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Alternatives to moralism

Political realist essays on power and legitimation

Aytaç, U.

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One primary task of political theory is to identify values and norms that provide us with practical orientation in political life. Take the example of equality. Depending on one's particular interpretation of equality as a value, certain socio-political arrangements will be deemed, *ceteris paribus*, more desirable than others. Also, theorists further specify the imperatives of values by translating them into norms. Consider a democratic theorist's defense of the principle that all those affected by a collective decision should be included in decision-making (Shapiro, 1999). This norm depends on some idea of political equality as a value. However, what it prescribes is much less vague than values. A defense of such a norm gives one an even more determinate direction in one's evaluation of the existing political practices and imagination of better institutions.

Even when we have some idea of how norms and values inform our political judgments, the question of where they come from is not always easy to answer. Where should we derive political norms from? The methodological debate between moralism and realism in political theory is largely shaped around this meta-normative question. While moralists suggest that political theory is a branch of moral philosophy, realists argue that there are sources of political normativity that are not reducible to moral considerations. However, what these non-moral sources are remains to be clarified. This thesis offers an account of political realism that answers the question of normativity in a pluralist manner. My main contention is that there are different sources of political normativity that we need to utilize for distinct tasks and contexts of legitimation.

Let me clarify what I mean by "different sources of political normativity for distinct contexts of legitimation." The basic idea is that norms we use to evaluate social and political relations will change depending on the type of phenomenon we critically analyze. For instance, it might make sense to partly draw on the given cultural norms when assessing state authority in order to see if the state is an alien tyrannical force merely imposing itself on the wider society. This approach would raise the question of whether the exercise of state power is justifiable in terms of citizens' existing sets of shared beliefs and dispositions. There is a sense in which a non-tyrannical state would make sense to citizens by their historically determined standards of legitimacy. However, once we are interested in the question of whether cultural practices, systems of beliefs, and their impact on politics are acceptable, our inquiry shifts to another context of legitimation. In this new setting, cultural and historical givens might lose a substantial portion of their normative significance because the culture itself is the object of normative investigation. Political realists typically argue that the norms we formulate should be highly sensitive to the context of inquiry (Williams, 2005; Geuss, 2008; Sangiovanni, 2008). My claim is that changing tasks and questions give rise to different contexts of legitimation.

In line with the contextualist aspirations of political realism, I offer a multi-faceted understanding of political normativity that respects the peculiarities of different contexts of legitimation. However, let me clarify that my contextualism is not about how different institutional or cultural contexts give rise to different norms within the same domain of normativity, e.g., moral. Put differently, the thesis is not about claiming that political context *A* requires the implementation of the moral norm *X* rather than the moral norm *Y*. I rather show how context variation creates new tasks for which we can identify different *types* of political normativity, e.g., epistemic vis-à-vis moral. Let me present an example. For certain tasks, I suggest that our normative approach to politics should focus on *epistemic* qualities of political relationships, e.g., whether the legitimation of a power relation is based on a set of beliefs that is poorly supported by the available evidence. This is quite different from moral arguments as our evaluative claims relate to whether our beliefs about the legitimacy of a power relation are grounded in cognitively and empirically sound reasons. This is not the same as saying that the power relation is (un)acceptable because of a moral norm.

Two important clarifications are in order here. By a source of political normativity, I do not mean a *metaphysical grounding* relationship in which normative facts depend on other normative or non-normative facts (Berker, 2018). Instead, I refer to different types of normativity that inform our judgments about institutions and relations of power. What *metaphysically grounds* these judgments in a given domain of normativity is a separate question. For example, while one might argue that epistemic norms should be utilized in political judgments, this does not necessarily commit one to a particular view of what metaphysically grounds epistemic norms. My question about the sources of political normativity is not a meta-ethical puzzle. It is about how political norms can draw on non-moral domains in a way that is conducive to useful and reasonable evaluation of the social world.

The second clarification is about domains of normativity. As the moralism–realism debate is partly based on the dispute about the role of moral considerations in political theory, we at least need some idea of what moral and non-moral domains refer to. The boundaries of moral normativity are a complex question to which I cannot do justice here. Many conceptions that focus on certain key notions such as practical obligations are overly narrow (Williams, 2006, p. 175). To avoid contestable definitions, some propose to understand morality as “a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational people” (Gert & Gert, 2020). However, these answers are too broad to be analytically useful. Further, any specifications are likely to be controversial as it is very difficult to entirely isolate one’s first-order moral commitments from one’s definition of morality. Instead of diving into an endless debate on the definition of morality, I propose to offer some provisional characterizations about what morality is *not*, which I take to be less disputable.

First, moral norms are different from the requirements that are derived from a proper understanding of an institution or practice, e.g., its function (Burelli, 2020).¹ Even if they might overlap, the inner normativity of institutions and practices is conceptually distinct because it derives the practical imperatives from “the point and purpose of the institutions” (Sangiovanni, 2008, p. 5). When you play chess, there are certain norms that govern your behavior. These norms only make sense given the very nature of the practice itself. In political life, there might be norms assessing the way institutions operate by the standards that make their existence meaningful. I call such norms *the inner normativity of politics*. Despite some overlap, this is different from a moral critique that appeals to independent normative standards.

