a status quo bias—rather, it is as radical as it gets.

## 2 | BEING REALISTIC

### 2.1 | A working characterization

The basic contours of political realism are fairly well understood by now, so I will just clear the ground from a few sources of misunderstanding in the extant taxonomies, and in so doing I shall also address some recent work that casts doubt on realism's consistency and distinctiveness. In the most general sense, political realism is a view about the normative autonomy of the political, and the negation of what Bernard Williams calls 'political moralism' (Williams, 2005, p. 5): the view that the normative standards that appropriately regulate personal interactions should also regulate political life. For instance, political moralists maintain that if I ought to treat both my friends and my fellow citizens as ends in themselves, it's because of a wider moral principle that says I ought to treat all persons as ends in themselves. Or think of the luck egalitarianism, espoused by many contemporary political philosophers: roughly put, normative political principles of distributive justice are derived from pre-political commitments about the importance of moral responsibility. Whether Rawls also adopted a moralist approach is debatable (Gledhill, 2012; Jubb, 2014; Thomas, 2017). Nozick, on the other hand, articulated his moralism most explicitly:

> Moral philosophy sets the background for, and the boundaries of, political philosophy. What persons may and may not do to one another limits what they may do through the apparatus of a state, or do to establish such an apparatus. (Nozick, 1974, p. 6)

While that approach remains prevalent in contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy, realists claim that no overarching principles that span personal morality and politics are plausible. That may appear to fly in the face of simple consistency requirements: if there are true overarching moral principles ("bring about the greatest good for the greatest number," or "never lie," say),—where "overarching" means that they apply to any agent regardless of whether the context of action is politics or not—then shouldn't we just apply them to our political predicament, in a categorical or even just pro tanto way? The realist contention is that moralists beg the question of whether there are any such principles spanning the personal and the political—a fraught distinction we will discuss in the next subsection—or at least whether they are good guides to political action or judgment. That is not to say that non-overarching principles are just role ethics principles for political office-holders (Estlund, 2017, p. 366), for non-overarching principles are not just a context-specific application of overarching principles. More precisely, non-overarching, properly political principles don't draw on the same sources of normativity as moral principles. That is why realists believe that there are no overarching principles. If such overarching moral principles existed, then at least a significant portion of normative political theory would be a branch of applied ethics. If realists can show that they can make normative political judgments that don't draw on overarching principles and so don't share the sources of normativity of moral principles, then they will have made room for their view.

One may reply that the lack of overarching moral principles doesn't preclude the notion that politics should be governed by moral principles, albeit moral principles that apply only to the political domain (Estlund, 2017, p. 367). That is a point realists who are not overly concerned with semantics are ready to concede (Williams, 2005, p. 5). What matters is that realist normative standards—however one may wish to call them—are not inferred from overarching, pre-political values or principles.[2]

## 2.2 | Three realist approaches

The main arguments in favor of the rejection of overarching moral principles, i.e., the realist thesis about the normative autonomy of the political, could be crudely summarized by this slogan: if morality could solve political problems, we wouldn't have politics. I want to distinguish between three argumentative strategies in support of this claim, each of which leads to a different strand of realism: ordorealism, contextual realism, and radical realism. Three caveats about that taxonomy are in order. First, my task here isn't to show how these arguments defeat moralism, but simply to articulate the positions realists may take. Second, those are Weberian ideal types; most worked out positions incorporate elements from more than one of the three approaches. Third, I make no consequential hermeneutical claims about any of the canonical figures I mention to fix ideas, nor about their reception.

Ordorealism has a familiar Hobbesian starting point, which Bernard Williams calls 'the first political question': "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" (Williams, 2005, p. 3). The basic thought is that, left to their own devices, including their own ethical judgments, people conflict, with highly undesirable results—so much so that ethical judgment itself may be reduced to a dead letter. Morality or justice are not in themselves a way out of this problem but, as Hobbes saw, they may be instruments through which political power enables us to solve that problem. So we need a freestanding sphere of political normativity if there is to be scope for personal morality, let alone most other trappings of human sociality. Note how leaving (or not falling into) the state of nature is considered desirable not out of some moral commitment to the desirability of political association,[3] but simply because it is a precondition for the enjoyment of most of what we happen to take to be valuable, morally or otherwise (Williams, 2005, p. 3). This is a modest point about the instrumental value of political association. As such it is an empirical claim, and one that probably wouldn't hold true in the few remaining small-scale stateless societies (Widerquist & McCall, 2015). But a certain contingency even of its basic claims is characteristic of the empiricist roots of this strand of realism.

