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### Alternatives to moralism

*Political realist essays on power and legitimation*

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## Article Two

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Ideology Critique Without Moralism

## **o. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

There has been a renaissance of ideology critique in Anglo-American philosophy over the last few years, with the tools of contemporary analytic philosophy put in the service of the traditional aims of critical theory (e.g., Haslanger, 2012; Jones, 2014; Stanley, 2015; Jenkins, 2016; Hänel, 2018). These philosophers tend to identify ideological flaws on the basis of moral commitments: ideologies are flawed insofar as they contribute to injustice, oppression, and the like. In this article we point out some shortcomings of that approach, which has been called the “new” ideology critique (Sankaran, 2020). We then make the case for an alternative approach to ideology critique, grounded in epistemic rather than moral normativity. We do this by putting forward two related claims: (i) ideology critique can debunk beliefs and practices by uncovering how, as an empirical matter, they are the product of hidden self-justifying power; and (ii) the self-justification of power should be understood as an epistemic rather than moral flaw.

Let us illustrate the rough idea with a toy example: a patriarchal society in which men’s power is sustained by the widespread belief that “father has everyone’s best interests at heart”. That belief is ideologically flawed to the extent that its persistence is explained by paternal inculcation—not because fathers are oppressive or patriarchy is unjust, but because the belief is the product of self-justifying power, and self-justifying power is epistemically suspect. We do not want fathers—or anyone—to be judges in their own affairs. This principle is widely accepted for reasons of fairness, but also for epistemic reasons: all else being equal, judges in their own affairs are less likely to reach the verdict that best fits the evidence. More specifically, we will argue that self-justifying power creates ideological distortions because of an epistemic circularity vitiated by what social psychologists call politically motivated reasoning—a phenomenon whereby “individuals can be expected to selectively credit all manner of information in patterns consistent with their respective groups’ positions” (Kahan 2016: 2). The rough idea is that social hierarchies empower dominant groups to disseminate their motivated beliefs about their own legitimacy to subordinate groups—a circular pattern leading to the prevalence of an epistemically flawed understanding of social relations.

Note, though, that the ideological flaw is not due to the mere fact that one group influences the other. For instance, education arguably requires teachers’ authority over students. But good teachers can transmit knowledge in ways that eventually transcend the need for institutionalised authority. There is something fishy about a math teacher who instills beliefs in students by appealing to her authority more than by demonstrating how to solve

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1 This part of the thesis is a version of an article that I coauthored with Enzo Rossi. Therefore, I will use the pronoun *we* throughout the article.

math problems. Inculcating respect for educational hierarchies is not enough to genuinely legitimize her position. Similarly, the legitimacy of a social hierarchy is epistemically suspect to the degree that it rests on beliefs instilled by the same hierarchy. And that holds regardless of the truth of the beliefs in question, so we can dispense with the notion of false consciousness as well as with moral judgment.

Our contention is that this epistemic approach is more parsimonious than morality-based approaches: using social scientific evidence to identify instances of power self-justification is typically less controversial than relying on the correct judgment about justice, or identifying the direction of moral progress. The key task of ideology critique, in our view, is to analyze our beliefs, concepts, and attitudes to identify *hidden flaws* in the social fabric. Social science coupled with philosophical analysis can reveal that social reality is not what it seems, and that sometimes this is due to masked instances of self-justifying power. The aim of this approach is to bring out a social conflict despite the appearance of harmony. It is in this sense, for example, that Marx takes himself to have uncovered the “secret” of accumulation behind the veil of bourgeois political economy and common sense notions of free exchange between capitalists and workers.

This parallel between our approach and Marx’s, though, is not a claim to the mantle of Critical Theory—a rich and multi-faceted tradition to which we cannot do justice here. We just stake out our position vis-à-vis the new ideology critics in Anglo-American philosophy. In so doing, we aim to amplify the mistrust of morality and prescriptive theory typical of much Marxism (Wood, 2004; Leiter, 2015). Our broader ambition is to carve out a role for social science in political theory that goes beyond the mere prospecting of what is feasible. However, the idea is not that social-scientific input can somehow allow ideology critique to occupy an Archimedean standpoint of perfect epistemic purity, above the fray of political struggle.<sup>2</sup> We want to show how social critique stands to gain from fighting its main battles on the terrain of empirics rather than that of moral commitments. This is only a comparative claim though. Unlike the contention that epistemic normativity is categorically pure and not distorted by power, we suggest that an epistemic route to ideology critique is an imperfect but better alternative.

Another contribution of this article is a methodological one. In the last decades, political realists have been questioning to what extent a non-moral source of political normativity can be developed (Williams, 2005; Rossi, 2019; Burelli, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Through our epistemic conception of ideology critique, we explore the possibility of making evaluative judgments about the

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2 We will further address this issue in section two.

3 Though realism’s anti-moralism need not be this stark: cf. Hall & Sleat (2017).

legitimacy of a socio-political order without appealing to moral standards. Further, in contrast to the conventional way of understanding legitimacy as a state-centric phenomenon in Anglo-American political theory, we approach the question of a legitimate order at the intersection of the major institutions including the state, the economy, and the patriarchal family. By doing so, we hope to build a bridge between realist theories of political legitimacy and the ambitions of radical social criticism with extensive outreach.<sup>4</sup> Our understanding of a socio-political order incorporates major institutions that have reciprocal causal influence on one another and collectively impose an institutional configuration on subjects in a political community. However, this is not just a mere aggregation of major institutions. We focus on how the exercise of state power is intertwined with and determined by broader power dynamics in society. In this sense, social phenomena that are detached from or have no constitutive effects on the state fall out of the scope of our inquiry. The idea of a socio-political order is not a state-centric notion in that it demystifies state power by analyzing broader power structures that shape it. Despite this, state power is still a significant element due to its manifest role in political coercion.

In what follows, we begin our discussion by pointing out some difficulties with the use of moral commitments in recent takes by Sally Haslanger and others on ideology critique: we show, *inter alia*, that moral commitments are at high risk of ideological distortion themselves, and that if moral commitments drive ideology critique there is little for ideology critique left to uncover, and little to distinguish ideology critique from other forms of normative theorizing (section 1). Those difficulties do not completely damn morality-driven ideology critique, but they do point toward some desiderata for our different approach, which we dub radical realist social analysis. We outline this approach by showing how empirically grounded epistemic critique diagnoses circularities in the justification of power relations, and thereby debunks the legitimating narratives of social practices and political institutions (section 2). We then demonstrate the concrete payoff of our approach by discussing the empirical literature on a real-world cousin of the toy example above, namely the phenomenon of neopatriarchy in the Middle East and North Africa region (section 3).