Second, moral norms are different from epistemic norms. The former apply to reasons for action whereas the latter indicate reasons to believe (Skorupski, 2010, p. 35). If I see a drowning child, I have a moral reason to save her. If my beliefs are not supported by the best available evidence, I have an epistemic reason to revise my beliefs. In many cases moral and epistemic reasons interact: when my moral reason to help someone rests on a false belief, e.g., a friend lying about her true situation, I have an epistemic reason to revise my beliefs, which would eventually change the way I perceive my moral reasons. Further, epistemic norms can be more indirect in terms of their truth-conduciveness. There might be epistemic grounds to revise the meaning of a concept although the meaning can be neither true nor false (Simion, 2018). Nevertheless, a concept might be more or less conducive to generating true beliefs in comparison to its alternatives. Similarly, epistemic norms might require a criticism of misleading true beliefs, when they function as pseudo-justifications for false beliefs (Levy, 1978).

Third, moral norms are different from linguistic norms as the latter apply to how we should understand certain terms and concepts rather than how we ought to act (Kripke, 1982). Linguistic norms reveal the meaning of key political concepts in a particular socio-historical context and criticize political arguments that rely on inaccurate interpretations. Although such linguistic norms do not directly tell us what to do, they have great practical relevance. Our understanding of what we ought to do in politics often presupposes certain interpretations of concepts. Revealing inaccuracies in these would make us revise the courses of action we have endorsed.

¹ It is possible to develop a functionalist understanding of morality by focusing on, for example, human nature as in the Aristotelian tradition. However, the inner normativity of political institutions can be distinguished from such an ethical approach in that its primary focus is the standards that institutions either explicitly or implicitly set for themselves. This is not necessarily tied to the function of human beings or any other external moral standard that can be derived from human flourishing. Some philosophers might think certain political institutional norms are necessary for proper human functioning. However, this is a different line of reasoning.

This brief characterization should be sufficient for the purposes of the thesis because what I offer as alternative sources of political normativity mostly draws on the types that I list here: the inner normativity of politics, epistemic normativity, and linguistic normativity. In what follows, I will briefly discuss where these ideas are situated in the wider literature, and how my contribution unfolds in the articles of the thesis.

My overall argumentative strategy is eclectic and illustrative. Rather than developing an abstract methodological argument showing why it is a good idea to pluralize the sources of political normativity, I will present four loosely connected arguments highlighting how different types of normative considerations make sense in distinct political contexts. I believe this strategy is useful as abstract methodological arguments already seem to be overrepresented within the literature on realism. By switching our focus to particular case studies in which different normative sources are invoked, we will be better positioned to observe how realist methodological commitments apply to first-order political problems.

More specifically, I show that three sources of political normativity are a proper currency of evaluation and critique for different contexts: the inner normativity of politics, epistemic normativity, and linguistic normativity. The thesis consists of four articles, each of which is devoted to one of these approaches. Before laying out a more detailed outline of the articles, I will now elaborate on two points of departure that clarify the aims of the thesis.

I. The First Point of Departure: The Sources of Political Normativity

The realist revival in contemporary political theory has often been associated with greater attention to a number of factors in and claims about politics: actual determinants of human motivation including emotions, skepticism of ideal theories, the need for a contextualist approach in normative assessment, the ineliminable nature of political conflict, the alleged failure of morality to solve political problems, the impact of ideological distortion on the formation of ethical convictions, and the primacy of legitimacy as a political value (Williams, 2005, p. 13; Galston, 2010; Mouffé, 2005; Rossi & Sleat, 2014; Geuss, 2008; Raekstad, 2021; Sleat, 2015). These characteristics are usually defended on the grounds of fidelity to essential facts about politics understood as a conflict-driven, historically situated, and power-centric sphere of human activity (Sleat, 2016a; Rossi, 2019). Nonetheless, it is not always clear if such theoretical dispositions could simply be considered as stylistic/methodological choices without necessarily articulating a distinct source of political normativity. For instance, criticizing ideal theories does not necessarily commit one to abandoning moral considerations as the primary source of political normativity (Sleat, 2016b). Similarly, there could be thinner moralist answers to the question of how a legitimate political order can be possible in the context of ineradicable conflict and disagreement (Maynard & Worsnip,

2018, p. 768; Buchanan, 2018). The realist emphasis on the circumstances of politics does not give automatic support to the rise of non-moral sources of political normativity.

Hence, there needs to be a more explicit and clear-cut account of realist political normativity, rigorously defined in terms of meta-normative positions. Some contend that political norms should be constructed by theorizing certain inherent properties of political life. Bernard Williams' idea that the normative requirements of political legitimacy are derived from the conceptual distinction between political rule and sheer domination is an early attempt to develop such an argument (Williams, 2005, p. 5).² This account is an example of what I previously called *the inner normativity of politics*. In this reading, the very idea of legitimate political authority is what distinguishes politics from warfare and other forms of sheer domination. To the extent that politics is a purposeful human activity aiming to secure "order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation", Williams believes that tyrannical ways of dealing with conflict and disagreement will defeat the very purpose of politics (Williams, 2005, p. 4; Cozzaglio, 2021, pp. 25–26). Put differently, politics is an inherently normative human enterprise as we choose to legitimize power relations to each other, instead of merely imposing them. Tyranny is not properly political as it only makes the circumstances of warfare implicit and does not form relationships based on legitimation (Hall, 2015). However, the simple act of providing a legitimation story is not sufficient to develop properly political relationships. Legitimation as a normative process should also be acceptable to those over whom power is exercised. Non-tyrannical, hence properly political, solutions to the question of order and social cooperation would then have to be acceptable to the subjects by their historically determined standards (Sleat, 2014, p. 319). In other words, power holders should legitimize their authority in a way that makes sense to those who live under their rule.