The contextual strategy's starting point can also be understood as beginning empirically, through an observation of the phenomenological difference between the political and the personal. One doesn't need to invoke Carl Schmitt to note that something is amiss in the thought that lying to my friends is bad for the same reasons that lying in a political

campaign is bad, if indeed it is. This approach may remind us of Machiavelli's claims about the tensions between personal and political values and so of the unlikeliness of a unified source for both. Yet realists need not endorse the more radical and old-fashioned readings of Machiavelli, according to which there is no salient difference between legitimate authority and effective power. Indeed some realists elevate such a distinction to a foundational principle (Sagar, 2018). The important point is just that the normative standards that apply to the exercise of political power are different from those that apply to personal relationships.

Here, however, one may worry that contextual realists have failed to learn the feminist lesson encapsulated in the slogan, "the personal is political." To assuage that worry, one may distinguish the personal/political boundary from the public/private one. Many liberal theorists consider them to be equivalent, or in any case focus solely on the latter, as their main concern is to identify the appropriate sphere of legitimate state intervention. So they tend to accommodate feminist concerns by acknowledging that, while the public/private line may have been drawn in the wrong place, the distinction remains viable and important (Gavison, 1992). Liberal realists, qua liberals, will be unable to accommodate the radical position of feminists who reject the public/private distinction altogether (MacKinnon, 1989). But realists need not be liberals, and if they aren't they can focus on the personal/political line instead, which in turn may allow for kinship with quite radical feminist positions (Frazer, 2015). That is because the personal/political distinction is not about a narrow liberal concern with the limits of state action. When the slogan was coined in the 1960s, feminists wanted to point out that, even in movements uninterested in the state or antagonistic towards it, the sphere of appropriately political action was conceived too narrowly, often in ways that marginalized issues of concern to women (Finlayson, 2016, pp. 125–128). That is not to say that the line cannot be drawn. Rather, the slogan reminds us to look with suspicion at any established, ossified way of drawing the line between the personal and the political.

The point about questioning the received wisdom about issues like the political/personal divide—critiquing them as ideology, if you will—leads to the third and final strategy at the realist's disposal, the radical one whose guiding thought is that "ethics is usually dead politics; the hand of a victor in a past conflict reaching out to extend its grip to the present and the future," as Raymond Geuss puts it (2010, p. 42). Insofar as morality is influenced by political power, moral advocacy for political actions and institutions should be the object of critical suspicion—more so than most mainstream, ethics-first political theory allows.

That point highlights a connection between the radical and ordorealist approaches. For ordorealists morality and justice are *instrumenta regni*. The radical approach shares that insight. However, on the ordorealist view the priority remains to establish order by whatever means necessary and so the insight is not problematized. The radical approach tries to establish criteria for making qualitative distinctions between the moral (and other) beliefs that support political authority. Different strands of realism assign different relative weights to stability and ideology, and resolve the trade-off accordingly.

## 2.3 | Sources of realist normativity

While there are points of contact between the three realist approaches it is best to think of them as ways of dealing with and prioritizing three different problems: the need for order and stability, the question of the appropriate bounds of political power, and the intertwining of power and knowledge. Solving one problem may well require a trade-off in terms of either or both the others. By way of illustration it will be useful to show how Williams's position incorporates elements of all three, though somewhat unstably. Williams offers a rough formula to argue that, "now and around here," only liberal regimes are legitimate (2005, p. 9):

$$\text{LEG[itimation]} + \text{Modernity} = \text{Liberalism}$$

As I will show in a moment, the insistence on meeting the basic legitimation demand is ordorealist, the references to a form of legitimation specifically suited for modernity are contextual, and the litmus test for the admissibility of beliefs in legitimacy is radical.

The basic legitimation demand exemplifies the ordorealist approach insofar as it requires the provision of order and stability, so relative success in meeting the demand becomes the basis of normative judgments. Importantly, though, the coercive provision of order is conceptually distinguishable from raw domination, which is suspended warfare rather than a political relationship (Hall, 2015)—all politics is coercive, but not all coercion is political. While it is possible to say of any regime whether it meets the basic legitimation demand, the notions of order and stability here can be filled in in context-dependent ways: what might have been acceptable politics in feudal Europe would not pass muster now. Politics versus raw domination is a conceptual distinction, but ordorealists can accommodate conceptual change. Yet a prudent attitude towards change prevails among realists who emphasize those concerns. So, simplifying somewhat, in the work of Matt Sleat (2013a) and Andrew Sabl (2011, 2017) we find defenses of relatively conservative versions of liberalism, with an emphasis on providing a stable outlet for the management of diversity social conflict while renouncing the neo-Kantian project of neutral arbitration.