## I. Ideology and Morality

Sally Haslanger is the most influential exponent of the new Anglo-American ideology critique (Haslanger, 2012; 2014; 2017; 2019), though there are cognate writings by a number of philosophers (e.g., Jones, 2014; Stanley, 2015; Jenkins, 2016; Hänel, 2018). The primary commonality of these authors is that they hold that ideologies are particularly problematic

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4 For a more detailed discussion on the notion of a socio-political order as the subject matter of political legitimacy, see the second section of article three in this thesis.

insofar as they maintain and reproduce unjust or oppressive social structures. Nonetheless they do not employ moral values in the same way or to the same extent. For instance, Stanley's conception of ideological flaw seems to be purely epistemic in that it focuses on how hierarchical social structures "inhibit the rational revision of pre-existing false belief, to preserve a desirable situation for a privileged group." (2015, p. 199). However, Stanley introduces moral premises into his view when he explains the political function of flawed ideologies in terms of their contribution to the efficacy of demagoguery, which itself is defined in relation to "moral facts" (2015, pp. 68; 228). Similarly, Hänel (2018, p. 915) and Jenkins (2016, p. 398) invoke the moral category of wrongfulness in their writings. Hence, while our discussion will focus primarily on the role of morality in Haslanger's paradigmatic view, it also applies to the other new ideology critics in varying degrees.

Haslanger alternates between descriptive and pejorative senses of ideology in her writings. In the descriptive sense of the term, ideologies are "representations of social life that serve in some way to undergird social practices" (Haslanger, 2012, p. 447; Haslanger, 2014). In a later writing, Haslanger (2017, p. 157) uses the phrase 'cultural *techné*' to capture similar phenomena: "a network of social meanings, tools, scripts, schemas, heuristics, principles, and the like which we draw on in action, and which gives shape to our practices." Put differently, ideologies navigate agents in complex social settings by furnishing them with conceptual schemes and discursive/behavioral dispositions. A crucial aspect of this view is that ideologies are constitutive of social reality, and so there is a sense in which their content reflects the true structure of social practices—a point which we will discuss in more detail below (Haslanger, 2012, p. 422).

Still, for Haslanger it is possible to use the term ideology in a pejorative sense, in order to denote a form of cultural *techné* that "organizes us in ways that are unjust, or in ways that skew our understanding of what is valuable" (Haslanger, 2017, p. 159; Haslanger, 2012, p. 412). According to Haslanger (2017, p. 159), epistemic and moral dimensions of problematic ideologies are intertwined. Bad ideologies shape and regulate epistemic resources in such a way that agents are not capable of identifying morally relevant aspects of their social condition anymore. Further, the distinctively moral implication of bad ideologies is that they "systematically disadvantage some groups and constitute unjust structures" (Haslanger, 2017, pp. 159–160).

But morality does not always do all of the normative work: Haslanger is also sympathetic to epistemic critique that solely tests whether our first-order normative beliefs are a product of sound and undistorted processes of deliberation. For instance, her work on generics offers an epistemic form of ideology critique: it reveals how statistical generalizations about identity categories such as "womanhood" often lead to epistemically unwarranted inferences with metaphysical and/or normative conclusions, i.e., about what womanhood essentially means

or how women ought to be (Haslanger, 2014, p. 22). Nonetheless, Haslanger also suggests that epistemic norms are culturally contaminated and therefore do not constitute a neutral ground. Thus she proposes to go beyond epistemic normativity, by including moral truths as the currency of ideology critique:

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

What, then, is the appropriate source of moral knowledge for the purposes of ideology critique? Haslanger offers three complementary answers to that question. First, she contends that we should turn to the claims of activists and social movements as a source of moral knowledge, in line with critical social theorists' recommendations (Fraser, 1981; Khader, 2011). Suggesting that moral knowledge is always situated, Haslanger holds that the disadvantaged groups that are "directly affected by the practices in question... are likely to have better access to morally relevant facts", because "participation in certain social practices provides us with first-person moral knowledge." (Haslanger, 2017, pp. 166–167).

Second, Haslanger makes an argument from human nature: "We can draw on knowledge we have by virtue of being human under good enough conditions" (Haslanger, 2017, p. 167). Even if we often face social barriers that keep us from fully utilizing our capacity to recognize basic matters of justice and moral goodness, she seems to be optimistic about access to moral knowledge on the gravest forms of injustice, especially with the help of activities such as consciousness raising meetings and the like.

Lastly, Haslanger offers a conceptual tool to address deep disagreement about the morally relevant facts. When some deny that an ideological belief or conceptual scheme contributes to an unjust social relation, Haslanger suggests seeking "a common ground" whose norms are binding for everyone involved in the dispute (Haslanger, 2012, p. 425). Even when two sides of the debate do not share a sufficiently large common ground at the beginning of the process, the dialogical nature of the procedure might in the end expand the shared justificatory resources they endorse to the extent that they converge on a mutually acceptable settlement. This is because Haslanger thinks that the pursuit of common ground is more than an exchange of arguments. Rather, it is an attempt to create a space for shared social practices that can transform both parties and enable agreement on a new conceptual infrastructure, including new and shared moral discourse (Haslanger, 2012, p. 425).

It seems to us that Haslanger's reliance on morality as a source of normativity creates at least three related problems for her account of ideology critique. Let us review them, and then consider some possible replies and rejoinders. We will not address all possible roles for morality in ideology critique. We will just criticize Haslanger's specific ways of relying on moral knowledge, and her claim that epistemic commitments are insufficient for ideology critique. Our aim in this section is merely to shift the burden of proof in our favor.

Our first worry with Haslanger's approach is that drawing on the first-order moral claims of social movements is not necessary to the success of emancipatory ideology critique. Picture a critique revealing that, empirically, some part of the culture is just a product of indoctrination, and therefore epistemically untenable. What need is there for the ideology critic to condemn it on moral grounds as well? Haslanger may reply that moral argument makes subjects more likely to lose their epistemic confidence in the dominant ideology, and so enact social change. However, this claim conflates success in the scholarly activity of critique with success in the political activity of advocacy—a blurry divide, but an important one if the practice of ideology critique is to retain a degree of distinctiveness. To be sure, that may come at a cost: social movements may raise pressing issues that may not lend themselves to an analysis in terms of epistemic flaws. But this concern can be equally addressed by developing a division of labor between ideology critique and moral theory, instead of stretching ideology critique beyond recognition so that it can be fully aligned with the most progressive social movements, even assuming the critic has a reliable way of identifying those movements, and the relevant currents within them.<sup>5</sup> As a result we believe it is still not clear why moral knowledge is a necessary element of ideology critique.