Some hold that Williams' conception of politics is unrealistic and even implicitly moralized, as it is not an accurate description of real world politics (Wendt, 2016). According to this view, Williams' concept of the political smuggles in moral considerations under the guise of achieving a realistic understanding of political life. These criticisms have been recently challenged by the functionalist reading of Williams. For instance, Burelli (2020) argues that the proper conception of politics is supposed to include an account of functional

2 Throughout the thesis, the notion of domination is not used in Pettit's neorepublican sense unless I explicitly refer to it. Williams' (2005) conception of domination focuses on whether a power relation is legitimized in a way that individuals can genuinely endorse. Although this bears similarities with Pettit's understanding of arbitrary power, the neorepublican criterion of acceptability is overly specific, requiring a particular version of democratic control (Pettit, 2000). The former, unlike the latter, does not necessarily require a democratic institutionalization in a way that transcends cultural and historical contingencies. Despite these differences, Pettit (2017) later on argued that his conception is in line with the context sensitivity of political realism. As further discussion on this is outside of the scope of this thesis, I will confine myself to this clarification.

normativity that is employed to evaluate actual instantiations of the very same practice. This type of evaluation takes place by pointing out the gap between the function of a political order and its actualized tokens. As a result, a normative outlook emerges out of the function of a particular practice without importing external moral standards. This is still a realist position because we can identify the function of political institutions by looking at actual political life. However, this does not mean that realist political norms should simply mimic *realpolitik*. As dysfunction is also a fact of political life, a realist picture of politics can be highly critical of the status quo by identifying the ways political institutions fail to fulfill their functions. So, defining the minimization of sheer domination as a function of a political order, Williams' conception of politics can still be free of pre-political moral properties.³ However, the limitation of the Williamsian solution is that it is unclear how one can develop a more comprehensive critique of social and political relations by using the conceptual distinction between politics and sheer domination. Although identifying and criticizing tyrannical regimes is an important task, we also need realist normative strategies to address further shortcomings of a minimally legitimate socio-political order.

Another group of scholars, also inspired by Williams, is interested in formulating realism as some kind of side constraint to normative theorizing. Let me call this *side-constraint realism*. According to the proponents of this approach, moral values could be the proper currency of normative assessment in politics unless they lead to unrealistic demands clashing with the general conditions of politics, i.e., disagreement, inevitability of coercion, and the importance of actual drivers of human motivation including both interests and values (Sleat, 2016a). For instance, the realist sensibility of this kind would be highly critical of a normative approach that identifies principles of justice that cannot be followed by any modern state. This would be in tension with the realist tenet that there are certain conditions of modernity, e.g., the modern state, which are necessary elements of any conceivable political organization (Williams, 2005, p. 91). Hence, normative theorizing should not prescribe what any modern state cannot possibly achieve. Hall's (2017, p. 7) realism similarly operates as a constraint on normative demands in that accepting certain features of the world as they are limits how far moral judgments can go. Insofar as one does not disregard such constraints regarding the facts of political life, one is in a position to justifiably make use of moral values in political theory.⁴

3 One might still dispute that eliminating certain forms of domination is a function of a political order. I believe this line of reasoning underestimates that even violent authoritarian regimes often claim to be free of cruelty, torture, humiliation and abuse of power (Cross, 2020a). There is a sense in which rulers claim to live up to certain standards by virtue of being good rulers.

4 While this approach resembles non-ideal theory in terms of emphasizing constraints on normative theorizing, Sleat (2016b) argues that realism and non-ideal theory are two distinct projects. He claims that realism is a more fundamental departure from mainstream liberal theory as it ultimately relies on a different conception of politics.

Further, in their reconstruction of Williams' and Geuss' ethical projects, Sleat and Hall (2017) claim to show that realist political theory is indeed a natural extension of certain ethical views that are skeptical of mainstream traditions such as Kantianism and Utilitarianism. By connecting Williams' and Geuss' positions on moral philosophy to their views about politics, they develop another argument showing that realism does not imply a distinct source of political normativity as opposed to morality. It rather entails a particular way of understanding ethics, as an extension of realist philosophers' meta-ethical views in moral philosophy. Realism then does not occupy a distinct location signaling a non-moral source of political normativity. Instead, it takes the form of a side constraint, regulating how values including moral considerations can translate into political norms. This constraint arguably requires greater sensibility to our cultural and historical context, and a better fit between an accurate understanding of political life and norms tailored to that reality. However, it is doubtful that these methodological sensibilities themselves can generate political norms in the absence of moral input. Hence, this view seems to give up on the idea of non-moral political normativity in a strict sense.

I am generally sympathetic to side-constraint realists' efforts to show that reliance on moral considerations is compatible with realist methodological commitments. However, this alleged compatibility does not really answer the question of whether there are *additional* normative sources for politics. The space of political normativity could be much more complex and multi-layered, incorporating several non-moral sources. Side-constraint realists might acknowledge that they are simply not interested in exploring novel domains of normativity. I believe this would be an unfortunate preference, given the common realist tenet that a richer and more accurate understanding of political life should play a key role in normative theorizing. If human agency has non-moral normative capacities that are relevant to the evaluation of institutions and relations of power, excluding them from normative political theory would be at odds with realists' ambition to capture the complexities of the social world.