Contextual realism can be associated with a practice-dependent approach to the sources of normativity (Sangiovanni, 2008; Rossi, 2012). The rough idea is that normative political principles are grounded in an interpretation of the point and purpose of particular political practices. The contextual realist, then, constructs her normative standards by asking whether the point and purpose of a particular set of institutions is genuinely political (i.e., whether it addresses the right questions about the provision of order, etc.), and whether those institutions are suited to their purpose. In Williams's theory this is exemplified by the connection between modernity and liberalism: an analysis of the historical context yields an account of the most suitable regime. This is a different level of evaluation from that which a pure ordorealist approach would warrant. For it allows us to rank alternative legitimate regimes on the basis of their fitness for purpose. Robert Jubb's recent defense of non-intrinsic egalitarianism exemplifies this approach (Jubb, 2015). Crudely, on Jubb's view an egalitarian standard turns out to be required for legitimacy on the basis of a reading of what may be expected of political institutions under contemporary conditions. New realist work on the legitimacy and justice of the EU similarly draws on Williams-inspired practice dependence (Beetz, 2017).

The radical approach, on the other hand, acquires its normativity by contesting what one may call legitimation stories. Williams's critical theory principle provides a good illustration. The distinction between necessary political coercion and raw domination partly depends on whether the exercise of political power makes sense to those over whom it is exercised (Williams, 2005, pp. 4–6), but this perception can be manipulated by ideology. For Williams this happens when a belief in the legitimacy of a coercive order is caused by the very power it supports and is in the interest of that power (Williams, 2002, pp. 230–234; 2005, p. 6; Sagar, 2018). One may not find that account of ideological distortion persuasive, but radical-minded realists must have one in order to make good the idea that there is more to legitimacy than a belief in it. And, importantly, the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable legitimation stories is not moral but epistemic: ideological legitimation stories just aren't what they purport to be, so epistemic caution requires us to disregard them, as we will see in 3.2 below (Prinz & Rossi, 2017).[4] Recent realist work in this vein includes critiques of the ideology of Rawlsian political liberalism (Finlayson, 2015; Freyenhagen, 2011) as well as historically informed, genealogical critiques of specific policy proposals or normative commitments (Prinz & Rossi, *forthcoming*; Rossi, 2017; Rossi & Argenton, 2017; Rossi & Prinz, *forthcoming*). Charles Mills's influential critique of the ideological nature of mainstream political philosophy's methodology may also be read in this light (Mills, 2005).

## 3 | DEMANDING THE IMPOSSIBLE

### 3.1 | Realism, nonideal theory, and fidelity to the facts

That thumbnail sketch of realism should go some way towards explaining why realism is distinct from nonideal theory, even though it is frequently lumped together with it by the many theorists who reduce it to an approach centered on "the concrete choices among limited alternatives made by agents with finite resources" (Markell, 2010, p. 176) or on the fact that "real world politics is characterized by noncompliance" (North, 2017, p. 1).[5] Both realism and nonideal

**TABLE 1** Varieties of political realism

| Type of realism | Source(s) of normativity | Relevant facts |
|---|---|---|
| Ordorealism | Distinction between politics and raw domination | Facts about how to provide order and satisfy the basic legitimation demand |
| Contextual realism | Practice dependence | (Interpretation of) point and purpose of relevant institutions/practices |
| Radical realism | Ideology critique of legitimation stories | Facts about power relations and belief formation |

theory are about taking "the facts" more seriously than most contemporary anglophone political theory does, but here I will show that, at least for some variants of realism, we are talking about importantly different sorts of facts. And that has consequences for the level of radicalism available to each theoretical approach.

Crudely, nonideal theory is a set of guidelines for how best to pursue our normative political ideals in the actual world. This can either be taken to point to a division of labour between ideal and nonideal theory, much as Rawls envisaged (Simmons, 2010), or to indicate a need to prioritize engagement with real-world political problems as opposed to imagining the ideal polity (Sen, 2006; Wiens, 2012)—either out of agnosticism about the ideal, or because one sees the ideal as an ideological distraction from concrete opportunities for social change (Mills, 2005). Let us bracket these debates. I just want to show that there is a consequential distinction between nonideal theory and realism.

Whatever our account of nonideal theory, a class of facts is going to play a crucial role in it; namely, facts about feasibility constraints. On the division of labour model, given an ideal theory describing a desirable and yet (for the time being or indefinitely) unachievable political state of affairs, nonideal theory will tell us what is the best way to approximate the ideal, given what is feasible. If we reject the division of labour model and maintain that normative theories should directly rank political options against one another as opposed to against some ideal (Sen, 2006), then nonideal theory will consist of a balancing act between the values embodied in alternative feasible scenarios. Either way nonideal theory is a criterion or a set of criteria for the ranking of politically *feasible* states of affairs.

Now recall the three realist strategies for generating non-moralistic political normativity. Facts will play a role in each strategy, but they don't have to be facts about feasibility for all types of realism. Though the lines in Table 1 ought to be decidedly blurry, the table offers a schematic representation of that point (Table 1).