In addition, we hold that moralization of ideology critique is not only unnecessary but also undesirable. If we dissolved the goal of studying epistemic flaws in moral discourses into the demands of justice themselves, the risk is that our epistemic inquiry would be considerably more distorted due to the lack of critical distance from our morals. Consider the example that you are a critic for a board games magazine. It is likely that your reviews employ certain standards of judgment that explains what makes a good board game. However, each and every board game you review is a rule-governed social activity, as it is a game. If you picked a particular norm of a board game and then employed it while reviewing other games, this would be conflating the standards of judgment with the objects of criticism. Similarly, the study of epistemic distortions in legitimizing discourses should be considerably distant from the object of criticism. Moral concepts and ideas are the most central element of such

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5 Here we use the term "moral theory" in a broad sense that also includes prescriptive political theory that relies on moral commitments.



discourses. Therefore, we believe that it is better to keep moral theory and ideology critique as separate and relatively autonomous domains of practical inquiry.

That last point leads to our second worry: Haslanger's approach is not well equipped to deal with potential cases of ideological distortion within progressive social movements. For instance, consider an elite-captured anti-racist movement that overestimates the role of moral wrongdoing against certain races in the formation of unjust social structures at the cost of underestimating other dimensions of oppression, i.e., class or gender (Johnson, 2017; Lewis, 2018; Táíwò, 2020). From an empirically informed point of view, it seems more advantageous to treat the situated moral knowledge of such a group as an object of ideology critique rather than mainly as one of its presuppositions. After all, as Raymond Geuss puts it, a key insight of ideology critique is that "ethics is usually dead politics" (2009, p. 42): sedimented power relations often present themselves as commonsensical moral truths.<sup>6</sup> There seems to be no good reason to think that progressive social movements are immune to such ideological distortions. And even if one takes a movement as a whole to be oriented in the right direction, the worry resurfaces when we consider the internal politics of social movements. Just think, for example, of the tensions between liberal and radical feminists. Each side sees itself as the most emancipatory one, or even the only truly emancipatory one. Any theorist who takes the lead from social movements would have to either ignore or adjudicate this sort of dispute (we return to the issue of intra-movement struggles in section 4, in our discussion of the empirical case study). Haslanger is no doubt aware of those problems, but it is not clear how her account can address them.

A third shortcoming of morality-driven ideology critique has to do with Haslanger's presupposition that human beings have direct knowledge of basic matters of justice under good enough social conditions. This is a problem of both redundancy and incoherence. Even if Haslanger acknowledges that the current conditions are much less than ideal, she seems hopeful that the relevant forms of moral knowledge are still accessible to most people. Kate Phelan (2019) recently put significant pressure on that presupposition. But even if one accepts it, one may then wonder whether it makes ideology critique redundant. Let us explain. One might say that morality-driven ideology critique identifies the hidden links between moral truths we acknowledge and how they are embodied or undermined in particular, mystified social practices. On this reading, moral truths are widely known at a certain level of generality and abstraction, and the critic's task is to explain how particular phenomena are incompatible with general moral truths most people endorse. For instance, a socialist ideology critic would take exploitation as unjust (general moral commitment), and show that wage labor is exploitative (relevance to the specific case). The idea is that, due to

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6 Charles Mills' famous critique of the ideology of ideal theory builds upon a similar insight (Mills, 2005).

the hegemony of mainstream culture and institutions, many people will tend to form beliefs and attitudes that are not coherent with some of their more abstract moral convictions.

Now, one could resist this move simply by pointing out that, if the connection between moral truths and practices is complex and convoluted, then it seems reasonable to think that social conditions are not “good enough” for most people to have access to all of the relevant knowledge, *pace* Haslanger. But there is an even more worrisome issue to consider in Haslanger’s argument. In short, the problem picked out by ideology critique of this construal is the impairment of subjects’ cognitive and reflective skills (Geuss, 1981, pp. 89–91; Williams 2002, p. 227; Williams 2005). But if we want people to correctly perceive the links between general moral truths and particular social practices, it seems sufficient to eliminate epistemic barriers (e.g., in our example, by enabling people to critically reflect on the features of wage labor that make it exploitative). Once the epistemic obstacles are removed, subjects should be able to call the legitimacy of dominant practices into question using their general moral commitments. There is no need for the critic to make an additional moral argument. To avoid the redundancy of the moral component of ideology critique, Haslanger would have to insist that moral truths are indispensable in ideology critique, regardless of the presence of epistemic obstacles. But that suggests that critical theorists possess moral capacities inaccessible to ordinary citizens. In other words, saying that removing epistemic obstacles is not enough indicates distrust toward subjects’ reflective capacities—an attitude that is hard to square with Haslanger’s commitment to social actors’ experience as a source of moral knowledge.

Two further, related strategies are available to Haslanger. The first one is to emphasize the link between ideologies and (constructivist accounts of) social reality. The idea here is that ideology is constitutive of social reality, and so it is not only a set of beliefs, attitudes and arguments that are false, but rather a conceptual scheme that shapes our social practices. And something that constitutes social reality cannot be epistemically flawed. For instance, when one argues that we need to drop a set of concepts altogether and replace them with a new set, or change the well-established meaning of some term, this is not an epistemic critique revealing a distorted reality. It is, rather, an invitation to replace one form of social reality with a better one, by revising our semantic conventions (Haslanger, 2012, p. 388). As Wittgenstein puts it, semantic grounding “is not true, nor yet false” (OC, § 205). In this view, meaning-making practices come prior to our epistemic norms because they are the fundamental fabric of the social world. Hence, truth- or knowledge-seeking standards might not be applicable to ideologies that constitute social reality. And that would be why Haslanger holds that we should employ moral arguments to explain why a particular set of concepts is preferable to another: moral commitments allow us to weigh up the different social practices promoted by the different sets of concepts and semantic conventions. For

instance, one may weigh up different concepts of “woman” based on how conducive they are to more inclusive social relations (Jenkins, 2016).