Finally, *radical realists* offer another approach to the question of political normativity. Some radical realists are interested in the critique of legitimization stories that are employed to justify power relations (Prinz, 2016; Prinz & Rossi, 2017; Rossi, 2019; Rossi & Argenton, 2020; Cross, 2020b).⁵ They have two main sources of inspiration. First, they draw on Raymond Geuss' conception of ideology critique. According to Geuss (2008, p. 90; 1981), political theory should be well equipped to identify and critique mechanisms through which existing

5 Not all radical realists are invested in this type of project that heavily concentrates on epistemic critique of actual legitimizing narratives. For alternative approaches see Finlayson (2015), Brinn (2020), Raekstad & Gradin (2020) and Raekstad (2021).

power relations shape and determine our normative convictions and preferences.⁶ Similarly, Bernard Williams' (2002, p. 131) *Critical Theory Principle* suggests that self-justification of power is not a proper form of legitimation. For instance, acceptance of a legitimizing narrative for a power relation is not warranted if it is a product of indoctrination by the very same power holder. Inspired by Geuss and Williams, radical realists' critical project seems to rely on an epistemic commitment. Rather than invoking moral categories directly assessing practices, they seem to shift their focus toward whether the causal histories of legitimizing discourses cast any epistemic doubt on their plausibility (Rossi, 2019; Rossi & Argenton, 2020). When a legitimizing narrative is debunked, as its acceptance is produced by problematic power relations, radical realists claim to suspend the epistemic authority of this narrative to support beliefs about legitimacy. It is important to note that their strategy does not fall prey to the genetic fallacy. This is because the target of their criticism is specific claims that circularly legitimize a particular institution by relying on certain "intuitive" ideas that are instilled by the very same institution, e.g., believing in the legitimacy of patriarchal family relations on the grounds that it is one's culture, which is largely a product of the exercise of past patriarchal power. Criticizing epistemic circularities do not constitute a genetic fallacy.

Although radical realists' use of epistemic criteria is a promising way of identifying non-moral sources of political normativity, they need to offer some answers about how to contextualize their epistemic critique. What determines how far epistemic critique should go? It is entirely possible to adopt an extremely harsh critical stance, which could effectively turn radical realism into a form of context-insensitive epistemic inquiry. For instance, deeming any piece of cognitively flawed belief formation not fit for legitimation would be a very strict requirement, which could deem even considerably democratic and egalitarian orders illegitimate. Alternatively, one could also go for less demanding criteria such as the mere coherence of a legitimizing narrative with subjects' beliefs. Radical realists need to present a convincing explanation for the kinds of epistemic requirements they prefer in comparison to alternatives.

2. The Second Point of Departure: Legitimacy as the Primary Value in Realist Political Theory

Another point of departure for the thesis is about the role of legitimacy in realist political theory. Due to their view that power relations and the creation of an order are fundamental characteristics of politics, realists initiate their normative inquiry from the question of what makes *political power* legitimate. Political legitimacy enjoys a sense of priority over

6 Even if he is a major source of inspiration for this approach, Geuss himself is far from restricting the task of political theory to epistemic critique. For his account of the tasks of political theory see Geuss (2008).

other political values as the creation and maintenance of a legitimate political order is a precondition for further political questions to be raised (Williams, 2005, p. 3). The problem of how to conceptualize legitimacy in relation to other values such as justice constitutes another taxonomical task within realism. Realists like Williams, Horton and those whom I have called side-constraint realists can be considered as representatives of *liberal realism* when it comes to the question of legitimacy. The first important characteristic of this group is that their notion of political legitimacy is authority-centric (Williams, 2005, p. 5; Horton, 2012, p. 129). This means that the notion of political legitimacy is applicable to states or similar institutions that make explicit claims to authority or the right to rule. In this sense, they do not depart from the liberal tradition of political thought grounding the concept of legitimacy in the state's right to govern its subjects. Sleat (2016c, p. 176) even extends this authority-centric account of legitimacy to the domain of international politics.

Another crucial feature of liberal realists is that some of them tend to conceive of political legitimacy as a less normatively demanding value in comparison to justice (Horton, 2012, p. 136). For instance, an unjust basic structure marked with an extreme degree of economic inequality might still incorporate a legitimate political system that is acceptable to its citizens in accordance with their historically determined standards of legitimacy. This position distinguishes a normative theory of political legitimacy from the task of radical social criticism. While gravest forms of oppression in cultural and economic domains are criticized by conceptions of justice, a more minimal degree of acceptability suffices to legitimize the political system. Bernard Williams' conception of how to realistically understand politics similarly brings in a certain level of anti-utopian conservatism. For instance, he (2005, p. 97) contends that the anarchist critique of the state would not satisfy the realist desideratum because state institutions are an inevitable fact of contemporary political life. Although there might be exceptions among liberal realists (Sleat, 2013, p. 8), their conception of political legitimacy tends to take the circumstances of politics as a valid reason to exclude radical or utopian forms of social criticism.

In contrast, *radical realists* conceptualize the notion of legitimacy in a way that can be utilized in comprehensive social criticism with no status quo bias. First of all, some of them dispute the idea that states are an inevitable element of political life, opening the door to a variety of radical political theories such as anarchism (Raekstad, 2016). Second, radical realists tend to hold that legitimacy as a political value is applicable to a wide range of social practices and institutions.