The third column shows the difference between realism(s) and nonideal theory. Roughly, we may say that the ties to the status quo become weaker as we descend through the rows. Only the top right box is bound to contain facts about feasibility: ordorealists will have to identify political solutions that can provide order in the actual world. This type of realism is indeed most often associated with the conservative or authoritarian figures in the canon: Schmitt, Oakeshott, perhaps Lenin. It also plays an important role in versions of contemporary liberal realism (Sabl, 2017; Sleat, 2012; Williams, 1997) that are less keen on or hopeful about progressive social change than mainstream liberal theory. Normative theorizing in that vein is tied to options reachable from the status quo. As we have seen that realism and nonideal theory cut across one another, we may say that, insofar as they have to take feasibility constraints into account, ordorealists are nonideal theorists of realism.

The contextual realist will have scope for radical social criticism through a reinterpretation of the practices and institutions at hand (Walzer, 1993). A practice-dependent approach is by definition anchored to reality, but the extent to which that produces a status quo bias varies greatly depending on the details of the approach. There is in fact a growing literature addressing this issue (Erman & Möller, 2015c; Sangiovanni, 2008), so I cannot do justice to its complexity here. Suffice it to say that, even if critics on the left are correct that the most radical options are ruled out to practice-dependent theorists, there are plenty of transformative proposals informed by that approach. Many are not realist, but some adopt realist methodological commitments (e.g., Beetz, 2017; Dasandi & Erez, 2019; Jubb, 2015).

Finally, the radical realist will be able to run the gamut from contemplative Adornian pessimism to anti-hegemonic transformative projects. This work will be informed by an understanding of how power relations shape beliefs in legitimacy, and so it will draw on the best social-scientific accounts of those dynamics, but that places no obvious limits on

our ability to critique and our attempts to reconfigure those beliefs (Freyenhagen, 2013). At any rate, and crucially for our purposes, the radical realist has no need for feasibility constraints. That is not to say that all status quo bias comes from feasibility constraints, but arguably all status quo bias due to fidelity to the facts does.

## 3.2 | Utopianism and radical realism

So (some) realists can demand the impossible. Realism is anchored in facts, but not necessarily marred by status quo bias. Does that mean that radical realists can prescribe anything that is metaphysically possible, with no regard to feasibility? G.A. Cohen and David Estlund tell us that it is permissible and even advisable to do so (Cohen, 2008; Estlund, 2011, 2014). It would be an odd result if radical realism found itself aligned with positions one may call arch-moralistic (or methodologically moralistic, in Estlund's parlance). My view is that realists can make prescriptions that do not take feasibility into account, but other limitations apply: realists' attention to the complexities of political dynamics cautions against two forms of theoretical hubris, which we may call *technocratic* and *ideological* moralism.[6]

Technocratic moralism is the attempt to provide a blueprint for the ideal polity. This is a problem found both in deliberately fanciful accounts of utopia—on which more below—and in forms of nonideal theory that interpret fidelity to the facts as a balancing act between pre-political moral ideals and empirical feasibility studies of detailed policy proposals. The main problem with this tendency is that it treats politics as if it were similar to a seminar room, and so unduly restricts the space for genuinely political contestation: there is much to be said for leaving concrete policy issues to the fracas of politics, where participation is not foreclosed on purportedly extra-political grounds, and so winners and losers emerge with their epistemic credentials and accompanying political standing intact. This sort of technocracy follows a long tradition that goes at least as far as Bentham's detailed and ethically grounded designs for the Panopticon and Comte's philosophically motivated proposal to divide France into precisely 19 *intendances*. A 19th century British socialist aptly describes the realist attitude towards those efforts:

> [W]e cannot describe, that is, picture, in the concrete, any state of society of which the world has had no experience. For into the reality of a society, even in its broader details, there enters a large element of contingency, of alogicality, of unreason, with which no general principles will furnish us. (Bax, 1891)

By contrast, radical realism is empirically informed, and so while it can let the political imagination run free of feasibility constraints, it is wary of letting it go down the dark alleys of precise prescriptions that balance an unwieldy amount of variables. The realist can be politically ambitious and systematic, but must be theoretically modest enough to leave those details to politics: there are aspects of politics not amenable to philosophical domestication.

The charge of ideological moralism is the realists' way of turning the tables on their opponents. Realism's status quo bias is supposed to come from its reliance on facts. Moralists like Cohen and, to a lesser extent, Estlund suggest that the best guarantee for truly progressive thought comes from banishing facts from the justification of our normative principles: crudely, the less we rely on facts, the more we rely on moral judgments alone (Rossi, 2016). But where do these judgments—and the intuitions that underpin them—come from? To see a potential for bias there one doesn't have to agree completely with Sally Haslanger on the workings of ideology: "our meanings are not transparent to us: often ideology interferes with an understanding of the true workings of our conceptual framework and our language" (Haslanger, 2012, p. 383). Suffice it to observe that, as many philosophical and psychological studies show, our moral intuitions and system-justifying moral commitments must relate in some non-trivial way to our present practices, if only because, whatever else it may be, morality is one of the practices we are engaged in (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). In which case there is at least a debate to be had as to the relative merits of fact-induced as opposed to ideology-induced status quo bias.