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

The upshot is that we have reason to revise our understanding of those two terms, e.g., by acknowledging that the personal is political. Indeed, Pateman’s argument can be seen as a scholarly companion to that celebrated claim of the second-wave feminist movement. The important point to note here, anyhow, is that the argument does not have to be understood as a moral critique of patriarchy. The mainstream use of “private” turns out to be untenable because it is the product of self-justifying power and, as we will see in some detail in the next section, that is as an epistemic flaw, in the sense that social contract theorists and the male political leaders who adopted their terminology were judges in their own affairs. What is more, this epistemic route to the revision of semantic conventions has an advantage over the moral route: it does not require an *ex-ante* negative judgment over the object of its critique.<sup>7</sup> It is the evidence Pateman uncovers that reveals the epistemic untenability of the contractualist public–private distinction. That conclusion does not require a prior moral judgment about the undesirability of patriarchal social relations. To be sure, hostility to patriarchy arguably motivated Pateman’s inquiry, but it is not required for her actual argument to succeed.

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7 A standard distinction between epistemic and moral reasons is that epistemic reasons apply to beliefs, and moral reasons to actions (Skorupski, 2010, p. 35). Revising semantic conventions requires a more sophisticated version of this distinction. Epistemic (moral) reasons to revise concepts do not directly apply to beliefs (actions), because transforming a semantic convention is to alter the linguistic environment, which both epistemic and moral commitments presuppose. However, as much as moral reasons can prescribe conceptual change due to the practical impact of language, epistemic reasons can do the same if a concept is conducive to generating flawed beliefs.

Lastly, sometimes debunking semantic conventions may not be enough to decide what new meaning to adopt, as there might be several viable alternatives. However, as Simion (2018) suggested, epistemic reasons can also play a positive role in redefining concepts. The personal can be shown to be political on epistemic grounds, say, by unearthing empirical evidence that households are characterized by relations of power and domination.<sup>8</sup>

The final strategy available to Haslanger to defend morality's place in ideology critique focuses on what ideology's constitutive role in social reality does to truth. The strategy embarks from the observation that "in the social domain, shared beliefs can make themselves true" (2017, p. 150), and thus epistemic normativity is not sufficient to mount an ideology critique and should be supplemented by moral critique. For instance, teenagers' social norm that "wearing crop-tops is cute" might be true in an epistemic sense, as the group members' shared belief genuinely captures what cute means in that particular social context (Haslanger, 2017, p. 410). The idea is that power holders or majorities can make their preferred social structures the reference of true beliefs, and so there is no sense in which those beliefs are a form of false consciousness, to use the traditional terminology of ideology critique. But recall that our approach to ideology critique does not require false consciousness. In the next section we resist this objection by showing how, even if one accepts Haslanger's constructivist picture of social reality, *justification* rather than truth can be at the center of a form of critique that can pick out the same problematic structures as Haslanger's account, yet without relying on moral commitments.

## 2. Radical Realist Social Analysis

We now present the abstract structure of a non-moralized type of ideology critique, which we call radical realist social analysis.<sup>9</sup> As we noted, this approach draws its normativity from an epistemic account of ideological distortion, centered on a distinctly political justificatory defect: the self-justification of power. The approach is realist because it grounds normative judgments in non-moral commitments, empirical analysis and epistemic critique in this case, and radical because it can question the most fundamental features of a socio-political order (Raekstad, 2018; Rossi, 2019).

Let us first elaborate on why we choose to focus on self-justifying power among many alternatives for epistemic ideology critique. There are other routes suggesting, for instance,

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8 On any non-moralized concept of domination, e.g., Williams' (2005) version that characterizes domination by its reflective endorsability or Pettit's version wherein the lack of control over the powers significantly impact one's perceived interests (2012, p. 58).

9 Variants of radical realism include Prinz (2016), Raekstad (2018), Rossi (2019), Cross (2020), and Rossi & Argenton (2021).

ideological distortion is at play when social actors' preferences are not in line with their counterfactual choices "under the conditions of relative autonomy", due to certain mechanisms of inculcation (Lukes, 2005, p. 146). Unlike this approach, our account does not need to fulfil the daunting task of predicting what agents would have chosen under the conditions of autonomy, without which identifying ideological distortion is impossible. Our proposal relies on a more parsimonious understanding of distortion. Secondly, employing another strategy, one might endorse the epistemic task of revealing the depoliticizing functions of ideologies, and show how disputed social practices are contingent historical facts rather than natural givens (Rorty, 1994, p. 233). However, the critique of depoliticizing and/or naturalizing discourses only targets one possible mechanism in ideologies. One might, by appealing to some sort of cultural relativism, knowingly endorse contingent practices as normatively valid without making a claim to necessity or universality, hence bypassing the second type of critique. Additional sets of arguments are needed to show justificatory defects in ideologies, regardless of our beliefs about the modal status of the social world. Our approach then plays a complementary role by focusing on how certain power relations tend to legitimize themselves and induce an epistemic circularity, which is a justificatory defect.

The general idea behind our epistemic account of ideology critique is that self-justifying power causes epistemically suspect (but not necessarily false) legitimation stories. A legitimation story is a set of cognitive mechanisms—from explicit argumentation to unconscious rationalizations and conceptual schemes—deployed in support of a practice or institution. We contend that social-scientific evidence coupled with philosophical analysis can be used to challenge legitimation stories in normatively salient ways.

To avoid moral commitments while still performing the tasks associated with social criticism, our account needs a test for ideological distortion that satisfies two desiderata, which we call the *realist desideratum* and the *evaluative desideratum*.

- (i) *Evaluative desideratum*: the analysis must debunk legitimation stories without committing the genetic fallacy, namely the mistake of confusing a blemish in the causal history of a belief, argument, or practice with the lack of alternative considerations in its support.
- (ii) *Realist desideratum*: the analysis must not rest on moral commitments.

To meet both desiderata, the analysis assesses the epistemic reliability of legitimation stories. We do not take issue with the practices and institutions directly, nor do we criticize their consequences in the social world, as doing either of those things would most likely introduce moral commitments, falling short of the realist desideratum. Radical realist social analysis

evaluates legitimation stories by investigating whether they came about in an epistemically suspect way. The guide to this investigation is philosophically interpreted social-scientific evidence. Social science can either discover instances of self-justifying power directly, by analyzing the genealogy of legitimation stories, or indirectly, by revealing that a legitimation story is not what it seems, i.e., it does not fit our best social scientific account of the relevant social dynamics, which in turn rings an alarm bell about a possible ideological distortion. In both cases the ultimate focus of analysis is the justificatory qualities of legitimation stories.