So a more realistic understanding of what is at issue in politics in a wider variety of circumstances would connect it with attempts to provide legitimacy not simply for acts of violence, but for any kinds of collective action, such as deciding

voluntarily to build a new road or to change to a new unit of measurement (as was done during the French Revolution), or for that matter for any arrangements that could be seen as capable of being changed, controlled, modified, or influenced by human action (Geuss, 2008, p. 35).

Following Geuss' reconceptualization of legitimacy, some radical realists apply the term to raise the questions of justifiability of power relations in non-state institutional settings, e.g., capitalism (Rossi, 2019, p. 647; Raekstad, 2018). Similarly, others (Prinz, 2016, p. 783) shift their focus from state power to a broader category of social order. Radical realists then start utilizing the notion of legitimacy to assess and critique any aspect of socio-political life, not necessarily restrained to the task of identifying tyrannical or unjust states. Further, this expanded scope of legitimacy even transforms how they are likely to conceive of state power itself. For instance, Prinz (2015, p. 164) highlights criticisms that the liberal conception of state legitimacy ignores how the exercise of state power and its legitimation are further influenced by surrounding power relations in other social institutions, e.g., the media, schooling systems, etc.

I believe radical realists' critical project is a promising solution to the charge of status quo bias, which is a common criticism of realism (Thomas, 2017). This is because their expanded conception of legitimacy is conducive to developing a comprehensive social criticism, investigating many different aspects of the social world. However, there are a number of puzzles they still need to solve. First, Geuss' characterization of legitimacy seems to be extremely inclusive, which collapses the distinction between political legitimacy and institutional legitimacy (Adams, 2018). If we put a collective decision to build a new road and systematic coercion in an institutional setting under the same category, political legitimacy would lose its analytic utility to address political power relations in a distinctive way. By political power, I mean a set of power relations that impose a particular institutional order on citizens, either directly through the state, or indirectly through other institutional factors that shape or restrain the exercise of state power.⁷ One might defend Geuss' (2008, p. 34) conception on the grounds that he employs a broader conception of politics, which is defined as a sphere of human activity that involves any type of collective action. However, this move arguably breaks the link between legitimacy and justifiability of power relations as there are questions of collective action which are not necessarily reducible to one's power over others. For anyone who is interested in preserving the distinction between justifiability of power and rationality of collective action, Geuss' conception of legitimacy seems to be too broad.

7 One might ask why my conceptualization of political power incorporates non-state institutions only to the extent that they have an impact on state institutions. I will discuss this issue in the next subsection.

To solve this problem, radical realists might adopt the notion of institutional legitimacy as an umbrella category and then take political legitimacy as its specific manifestation in the context of state power. Nonetheless, this route would lead to a narrow conception of political legitimacy, for which they criticized liberal realists. Alternatively, they might employ the notion of socio-political order to indicate that political legitimacy is applicable to a network of institutions, i.e., the state, the economy, and the patriarchal family. By doing so, they would be able to fine grain a broader conception of political legitimacy in a way that still keeps the issues of political power at its core. However, radical realists have not developed a full-fledged conception of socio-political order so far. They rarely define what they mean by social order. Further, they also do not provide a detailed account of how state power and other social institutions interact with each other as the elements of a socio-political order. I attempt to address these limitations and develop some solutions in the rest of the thesis.

There is a sense in which my position falls somewhere between Williams' and Geuss' conceptions of political legitimacy. On the one hand, I disagree with Williams' (2005) view that the question of political legitimacy is mainly about state power. On the other hand, I oppose Geuss' attempt to indiscriminately apply the notion of legitimacy to everything political, e.g., collective action problems. My position represents a midway between the two. I don't take political legitimacy as a state-centric phenomenon. However, I restrict the scope of political legitimacy to those institutional factors that shape and determine the exercise of state power, within the economy, culture, and the state itself. I acknowledge that it requires more exegetical work to pinpoint where exactly my approach is located between the two great figures of contemporary realism, or to tell if it is more Geussian or Williamsian. At any rate, the broad qualification that I borrow some insights from both seems sufficient for my purposes in this thesis. As this project does not have an interpretative focus, there will be no further engagement with this issue.

3. Pluralizing the Sources of Political Normativity for Distinct Contexts of Legitimation

Combining the questions that we encounter in the above-mentioned points of departure, this thesis offers a novel account of political realism in terms of assessing and critiquing power relations. I hold that there are different sources of political normativity that can plausibly be employed in distinct contexts of legitimation. I characterize three different sources of non-moral political normativity: the inner normativity of politics, epistemic normativity, and linguistic normativity. I propose that we employ these normative sources in three different contexts of legitimation: state power, socio-political order, and imposing limits on the boundaries of the political.

Before laying out the details of this division of labor amongst different sources of normativity, let me explain how the three contexts of legitimation are related to one another. First of all, although I am sympathetic to radical realists' ambition to develop a theory of comprehensive social criticism, I believe it is still normatively useful to have a conception of political legitimacy specifically tailored to state institutions, as a proper subset of political power relations. By the state I mean "a structure of power and authority distinct from any particular group or individual, which successfully enforces a monopoly of legitimate violence within a given area" (Weber, 2010; Raekstad, 2018, p. 152).⁸ State power is a central element in the enforcement of an order as its use of coercion is explicit and immediate. For instance, regardless of whether the liberal capitalist order as a wider network of institutions is legitimate or not, it is still important to know if the state is tyrannical. Even from radical realists' perspective, the required courses of action would drastically change once you switch from transforming an illegitimate social order with a non-tyrannical state to overthrowing an illegitimate social order with a tyrannical state. Hence, I propose that we operationalize different units of analysis to capture two distinct layers of legitimation: state power, and socio-political order as a wider network of major institutions. The former will inform us about the normative qualities of states: whether and to what extent they rely on tyrannical methods and dyadic domination. The latter is inspired by theories of legitimation from early Habermas (1988) and Fraser (2015) which conceptualize social formations by focusing on the nexus of deeply intertwined institutions, e.g., state power and the economy. The second context of legitimation will enable one to engage in a more radical criticism of the socio-political order as a whole. In the second context, we shift our attention to how the exercise of state power is intertwined with and determined by broader power dynamics in society. For instance, the third article takes up the task of showing how the structural power of capital is constitutive of the socio-political order by shaping the environment in which state power is exercised. By *the socio-political order*, I mean an ensemble of institutions including the state, culture, and the economy that constitute, restrain or determine the exercise of state power.