The two forms of moralistic theoretical hubris are pitfalls radical realism must avoid. But once they are ruled out, what room is left for radical normative theorizing? The answer I wish to outline here takes its cue from an ambiguity in the word "utopia", which may be taken to mean "good place" (*eu*topia) or "no place" (*ou*topia). The blueprint of the

technocratic moralist and the aspiration to moral perfection of the ideological moralist are eutopian. Radical realism is outopian, in the sense that its normativity is negative: it just tells us that, given its diagnosis, the society we should aspire to is, for the time being, a non-place—though with the partial exceptions that we shall explore below.

Now, even if there are no blueprints, on what basis can we make those normative assessments without drawing on pre-political moral commitments? Recall our discussion of the sources of normativity for the radical approach to realism: normative judgments follow from a critical appraisal of legitimation stories, and the appraisal is predicated on epistemic rather than moral considerations. If a legitimation story isn't what it purports to be, it becomes epistemically suspicious and so should be *debunked*, and the practices it supports should be disposed of. Conversely, a critical examination of other legitimation stories may *vindicate* the practices they support. Some would rather resort to notions of autonomy to ground those appraisals, and even Williams appeals to "the most basic sense of freedom," which tells us that we should try to avoid being "in the power of another" to justify his critical theory principle, but it is important for a thoroughgoing realist to resist the siren call of even such minimal pre-political moral commitments (Williams, 2002, p. 231). Or rather, anyone using such commitments in normative political theory does so at the non-trivial risk of having them debunked at a later stage—for we should not employ pre-political moral commitments whose genealogy turns out to be tied up with the very political norms or institutions they are meant to justify. The rough idea behind that move can be expressed using the analogy of refereeing: it would be epistemically unwise to use an author as a referee for her own work. Likewise, if (say) it turns out that states had a central role in producing our current notion of private property, then it is (ceteris paribus) epistemically unwise to use the notion of property to assess the legitimacy of states.[7] David Estlund invokes another analogy to express his skepticism of this sort of realist debunking: "arguments in criminal court are overwhelmingly self-serving, and often produced for that reason. This should alert us, but it does not somehow sidestep the pressing issue of whether the defendant's arguments can be answered" (Estlund, 2017, p. 370). But, to remain within the legal analogy, the point here is not one about the quality of arguments, but about whether some arguments are even admissible evidence. It may be inevitable that some inadmissible evidence may be heard, but it cannot be made to count in favor of a verdict.

Something similar holds for the case of vindicatory genealogies. Suppose, for instance, that a radical realist wanted to probe the legitimation status of non-hierarchically coercive, acephalous forms of political organization—a type of structure we shall return to in our discussion of prefigurative politics below. As in the case of property rights, this isn't a line of argument we can explore in detail here. However we can envision how a vindicatory genealogy may take its cue from the fact that those forms of organization have been standard—or natural, in an Aristotelian vein—for the overwhelming majority of human history across all contexts (Widerquist & McCall, 2015), which in turn points to the need to assess them using legitimacy criteria that differ from those used to evaluate more artificial developments, such as the state system. If the legitimation stories supporting non-hierarchical societies pass muster it is because their genealogy reveals a lack of potentially self-serving distortions of our belief formation processes. Once again, the normativity here is epistemic.

So, insofar as radical realism is attractive in its own right, it also lends support to the anti-moralistic current within Marxism. Indeed, it will be useful to compare it with a form of Marxism that enjoys considerable favor in current academic debates; namely, the moralized interpretation of Marx's critique of capitalism. This is not the place to revisit the debate on the role of justice and morality in Marx (Geras, 1985; Lukes, 1985; Raekstad, 2014); however, some pointers from that literature will be useful to situate the position I intend to make room for. Two important strands of Marxism have been converging towards the moralized interpretation in similar ways: the Gramsci-inspired, counter-hegemonic project of preparing the ground for revolutionary social change by intervening on the culture before attacking its underpinning material structures directly, and the analytic Marxist project, championed by G.A. Cohen, of using moral discourse to foreground socialist political practice. Both projects revive the importance of normative theory to Marxism, against a long-standing Marxist current that rejects it (Leiter, 2015). But both projects are instances of moralism, at least if we interpret the Gramscian approach as involving the construction of positive normative ideals, much as in Cohen. So this form of normative theory is not available to radical Marxist realists. Their position is closer to Adorno's critical theory: a normative approach, but one that limits itself to critique, even though (pace Adorno) the critique can

both debunk and vindicate. The realist Marxist position I favor is a middle ground between anti-normative Marxism, which limits itself to causal claims and predictions about society's development, and moralistic Marxism, which seeks to articulate positive socialist ideals, moralized conceptions of exploitation, and so on.