Radical realist social analysis aims to identify a distinctly political epistemic defect, namely the self-justification of power—a form of circularity that should be pronounced enough to constitute a sufficient condition for debunking a legitimation story, i.e., casting sufficient doubt on its plausibility so as to rule it out as a justification for belief in the relevant power's legitimacy. Importantly, the analysis does not seek to demonstrate that a legitimation story is false, but rather that its causal history gives us sufficient reason to discard it, to mitigate epistemic risks. To use a toy example, a scholar may in fact be the best possible critic of her own work; nonetheless a journal editor would be epistemically reckless if she knowingly used a referee report written by the author about her own work. A self-written referee report is akin to inadmissible evidence in a trial: it may be informative, but it should not weigh in the jury's decision, due to basic considerations of evidential standards, rather than moral considerations. Likewise, self-justification of power constitutes a problem of circularity. The rough idea is that social groups that enjoy a distribution of power particularly skewed in their favor (men in a strongly patriarchal society, say, as we will see in some detail in the next section) cannot be seen as reliable producers of legitimation stories about their own socio-political order. Their epistemically flawed legitimation stories ought to be viewed as unreliable, which in turn yields at least a *pro tanto* reason to withdraw support from the practices and institutions underpinned by such stories. But nothing directly follows from the debunking about the practices and institutions themselves, so the genetic fallacy is not triggered.

It is important to note that epistemic circularities might not be categorically fallacious. Some philosophers draw a distinction between benign and malignant circularities. Malignant circularities consist of cases in which there are sound reasons to be suspicious of circularities, or the context of inquiry is built on some kind of doubt regarding the trustworthiness of circular belief sources (Bergman, 2004). In social and political contexts, epistemic circularities in the form of self-justifying power are particularly problematic as the powerful's advantageous social position depends on the legitimation and reproduction of the existing hierarchies, which is a significant source of bias (Williams, 2004, pp. 228-229). As a result, their judgments are more likely to deliver distorted or false narratives. The recent empirical literature on motivated reasoning also seems to verify this insight

by showing how the dynamics of perceived interests and social identities can determine the cognition of agents (Kahan, 2016). A substantial body of empirical work attests to the prevalence and ubiquity of politically motivated reasoning across the main social cleavages, and to its tendency to generate false beliefs (e.g. Kahan 2013; Karadja et al. 2017; Molden & Higgins 2012) Following this, we believe epistemic circularities in the legitimation of power relations are particularly problematic.

Another way of seeing why that is the case is to repurpose an argument by GA Cohen (2014) about the epistemic status of Marxist social theory. Answering the question of how Marxists could know their social theory was correct while also holding that power corrupts social theory, Cohen argued that since the proletariat does not need to distort reality to seize and maintain power (due to its numerical advantage over its enemies), proletarian social theory is likely to track the truth (all else being equal, and assuming that social inquiry left to its own devices tends to track the truth). This argument from numerical superiority runs into several difficulties, which we will not be able to cover here. However, the argument relies on a useful insight that can be revitalized: hierarchical power structures create special interests that distort the beliefs and narratives about the social order. This is in line with our discussion of motivated reasoning. Even if we feel pessimistic about the propensity of the proletariat or other types of majorities to discover truth, we can still say that hierarchical orders, e.g., capitalism, patriarchy or colonialism, have a particular need to generate epistemic distortions, as reliance on sheer coercion is an expansive way of reproducing the order.

Reversing and modifying Cohen's argument, we can say that when a group rules hierarchically over another group they are (*ceteris paribus*) more likely to distort inquiry into the nature of social relations so as to present a picture favorable to the existing hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> A straightforward example would be the legitimation stories about the alleged racial differences that officially underpinned white rule in Apartheid-era South Africa (Johnson, 1982). In the educational materials that were prepared under the supervision of the ruling elites, the Bantu population was systematically portrayed as rural and tribal as opposed to the urban and modern white citizenry, which was functional in preserving the geographical and administrative segregation of racial groups (Johnson, 1982, p. 224). Hierarchical structures create special interests that strongly incentivize the powerful to generate false or unjustified narratives in favor of the status quo. This is why legitimation stories that emanate from those who are the top of hierarchies should be treated with extreme epistemic

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that this is not a moral critique of the inegalitarian or unjust nature of such orders. We do not need to resort to moral judgments that would cause us to fall short of the realist desideratum. It is an epistemic critique: if the mechanisms of cultural transmission are heavily biased towards the prevailing power asymmetries, the products of that culture that legitimize the socio-political order are epistemically suspect.

caution, in the absence of independent reasons to endorse these narratives. As a result, we hold that self-justifying power within hierarchical social structures are likely to induce a form of malignant epistemic circularity in narratives and mechanisms that reproduce social relations. This is because self-justification of power typically amounts to the powerful's motivated reasoning in these settings. The powerful have both the power to disseminate ideas and the (implicit or explicit) motivation to preserve the status quo.

To see how this meshes with our account of the epistemic perils of self-justifying power, consider this streamlined scenario. Society S has two social groups, A and B. A holds considerably more power than B, including power over B. That is to say, A are on top of a social hierarchy, with B at the bottom. A believe this hierarchy is legitimate (call this belief 'L'). A causes B to also believe that L. The prevalence of L is a key factor in the persistence of S's social order. Given the pervasiveness of politically motivated reasoning, there is a very high chance that L is the product of politically motivated reasoning on A's part—specifically, reasoning motivated by the reinforcement of A's social position.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in the absence of independent reasons to endorse the belief, L is epistemically unreliable (because it is circular and A is untrustworthy due to the prevalence of motivated reasoning), and so continued belief in it is unjustified:<sup>12</sup> it is a flawed legitimization story contributing to a flawed ideology.

Our account of ideology is loosely inspired by—though differs greatly from—that of Bernard Williams. Williams' (2002; 2005) critique of the self-justification of power pertains to relatively simplistic cases that are traceable to a figure exercising her powers to indoctrinate and reproduce an order in which she is a ruling elite. In contrast, as will be shown in the next section, we work with a more complex understanding of society, with multiple domains of power relations and spillover effects. From this perspective, self-justifying power refers to those cases when power shapes individuals' subjectivity through diffused cultural reproduction processes, e.g., the patriarchal family, which in turn might have legitimizing effects on other institutions, such as political institutions or the economy. It means we are

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11 Most empirical research on politically motivated reasoning focuses on distortions engendered by social identities. We assume that positions in social hierarchies have corresponding social identities. On this view, awareness of the full import of one's social position (roughly what Marxists call class consciousness) is separate from social identity: one may be aware of their identity as a woman and have corresponding politically motivated beliefs, while not being aware that the social position of women is subordinate to that of men.