One might ask why my conceptualization of the socio-political order limits the scope of relevant institutions in terms of their impact on state power. The basic idea is that I would like to develop an account of political legitimacy that still traces the question of a legitimate order back to the use of monopolized violence. It is true that political power is not all about violence. However, non-violent power relations seem to be relevant to the question of a legitimate order insofar as they contribute to the imposition of that order on citizens by shaping the circumstances in which state violence is organized and implemented.

8 This definition employs perceived legitimacy rather than normative legitimacy.

Once one moves from the legitimacy of states to the legitimacy of the socio-political order, one attempts to reveal how seemingly non-political institutions involve certain forms of political power. For example, if one shows that the social power of economic elites restrain the use of political power in certain policy domains, one *politicizes* elites' seemingly economic and non-political capabilities, e.g., investment decisions (Robinson & Harris, 2000; Barry, 2002). By politicization, I mean rendering a set of social relations contestable by revealing that they are relations of power that are in need of legitimation. Once their capabilities are politicized, such power relations will need to be legitimized in a way that is similar to the case of state power. After politicization, these power relations are part of the explanation of how order is imposed on citizens as they shape and restrain the environment in which state power is exercised. As a result, these social arrangements become subject to the demands for legitimation as they constitute a form of political power. Political legitimacy is then applicable to not only state power but also to a network of social institutions that determine how state power is used. This network of institutions is what I call *the socio-political order*.

But how far should we politicize social relations of power? There are many other ways broader social institutions shape and restrain the exercise of state power. One example is scientific institutions. Due to their unique entitlement to certain forms of knowledge, the scientific community often has the effective authority to decide what is feasible and what is not. In democratic theory and the philosophy of science, it is already widely accepted that there are ineliminable moral and political influences on scientific experts' decisions (Anderson, 2004; Douglas, 2009). On the other hand, there are arguably extreme versions of politicized science as in the case of post-truth politics and science denialism. To achieve a desirable degree of stability and good quality decision-making, it seems necessary that certain powers and authorities are *depoliticized*. By this, I mean that there are formal or informal institutional mechanisms that filter out certain debates or demands from ongoing legitimation processes in political life. As a result of such depoliticization, certain aspects of socio-political arrangements would not be subject to a continuous challenge by political actors regarding their legitimacy. However, putting limits on politicization itself should be legitimized if we want to avoid dogmatism. Hence, the third context of legitimation is the identification of the limits of the political. The primary question in this context is whether legitimizing certain forms of depoliticization can rely on normative criteria that political realists are likely to endorse.

In the following table, I list three contexts of legitimation and the corresponding sources of political normativity I propose. After having outlined how these three contexts are related to one another, I will now discuss how each of the articles of the thesis explores an alternative source of political normativity for distinct contexts of legitimation.

Context of Legitimation	Source of Political Normativity
State	Inner Normativity of Politics
Socio-Political Order	Epistemic
The Limits of the Political	Linguistic

Source: author

3.1 Political Realism and Epistemic Constraints

The first article relies on a close reading of Bernard Williams' political writings. I hold that Williams' theory of state legitimacy faces a tension between his realist and epistemic commitments. On the one hand, he claims to derive political norms from the conceptual distinction between political rule and sheer domination. This view is a version of theoretical approaches claiming that a proper understanding of political life gives rise to an *inner normativity* inherent in political relationships. The basic idea is that political rule entails some idea of legitimate power insofar as rulers hold that they move beyond the circumstances of warfare and/or mere tyranny, making a claim to normative authority (Williams, 2002). This is because the point and purpose of politics, according to Williams, is to eliminate mere tyranny or warfare. Rulers' ability to legitimize themselves is then what distinguishes a political rule from sheer domination. A normative outlook emerges out of the conceptual distinction between a political relationship and domination, which reflects the inner logic of politics. On the other hand, asserts Williams, if power relations create their own acceptance, this does not count as genuine legitimation. Self-justification of power is then conceived of as a type of sheer domination. Williams develops this additional mechanism to filter out more subtle forms of domination such as ideological indoctrination.