An analogy might help seeing how that middle ground position might work. On a traditional definition, sculpture consists in the removal of material—Michelangelo expertly chips away at a block of Carrara marble until the David emerges. My radical realist critique is like that, insofar as it removes epistemically suspect legitimation stories, and leaves intact those that are epistemically above board. But now the analogy breaks down, at least in part: we do not have a preparatory study of the planned sculpture, for that would be the technocrat's blueprint. Nonetheless we have a criterion, a theory of ideology that guides our critical efforts, which is not unlike the guiding drawings sculptors make on the side of marble blocks. In one sense, this is closest to Marx's own conception of social critique: "confining myself merely to the critical analysis of the actual facts, instead of writing recipes (Comtist ones?) for the cook-shops of the future" (Marx 1873/1990, p. 99).[8] On the other hand, the sculpture analogy should lead us to disawow Marx's optimism about what critique would engender. Marx believed that a new, non-oppressive society would emerge from the ashes of the society transformed by critique-driven revolution—like the David from the block of marble. But what reason do we have for such optimism? The realist perspective suggests that Marx was trying to reconcile two incompatible desiderata: dispensing with blueprints and being optimistic about society's future. But if we are serious about the former, we should be open to the possibility that we may not be able to turn the marble into a beautiful sculpture after all. Once we remove all structures condemned by our negative critique, society may rearrange itself along new oppressive structures, supported by new flawed ideologies. And even the structures warranted by our vindicatory genealogies may not live up to their full promise. Why think that history will end, and that it will end well at that?

To see what that entails, let us consider where that view sits in the debate between moralist and non-moralist Marxists. The debate is often couched in terms of whether Marx considered capitalism to be unjust. Steven Lukes identifies four possible answers to that question (1985, p. 48):

- Marx thought the relation between capitalist and worker was just.

- He thought it was unjust.

- He thought it was both just and unjust—that is, just in one respect and unjust in another.

- He thought it was neither just nor unjust.

The radical realism outlined here opens a fifth portion of logical space:

- So long as we live under capitalism, we cannot know whether the relation between capitalist and worker is just, unjust, or neither.

That is because we don't know whether removing the ideological obstacles to a correct appraisal of social structures will reveal what a just society looks like, nor the way in which it will change our normative judgments on the present society; we simply don't know what our perspective will be once we eliminate our present ideological distortions. We don't even know whether it will be possible to eliminate those distortions and the structures that support them. That is also why we cannot know whether any possible alternative society will be an improvement over the present one, nor whether a society not in need of improvement will ever be possible. Recall: realist critique need not tell us that a given social structure is oppressive or unjust. It aims instead to tell us that the legitimation stories supporting that structure are epistemically suspicious and so should be discarded, or that the stories supporting other actual or hypothetical structures should be taken seriously.

What will or should happen if and when specific beliefs in legitimacy are debunked or vindicated is a separate question, which different theorists will answer differently, depending on further normative or empirical commitments. The point here is to reveal a viable position in logical space, not to develop its practical consequences, for that would require taking up a number of debates in moral psychology and social science. But it is possible to give a flavor of the options.

Consider negative critique first. Some realists may demand the abolition of the relevant structures, even when that is impossible, as in not feasible[9]—and they will remind those who scoff at their disregard for feasibility that restricting political aspirations to what may work here and soon is an attitude typical of technocratic complacency, and as such it ignores an important aspect of political reality; namely, unexpected or unforeseeable radical change. We may also hypothesize that, once enough people realize that a central plank of their belief in the legitimacy of capitalism is faulty, or maybe simply after immiseration has taken enough of a toll, people will rebel and change the system of production. But we cannot know whether the new system will be so devoid of the need to conceal its real power dynamics so as to afford an unclouded view of human relations. Marx's optimism might have been misplaced.

Other realists may be more cautious. Suppose we found out that our thinking on, say, the wage relation is epistemically distorted. And, as our ideology critique will have exposed areas of suspected obfuscation, we will be able to articulate philosophically which questions social science should ask—an eminently normative task, but one still compatible with Humean empiricism, and so with an ideal of fidelity to the facts that chimes with the epistemic standards of current social science. So the realist perspective helps us see how, as Leiter (2015) shows, Marx's avowed anti-empiricism is unnecessary and even detrimental to his aims. This relates to the issue of the alleged status quo bias of fidelity to the facts. Insofar as facts are thought to induce bias, it is partly because of a conflation between empiricism and common sense. Marx rejected the former because he thought it was inseparable from the latter, which in turn (and here radical realists would agree) is inseparable from ideology. So the challenge for radical realists is to drive a wedge between empirically informed political theory and acquiescence to common sense understandings of politics.