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



able to critique self-justifying power even when it does not immediately fit the classical scheme of a “totalitarian ruler who indoctrinates citizens.”

In the next section we will illustrate our approach through a real-world case study. Before that, however, let us address five potential worries about our approach. The first worry is that our account of epistemic distortion may be overinclusive: what about, for example, hierarchical relations such as those between teachers and students? Arguably a measure of hierarchy is constitutive of at least some types of successful education. But note how, even if a maths teacher has a motivated belief that her hierarchical position vis-à-vis students is legitimate, her belief that Pythagoras’s theorem can be proved need not be similarly motivated. And if a student ultimately believes that the theorem can be proved mainly because the teacher said so, then this student hasn’t really grasped the subject, and the teaching process may thus be questioned. What is more, in the typical societal cases that concern us here the content of the belief coincides with the justification of the hierarchy (e.g. “A are natural rulers, B natural subjects”), so the motivated distortion goes all the way down, unlike in teaching and other examples of epistemically benign hierarchy. Indeed, consider the timely example of scientific expertise. In many cases, e.g., physicians, citizens’ epistemic trust in experts is mainly rooted in “the rational belief in the efficacy of the knowledge they possess” (Turner, 2001, p. 140). Although citizens have no direct way of assessing experts’ epistemic authority, they can indirectly justify their trust in the scientific institutions by looking at their valuable outputs, and compare those outputs to those of available alternatives (e.g., faith healing, or homeopathy). In this sense, deference to scientific authority is not necessarily dogmatic. This is different from the critique of self-justifying power because our approach targets the extensive degrees to which power circularly appeals to itself for legitimation, lacking external support. Besides, as the example of Pythagoras’s theorem shows, the bulk of scientific knowledge does not aim at preserving a hierarchy between experts and lay people.<sup>13</sup> So, in cases where scientific claims are not about the legitimacy of the scientific-institutional hierarchy, expert authority, or other similar examples, is not relevantly analogous to our discussion of self-justifying power.

The second worry is that we may be smuggling some negative moral evaluation of power imbalances into our epistemic argument. But that would be to misidentify the flaw that radical realist social analysis seeks to criticize: the flaw is not power asymmetry or imbalance per se, but the self-justification of power. For any theory of power, self-justification remains an epistemic flaw. To be sure, we still have to identify power, which brings a host of contestability problems familiar from the philosophy of social science. However, notice that we do not need a full-fledged theory of power. All we need is to do is identify legitimation

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13 With the possible, partial exception of elitist scholarship on philosophy and sociology of science.

stories that can be traced back to the agency of the groups and social structures they justify. To return to the example of Apartheid, we do not need a full theory of power to see that the mythology about the essential characteristics of various ethnic groups was crucial to the preservation of the political status quo, and could be traced to the agency of a group that was at the top of the social hierarchy. It is the epistemic flaw of self-justification that points us to a problematic power imbalance, not the other way around.

A third worry concerns the political contestability of epistemic normativity. One may observe that epistemology is probably not politically innocent, or not entirely so. Earlier we discussed Geuss' realist observation that "ethics is usually dead politics: the hand of the victor in some past conflict reaching out to try to extend its grip to the present and the future" (2009, p. 42). It is reasonable to suspect that sometimes epistemology is dead politics too, and we neither wish nor need to deny that. All we need is the relatively uncontroversial claim that epistemology is considerably less politically compromised than ethics—a claim that holds even if we acknowledge that power does shape our ways of acquiring and justifying beliefs. For one thing, typically morality does not even try to be politically innocent, whereas epistemology does. And so, as Quill Kukla recently put it in an overview of literature critical of epistemic purity, "We cannot do epistemology without fundamental, central attention to social identities, power relations, and the social institutions and structures within which epistemic practices happen. But [...] this result is of no threat to our usable notions of objectivity, justification, and the like" (Kukla, forthcoming, p. 1). That is not a conclusion we can thoroughly defend here, but it is quite easy to grasp how it may follow from fairly uncontroversial premises. The rough idea is this. Power tends to distort our normative capacities to a degree proportional to their importance in sustaining the socio-political order. If ideological distortion has any political function, it is to stabilize the order. Hence, it is reasonable to expect that one would observe more distortion in crucial domains that most directly contribute to social and cultural reproduction. It is undeniable that our norms for acquiring and justifying beliefs play a role in sustaining relations of power. But it is equally undeniable that our norms for regulating interpersonal interactions play that role to a much larger extent. Distorting impacts of epistemic norms would be less grave because they are more distant from practical categories of authority, obligation, and compliance in which ideologies should be deeply invested in order to sustain the order. That quantitative difference is all we need to establish the preferability of epistemic over moral ideology critique.

A fourth, related, worry may come from recent developments in philosophy of science suggesting that contextual values (including moral values) play an ineliminable role not only in formulating research questions, but also in evidence collection and hypothesis confirmation (Anderson, 2004; Turnbull, 2017). So one might conclude that empirically

informed epistemic inquiry is affected by moral commitments all the way down, which would make epistemic judgments insufficiently distinct from moral judgments. Yet with a more nuanced understanding of the role of contextual values in science, that conclusion does not follow. Philosophers of science often acknowledge the lexical priority of evidence to contextual values (Hicks, 2014). Similarly, Douglas (2009, p. 96) contends that only evidential considerations can play a direct role in science, constituting a *reason* to accept an empirical claim. In contrast, contextual values play an *indirect* role, informing judgments about how demanding our evidential standards should be. Our epistemic conception of ideology critique, then, can accommodate the impact of contextual values in science. This is because our exclusion of moral values mainly pertains to what type of *reasons* support evaluative claims about ideological beliefs, concepts or dispositions. While it may be that the level of evidential standards and the type of research questions we pick are influenced by moral or other contextual factors, that does not amount to claiming that beliefs, attitudes or concepts are ideologically flawed on moral grounds.

A fifth worry is that our conception of ideology critique might be elitist. This is because we are skeptical about basing ideology critique on the moral knowledge of social actors, unlike Haslanger. Further, we also contend that social scientific input ought to play a greater role in debunking legitimation stories. One might interpret these features of our approach as if we are claiming that philosophers and social scientists have some sort of epistemic privilege, enabling them to access the knowledge of what is ideologically distorted (Celikates, 2018, p. 119). We would like to emphasize that our commitment to epistemic normativity does not necessarily imply elitism. We believe that there is definitely a necessary role for scholarly activity in ideology critique because modern societies are highly complex. Any sophisticated theory of ideology will require a certain degree of scholarly activity that attempts to understand such complexity, usually also with the help of other scholars' research from cognate fields. However, this does not amount to elitism. In many cases, the type of social scientific input required by ideology critique does not allow for elitism. For instance, ethnographic research that takes social actors' perspective seriously is an integral part of understanding the inner logic of legitimation stories.