I argue that certain interpretations of the latter requirement are based on epistemic commitments, and can potentially conflict with Williams' realist non-domination requirement. In the context of state power, Williams employs a dyadic conception of domination according to which one intentionally exercises power over another. However, there are certain instances of self-justifying power that do not lead to domination in this sense. Although self-justification of power is epistemically dubious, it does not always fit with Williams' realist normativity derived from the political rule–sheer domination distinction. As a result, I propose to revise Williams' epistemic requirements, i.e., his *Critical Theory Principle*, to make it more harmonious with his realist commitments centered around the political rule–sheer domination distinction. By toning down the epistemic requirements, I reframe his theory of state legitimacy in a more minimalistic manner, shifting the focus toward the inner normativity of political institutions, e.g., the normative function of state power. I contend that this move is beneficial as it keeps realists from conflating different layers of legitimation in political life. In the next two articles, I elaborate on

how alternative sources of normativity can be plausibly employed in other contexts, e.g., the socio-political order, in order to develop a more comprehensive approach to social criticism. Such a division of labor between different normative approaches and contexts of legitimation enable one to make more nuanced normative judgments about political life. As many undesirable traits in politics come in degrees in terms of intensity and scope, the framework I offer will accommodate both minimalistic normative requirements and aspirations for radical social criticism.

3.2 Ideology Critique without Moralism

Switching the focus from state power to a wider network of institutions, this article develops a realist account of ideology critique to assess the socio-political order at the intersection of the economy, culture, and the state. Contrary to moralist approaches to ideological distortion (Haslanger 2012; Stanley, 2015), we offer an *epistemic conception* of ideology critique inspired by Williams' *Critical Theory Principle*, expanding the scope of legitimacy-based evaluation of social relations.⁹ This epistemic conception concentrates on whether beliefs about legitimacy suffer from certain evidential defects such as self-justification of power. The basic idea is that cultural narratives that legitimize asymmetric power structures can be debunked if the very same inegalitarian social structures instill these narratives. Although this sounds like a moral celebration of the ideal of equality at first glance, we advance an epistemic argument. Self-justification of power through social structures is an epistemic flaw because a good legitimation of a power relation should not rest on circular reasoning. Further, we hold that self-justification of hierarchical social formations is particularly epistemically dubious. This is because existing power asymmetries create special interests that make the powerful more likely to distort the inquiry into the nature of social relations.

Our account of ideology critique politicizes the elements of local cultures and identifies how the cultural surroundings and the exercise of state power are often intertwined with each other. For instance, patriarchal narratives rooted in a culture are epistemically suspect when they circularly “legitimize” power relations that instill the very same narratives through intra-family socialization. We focus on the conservative neopatriarchal family model in the Middle East and North Africa, which is also functional in stabilizing authoritarian orders in the region. If patriarchal norms of the family owe their reproduction to the authority of the elderly over the young, there is a sense in which the legitimation of the patriarchal family is circular. Younger generations accept the authority of the elderly as legitimate, mainly because the latter trained the former in that particular direction. In such a setting of cultural reproduction, patriarchal norms themselves are not warranted to legitimize the intra-

9 This is a version of an article that I coauthored with Enzo Rossi. Therefore, I will use the pronoun we in this subsection and also throughout the article.

family power relations. Moreover, authoritarian political elites' use of such narratives is also problematic. Acceptable justification of state power should not rest on epistemically suspect cultural resources. While our conclusion about the problematic nature of neopatriarchy is not new, our epistemic argumentative strategy offers new resources to deepen the critique.

However, as one might realize, this is different from assessing state legitimacy, as discussed in the first article. There is a sense that states can rely on broader cultural and historical sources of normative beliefs crystallized in social norms. Hence, they are not necessarily tyrannical states and could possibly be legitimized in relation to their cultural surroundings. By contrast, when the socio-political order is taken as a whole, the legitimation of state power in relation to cultural practices loses its normative significance. This is because, as the normative question we are interested in changes, so does the context of legitimation. In the new context, the question is whether we have reasons to accept the alleged legitimacy of an order that is imposed by a combination of different social institutions and structures. In this case, epistemic deficiencies of legitimation narratives used by the state indicate a legitimation deficit of the socio-political order as a whole, rather than that of the state. Hence, we can still criticize minimally legitimate state power on the grounds that it rests on broader social institutions that are ideologically distorted. In the first article, epistemic evaluation is bounded by the inner normativity of politics, derived from the political rule–sheer domination distinction. In contrast, this article illustrates how a more radical epistemic criticism would unfold in the broader context of social institutions.

3.3 Global Political Legitimacy and the Structural Power of Capital: A Radical Realist Account

Following in the footsteps of the second article, this article presents an alternative way to expand the scope of political legitimacy in a radical realist key. As Geuss (2008, p. 42) puts it, one key task of political theory is conceptual innovation. I draw on this insight and engage in conceptual innovation in a way that yields certain normative implications. I expand the radical realist theory of political legitimacy towards another essential sub-system of the socio-political order: economic institutions. In the article, I focus the discussion on international political theory and global political legitimacy. This is because global politics is particularly suitable to introduce conceptual innovations, as many of the basic categories from domestic political orders cannot be straightforwardly applied to the globe. For instance, global legitimacy theorists have been debating about what the proper subject matter of political legitimacy is in the global context (Hurrell & Macdonald, 2012; Erman, 2016; Buchanan & Keohane, 2016). As there is no global sovereign power, it is not clear where political power resides in the world order. Given that political legitimacy is paradigmatically used to assess normative acceptability of political power, the indeterminacy about defining political power has immediate practical implications.