Now, the refusal to condemn social structures directly and the reduced optimism relative to Marx's position may give renewed energy to a worry this article is meant to address: does this approach result in a kind of pessimism that is often, perhaps correctly, associated with resignation to the status quo (Finlayson, 2017)? To return to the sculpture analogy, what if by chipping away at the marble we find out that it is irremediably corrupted? That is to say, why discard an epistemically distorted legitimation story if we don't know whether it will ultimately possible to eliminate distortions? The answer I wish to suggest is temperamentally radical in a way reminiscent of Gramsci's pessimism of the intellect cum optimism of the will: there is no guarantee that the ultimate prize is within reach, but that is not enough of a reason not to pursue it.

But there is a more hopeful angle. When we say that the marble may be corrupted we mean that society, or the locus in which most political power is exercised, may not be entirely rid of ideologically flawed beliefs and the structures they support. First, that is not to say that progress cannot be made. Progress is possible, even though we don't know whether it is in our power to achieve it. Besides, failing to produce a whole polity or society immune from negative critique does not preclude smaller scale political initiatives supported by vindicatory genealogies. Think of what has come to be called prefigurative politics: one can create microcosms supported by alternative legitimation stories, irrespective of whether similar structures are feasible at the level of the whole society. To be sure, prefiguration is often understood as a way to enact what one hopes or expects eventually to extend society-wide (Raekstad, 2018). But it doesn't need to be understood that way. Small-scale structures may simply be the best we can hope for here and now, and that is all the more reason to pursue them, while still bearing in mind that a focus on the particular carries the risk of pro status quo quietism at the general, structural level. Indeed that risk is best balanced against the hope of extending the spaces of prefiguration as widely as possible.

One might object that it isn't clear why prefigurative structures are less likely to be subject to ideological distortions. The radical realist has at least two replies.[10] We can illustrate each in reference to the examples of debunking and vindicatory genealogies canvassed above, e.g., that private property doesn't have a normative standing that floats free of that of the state, or that non-state coercive political structures can provide order and stability. On the one hand, the radical realist could follow the prevailing line of most theories of immanent critique: we inevitably start out with ideologically suspect beliefs and commitments, and then continuously revise them dialectically in light of our practices and experiences (Stahl, 2013). Here the genealogies are constructed with epistemic standards that—at least to begin with—do not claim a special status relative to society's prevailing narratives. The genealogies rely on the established results of empirical social science.

On the other hand, there is a bolder move, and one that is directly tied to the idea of prefigurative politics. The idea is that if prefiguration is at all possible, then it can be free of ideological distortions, because there are no structural impediments that make distortions necessary, and when there are no such impediments social theory naturally tends to uncover the truth. We can unpack this idea with reference to G.A. Cohen's defense of the Marxian account of ideology (Cohen, 2014), which floats free of his wider moralized interpretation. Cohen's discussion starts from the problem of how a Marxist may consistently claim that all previous social theories are ideologically distorted because they are the product of class interests, whereas his theory is true. The solution, according to Cohen, requires us to accept the premise that the proletariat will make a successful revolution—successful in the simple sense that the proletariat will defeat its opponents, not in the question-begging sense that the revolution will bring about a true socialist society devoid of ideological distortions (2014, p. 277). Granting that the workers will make a successful revolution yields the possibility of ideology-free proletarian social theory because, unlike, for example, the French bourgeoisie, as per Marx's famous discussion, the proletariat has the numerical strength to succeed without the help of other classes, and so has no need to rely on false beliefs that mask partial class interests as universal human interests.

Absent the impediment of the need for coalition-building obfuscation, Cohen concludes, it will be possible for the proletariat to rely on true beliefs about society: "it is not only the office but also the natural aim of intellectuals to discover truth, so that social theorists will arrive at it if nothing impedes them" (2014, p. 278). Now, it is my contention that if we substitute prefiguration for revolution (and remain neutral as to whether prefiguration will eventually lead to wholesale revolution), Cohen's argument can be used to support the bolder radical realist strategy I outlined above, in a way that illuminates the connection between radical realism's epistemic normativity and prefigurative politics. The thought is that if it is possible for a group to establish their prefigurative political structure without support from other social groups, then it will be possible for that group to erect their structure with no need for distorted beliefs. In a way, this version of the argument is less onerous than Cohen's: while Cohen requires an assumption about a future event (the successful proletarian revolution), we can vindicate our vindicatory genealogy (as it were) by pointing to actual prefigurative structures—from Occupy camps to autonomous zones such as Zapatista Chiapas, the Democratic Federation of Norther Syria (or Rojava), and the zone à défendre in France, to name just some prominent examples.

Here a critic may still object that the political actors who bring about those prefigurative structures must operate from within society's wider and presumably distorted belief structures. In reply I should first make clear that I am not arguing that any prefigurative structure will ipso facto be ideology free, but simply that it can be so. The examples I mentioned are good candidates for forms of at least partially successful radical realist prefiguration (e.g., Raekstad, 2018), but examining them in detail would take us too far from the focus of this primarily programmatic article.