Further, our epistemic principle, which denounces self-justification of power, ultimately recognizes the importance of social actors' reflective capacities. We do not pre-designate a set of "real interests" for social actors and then label them as deluded just because they do not endorse our framework. In contrast, our conception of ideological distortion only problematizes social actors' judgments when they do not sufficiently exercise their reflective capacities, mainly due to structural obstacles. In the case of self-justification of power, our suggestion is that, as power cannot justify itself, social actors should be able to keep

reflecting on the legitimacy of their social institutions and endorse them only after they find independent reasons to support them, which are not traceable to the same power structure.

### 3. A Case Study: Neopatriarchy

We are now in a position to demonstrate how radical realist social analysis evaluates actual socio-political orders. Our case study is neopatriarchy—a term often used to characterize and analyze socio-political orders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. With this choice we wish to move away from the hegemony of Eurocentric examples in political theory, and center a political question endemic to the Global South. To be sure, our presentation of the case study will not do justice to the particularities of the many different societies commonly described with the neopatriarchy label. Our trade-off between ethnographic detail and generalization aims at reaching a level of abstraction that enables us to speak of structural ideological distortion, rather than just zoom in on particular instances of distorted beliefs or practices.

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

Conceptually, neopatriarchy spans macro, meso, and micro levels: state and economy; institutions and organizations; households, families, attitudes, and interpersonal relations. The modernizing neopatriarchal state introduces policies for women's social and spatial presence—public education, employment in the government sector, the vote— but retains patriarchal family laws that bind women and girls to the family and to protection (or control) by male kin. (Moghadam, 2020, pp. 469–470).<sup>14</sup>

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

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<sup>14</sup> Our conception of neopatriarchal order is less strict than Moghadam's and includes non-oil-dependent countries such as Turkey. For us, it is sufficient that the socio-political order rationalizes its authoritarian leaning through patriarchal discourses, and partly relies on traditional patronage relationships mediated by family, tribal, or religious connections (Durak, 2012; Çınar, 2019).

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

Neopatriarchal orders display an impressive degree of intertwinement among economic, political and social institutions with reciprocal causal effects on each other. On the one hand, authoritarian political institutions in their different variants—including electoral populism or one-party states—engage in top-down interventions to reproduce and even strengthen existing patriarchal norms, especially within the family and economy by means of legislation and executive policy-making (Moghadam, 2004, p. 145; Walby, 2019, p. 425). On the other hand, the very same political actors legitimate their power by appealing to existing patriarchal discourses and relying on neopatriarchal networks in the allocation of resources for clientelistic purposes (Sharabi, 1988, pp. 45–48; Melián, 2018). However, the particular shape and form of the economy, e.g., increasing precarization of labor and chronic unemployment, further reproduce the neopatriarchal relations of dependence as employees often compensate their lack of socio-economic rights by submitting to local authorities of religious communities and/or family connections, which in turn offer them social protection (Durak, 2012, pp. 73–81).

After this brief characterization of neopatriarchal orders, it is important to zoom in on two of their legitimation stories. Before that, though, a qualification is needed. Contrary to conventional theories of political legitimacy, we will discuss the legitimacy of an entire socio-political order rather than just that of its formal political institutions. This is because neopatriarchal orders are constituted by social structures that are not reducible to the state and other such agencies. Our unit of analysis, then, is the socio-political order as an intertwined network of different domains: the economy, the state, the family, and the wider culture.

The first legitimation story is the use of patriarchal discourses by political power holders to consolidate the authoritarian traits of a regime. Social scientists have long argued that patriarchal discourses and analogies are commonly employed as justificatory narratives by power holders across a wide range of contexts beyond the MENA region:

The imagery and language of father and family are widespread in Africa because they strike a resonant and deeply embedded cultural chord. They form part of a culturally valid and largely implicit comprehension of the limits of political legitimacy based on a complex and largely unarticulated moral matrix of

legitimate governance derived from an idealised vision of patterns of authority and behaviour within the family (Schatzberg, 1993, p. 451).

A striking and more recent example from the MENA region is the authoritarian populist transformation of Turkey in the last decade, and the role of patriarchal discourses in this transformation. Characterizing patriarchy as the blend of male domination and the rule of the elder, Ugur-Cinar (2017, p. 330) highlighted that Turkish political life has been increasingly structured along the lines of these gendered and paternalistic aspects of patriarchy. Drawing on extensive analysis of Turkish president Erdoğan's political speeches, Ugur-Cinar (2017, p. 335) identifies patterns of patriarchal framings that marginalize anti-government opposition by portraying protesters as unruly women and youngsters who do not respect the norms defining roles and behavior appropriate to their position in a patriarchal hierarchy. Similarly, Erdoğan often portrays the relationship between him and his constituency through a structural analogy with intra-family ties, mobilizing emotional resources to legitimate his position as the father of the nation (Ugur-Cinar, 2017, pp. 335–336).

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

The second legitimation story concerns the political-economic base of neopatriarchal orders. As mentioned above, loyalty to one's president, tribal leader, elder of the family and/or husband are rewarded with material benefits, economic security, and social protection (Rodríguez, 2018). As opposed to blanket benefits available in rights-based welfare states, neopatriarchal orders allocate resources in response to individuals' performance in the effective compliance with the authority of those who are in a higher position in the patriarchal hierarchy. Sharabi (1988, pp. 45–46) succinctly summarizes how patron-client relationships are maintained through the mediation of neopatriarchal networks at micro levels:

The lubricant of the patronage system endowing it with suppleness and resilience, is the *wasta* (mediation) mechanism... *Wasta*, in the form developed within the family, not only socializes the individual into accepting the supremacy of established authority but also trains one in the ways of dealing with it. Through the intercession of the mother, the uncle, a respected figure close to the family, and so forth, the child discovers that despite one's impotence one can still operate in the existing system of power.