My main argument is that we should expand the subject matter of global political legitimacy in a way that includes the structural power of global business elites. I discuss how the structural power of business elites influences and shapes the way state power functions under the circumstances of globalization, making structural power a subject matter for political legitimacy. This is an unconventional view because political power is often characterized by its intentional exercise to bring about certain outcomes (Hurrell & Macdonald, 2012). In contrast, the structural power of global business elites is a non-intentional situation in which democratic states are made to be disproportionately responsive to the former's preferences, regardless of any intentional attempt to create this outcome. I utilize radical realists' argument that the notion of political legitimacy is indeed applicable to a broader range of social practices and institutions, not just dyadic power relations between rulers and subjects. Further, engaging with empirical literature on international political economy and the Transnational Capitalist Class, I show how social scientific inputs can be utilized in the conceptualization of fundamental theoretical categories such as political power and legitimacy. I consider the argument of this article as another example of *epistemic sensibilities* in radical realist political theory. My argument basically suggests that a more empirically informed account of power relations leads to a conceptual revision of our theories of political legitimacy. Rather than focusing on formal institutions, an empirically richer and more accurate understanding of the relevant social dynamics gives us a reason to rethink the design of our basic normative conceptual frameworks. Empirical richness and accuracy here should be understood as epistemic virtues because they are conducive to forming theoretical beliefs that demystify state power, emphasizing what other power relations in the economic domain determine and shape it. Therefore, the conceptual innovation of this paper is grounded in *epistemic commitments*.

3.4 On The Limits of the Political: The Problem of Overly Permissive Pluralism in Agonism

The division of labor among the first three articles is as follows: the first article elaborates on a realist conception of state legitimacy as a minimalistic normative requirement, while the second and third articles draw on alternative strategies to develop a more comprehensive approach to legitimacy, problematizing power relations in culture and the economy. As discussed previously, the second phase of the project implies politicization of certain segments of social life that people often do not associate with questions of political power and legitimation. However, the stability of social and political life considerably depends on a certain degree of depoliticization in social interactions, to make sure that institutions do not constantly face legitimation challenges. In order to strike a balance between the requirements of stability and radical social criticism, one needs to find a non-arbitrary way to legitimize certain forms of depoliticization without nullifying what has been achieved in previous articles.

The aim of the fourth article is to identify a criterion for when depoliticization can be legitimate. In this article, I engage with another political theorist with realist leanings, Chantal Mouffe. The reason I focus on Mouffe's (2000; 2005) writings is that she has the most explicit discussion and critique of depoliticization among current realist thinkers. Relying on a post-structuralist social ontology, Mouffe (2005, p. 18) contends that no claims about truth and rationality transcend the domain of political contestations. Following this, she concludes that there is no neutral source of normative justifiability that can effectively adjudicate between competing political positions. Contrary to Mouffe's contentions, I argue that there is a way to effectively criticize excessive politicization without relying on universal moral commitments. I show that a quasi-Wittgensteinian conception of socio-linguistic normativity helps us diagnose excessive and implausible politicization (Wittgenstein, 1969; Haslanger, 2012). Applying my theoretical argument to science-denialist movements, I claim that denialists' use of basic concepts about science is not coherent with the broader socio-linguistic conventions in modern societies. This article illustrates how *linguistic normativity* can be a crucial source of political judgment when the fundamental epistemic or moral commitments are contested by a variety of political actors.

4. Envisaged Contributions

The main contribution of the thesis is to explore various sources of political normativity, which depict a picture of plurality. Of course, this is hardly a new position. The novelty of my argument is to offer a vision that brings alternative normativities together in a more complementary way. The four articles illustrate what a division of labor between alternative normative approaches would look like. The main advantage of my position is to enable one to formulate political judgments about legitimacy in degrees. The judgments about the legitimacy of state power would be more minimalistic and focus on the inner normativity of political institutions, addressing some of the gravest forms of domination. In contrast, analyzing the legitimacy of the socio-political order would create the necessary conceptual space in which one could evaluate and critique minimally legitimate states more radically, drawing on a variety of epistemic commitments. Lastly, my pluralist account shows when and how it is reasonable to limit the processes of legitimation and depoliticize certain areas of socio-political life, drawing on the Wittgensteinian conception of linguistic normativity. However, this conception of depoliticization is not dogmatic, as the very act of putting limits on the political itself is supposed to be legitimized by certain normative standards.

Second, the thesis makes a methodological contribution to the debates about political legitimacy. In the domestic context, political legitimacy is often taken to be a matter of state power. By developing and operationalizing a conception of socio-political order as the subject matter of political legitimacy, I show how radical realism can depart from the basic

premises of liberal political theory and transcend the state as a unit of analysis in theories of legitimacy. In the international context, many hold that the scope of global political legitimacy is similarly narrow and exclusively applies to dyadic relations of power where one actor intentionally exercises power over another. In contrast, this thesis demonstrates that the intentionality condition is unfounded, by showing the relevance of structural power asymmetries as the subject matter of global political legitimacy.

Lastly, the fourth article of the thesis engages with Mouffe's agonistic theory and substantially modifies it. By eliminating the post-structuralist baggage of Mouffe's political thought, I articulate how one can properly criticize depoliticization without committing to the view that social reality is political all the way down. This is arguably a provocative move as Mouffe derives the basic presuppositions of her political theory from post-structuralist philosophical commitments. My modification of Mouffe's critique of depoliticization presents important insights for realists in the Anglo-American theory tradition as well. Both continental theorists of agonistic politics and realists of the Anglo-American tradition share the view that ineliminable conflicts are an essential feature of politics. I show that this methodological commitment does not warrant a relativist conclusion. Even in the presence of ineradicable conflicts and hegemonic struggles, there might be certain standards that imply a threshold of minimal acceptability for political ideas and positions. In this sense, truth and rationality are not all about power.

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