Second, to reject categorically the very notion of autonomous zone that is at the center of so much of contemporary radical theory would just be a petitio principii. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that the prefiguration I have in mind need not take the form of the temporary autonomous zone familiar from anarchist literature; namely, an ephemeral space of self-organization (Bey, 1991). It may also, more modestly, be what David Graeber termed a *provisional* autonomous zone, which "does not stand quite so defiantly outside power" (2007, p. 172), but nonetheless carves out an alternative in interstitial but therefore more self-sustaining ways, through "constant reminders" of the tension between states' power—including ideological power—and concrete opportunities for radical self-organization. It is precisely the awareness of this tension that allows people "to a large degree, to insulate themselves" (Graeber, 2007, p. 177). Graeber's example is a tension between indigenous and colonial modes of organization in Madagascar, which results in everyday resistance, both material and ideational. One can apply the same analysis to, e.g., anti-capitalist struggles, as Graeber's (2013) own work on the Occupy movement shows. So the line between immanent critique and prefiguration may not be as stark as I made it look so far: even if we do not get to live in full autonomy, we can prefigure by turning "away from endorsements of revolutionary flashpoints and towards the slow burn of everyday resistance" (Springer, 2014, p. 2).

In fact, even though there may well be other avenues for radical realist politics, and even though radical realists don't *have* to prescribe it, prefigurative politics is not just a viable and attractive option for them, but an embodiment

of their theoretical outlook: it is precisely the self-understanding of political agents afforded by the radical realist vindicatory genealogy that enables the sort of political practices that yield provisional autonomous zones.[11] That is the case even if it turns out that none of the examples cited above fully lives up to the epistemic standards I set out, for I have shown that it is possible to do so. Besides, even if complete freedom from ideological distortions remains just a regulative ideal, the genealogical method outlined here affords opportunities for piecemeal progress, and it does so in ways that go beyond the familiar Foucauldian step of revealing the contingency of institutions, practices, and concepts. Radical realist genealogical critique—debunking or vindicatory—allows us to make directly evaluative judgments on actual and possible political structures. So, unlike Adorno, the radical realist may not call the police on her protesting students, provided the structure of their prefigurative occupation is supported by epistemically sound beliefs, or even just by beliefs that are an improvement on the status quo's prevailing ideology. We can think of prefigurative politics as analogous to the *non finito* technique in sculpture, as exemplified in Michelangelo's Prigioni: details or parts of figures are sculpted into blocks that the artist cannot or will not complete, so the unfinished state becomes one "among the recognisable factors of the work, a distinct form" (Gilbert, 2003, p. 63). The choice of engaging in prefigurative politics with or even without a pathway towards wholesale revolution, then, reminds us of how radical realist critique is anchored in a sober assessment of our political predicament and of our political imagination: "The stone block must be understood not simply as the material of the sculpture, but as its determining law, from which the figure is never free" (Gilbert, 2003, p. 61). That may be too pessimistic for the most wide-eyed radicals; nonetheless, it does not condemn us to pessimism, nor to the conservatism that is commonly associated with pessimism (Möller & Erman, 2018; Sleat, 2013b). The radical realist contention is that the possibility of eventual disappointment is a price worth paying for a form of critique that is both radical and faithful to the facts.

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## NOTES

[1] For an overview see Jubb (2017), McQueen (2017), and Rossi and Sleat (2014).

[2] For a lively debate on this issue see Jubb and Rossi (2015) versus Erman and Möller (2015b), and Leader-Maynard and Worsnip (2018) versus Jubb (2019). I will not take issue on the technicalities of this sometimes semantics-dominated debate, but I will attempt to bypass it by showing how realists can make normative claims without relying on pre-political moral commitments.

[3] "Political association" need not refer to the modern state (Raekstad, 2016).

[4] Notice, however, how the broader radical realist approach I describe here need not be genealogical: one may draw on epistemic normativity simply by pointing out that things aren't as they seem, regardless of their genealogy. This is a key difference between the genealogical approach I develop in the next section and the ideology critique championed by both Geuss (2017) and Prinz (2016).

[5] Also see Freeden (2012), Galston (2010) and Valentini (2012), but Rossi and Sleat (2014) and Sleat (2014).

[6] I lack the space to map this distinction onto the large literature on utopian studies. But for an illuminating—if different—articulation of the relationship between realism and utopianism see Thaler (2017).

[7] I develop this argument in Rossi and Argenton (2017).

[8] This is another point of difference between my position and Geuss's, who says, "it is completely open to the realist to depict utopian conditions in all their particulars if he has a mind to" (2017, p. 245).

[9] On most understandings of feasibility, e.g., with either soft or hard constraints (Gilabert, 2017).

[10] I need not choose between these two strategies for the purposes of my argument.

[11] I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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