In neopatriarchal orders, the client-patron relations that are dominant in power and resource allocation are often characterized by a variety of networks consisting of religious, tribal or familial groups (Hermez, 2011; Durak, 2012; Melián, 2018). The regime type in these socio-political orders are often called “neopatrimonial”, referring to the quasi-patriarchal relationship between rulers and subjects based on the former’s protection and the latter’s allegiance (Cengiz, 2020). Neopatrimonial systems of patronage are also neopatriarchal to the extent that intermediary mechanisms at micro and meso levels are the abovementioned traditional networks where the patriarchal authority of men and the elderly is central, instead of modern organizations such as political parties.

The second legitimation story of neopatriarchal orders, then, is based on the idea that the prevalent relations of neopatriarchal authority take care of their individual members through patronage. This is mainly a form of perceived output legitimacy in the sense that the socio-political order achieves a considerable degree of stability and popular support as it delivers certain benefits and resources that are deemed valuable by the subjects (Scharpf, 1999). In the remainder of this section, we will investigate whether these legitimizing narratives about the moral validity of patriarchal discourses and the output-oriented legitimation of neopatriarchal networks pass our epistemic test of self-justifying power.

As regards the first legitimation story, power holders’ appeal to patriarchal discourses, we hold that there are two distinct problems of circularity which amount to self-justification of power. First of all, as highlighted above, patriarchal norms and values that political elites use to justify their governance are partly the product of the same power. A major characteristic of neopatriarchal orders is that state power is used to reinforce the existing gender roles and the intra-family relations of authority (Moghadam, 2004, p. 145; Walby, 2019, p. 425). For instance, the preservation of conservative family laws contributes to the marginalization of women in the spheres of both intra-family relations and the labor market. It is important to note that the exercise of state power is not only observed in the decisions of executive and legislative branches. The absence of certain decisions, i.e., *nondecisions*, is another way power is exercised by excluding certain claims from the agenda of political institutions (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Hence, the mere maintenance of existing social structures pertains to the way state power is exercised, as it is a product of an active use of political power in excluding certain alternatives from the domain of policy-making despite various actors, e.g., the demands of feminist movements. The problem here is that if the persistence of strict patriarchal norms and values is conditioned upon the support of state power, then the former cannot be a proper source of legitimation for the latter. This is because of the basic epistemic tenet that an evaluation of a power-related justification should be based on standards that are independent of the alleged authority of the object of evaluation. Just like it is epistemically flawed to trust a person solely on the basis of her

assertion that she is trustworthy, it is not plausible to legitimize a power relation on the basis of certain cultural traits that are reproduced by the very same power.

However, we do not know if the effect of state power is the sole determinant for the maintenance of existing patriarchal norms. While this degree of circularity is sufficient to cast some epistemic doubt on the political use of such norms, we need to identify additional mechanisms of self-justifying power to strengthen our case. The second circularity is about the reproduction of patriarchal norms within the family itself. Sharabi (1988, pp. 41–48) suggests that the early intra-family socialization of children is a crucial factor explaining why the broader culture of neopatriarchal orders is so conducive to the creation of obedient behavior with respect to authority figures. Further empirical evidence suggests that patriarchal traits such as intimate partner violence are intergenerationally transmitted (Islam et al., 2014). Not only behavioral dispositions but also explicit norms and gender roles are often considered transferrable from one generation to another via early socialization in the family (Min et al., 2012; Platt & Polavieja, 2016). Modeled on the paternal authority within the family, the primary ethos of the neopatriarchal order is premised upon dependence on the family and respect for the elderly rather than the ideal of autonomous citizens. As a result, the cultural reproduction of patriarchal norms within the family is essential for the stability and legitimation of the socio-political order. Extensively hierarchical and authoritarian intra-family relations are the basic building blocks from which other meso- and macro-level relations derive legitimacy.

We believe this model of cultural reproduction suffers from a problem of epistemic circularity. The creation of the neopatriarchal subjectivity, i.e., a particular model of personhood with specific social identities and internalized norms, is largely a product of the neopatriarchal family in which the autonomy of children and teenagers is severely curbed in comparison to its functional equivalents, i.e., other family types. In this sense, the reproduction of norms and values is traceable to the exercise of power and authority within one of the institutions of the neopatriarchal order, i.e., the power of the father and other elderly figures over children. As the very same norms and values are being instrumentalized in the legitimation of elderly figures' authority over others, there seems to be a case of self-justifying power in the neopatriarchal family. Further, since these pro-patriarchy value orientations are also used in the legitimation of broader social institutions, one can also say that the socio-political order as a whole is rationalized through the use of certain premises that are circular in themselves. We hold that socio-political orders cannot be truly legitimized by such circular narratives where power and authority generates their own acceptance. Given that these mechanisms of cultural reproduction involve hierarchical structures with diverging power positions and interests, we argue that there are strong reasons to believe



that epistemic circularities in the reproduction of the neopatriarchal family are largely malignant, considering our discussion of motivated reasoning in the previous section.

One might object that our argument deems any form of cultural reproduction epistemically suspect. This is because it is inevitable for well-functioning orders to reproduce their norms and value systems over time. Our reply to this objection is to highlight that a particular level of cultural reproduction could be much more than what is needed for a well-functioning socio-political order. While we agree that there is a baseline reproduction below which the organization of social life would be infeasible or ineffective given our historically defined needs, we contend that power holders are often tempted to use mechanisms of cultural reproduction more intensely than what the baseline level requires. We do not claim to know where exactly the baseline lies. However, we suggest that the more hierarchical the social structures are, the better chance there is that existing cultural reproduction is above the baseline. This is basically because, as Cohen (2014) puts it, more hierarchical structures create special interests of those who are at the top of the hierarchy. The best way to preserve those interests is to hinder social change and overemphasize the importance of existing cultural norms, i.e., to employ status quo bias. Hence, more hierarchical societies are *ceteris paribus* more likely to overestimate the necessary level of cultural reproduction, because privileged groups have more vested interests in distorting that level—a pattern one can observe in neopatriarchal societies. As more egalitarian family models seem to be a genuine empirical possibility in certain cultures or sub-cultures, the belief in the necessity of neopatriarchal family with steeper hierarchies is more likely to be shaped by special interests. Of course, there is also the possibility that variation in family models can be explained by other historical and cultural contingencies. However, this possibility does not automatically nullify the epistemic risk caused by the greater incentives of the powerful to generate a status quo bias in more hierarchical social formations.

Lastly, let us consider why the second legitimation story—output-oriented legitimation through patronage—counts as self-justification of power. We suggest that the story rests on a fallacy akin to the one Jon Elster diagnosed in the self-legitimation of feudalism: “The illusion of a voluntary and rational arrangement disappears when one observes that the lord provided protection mainly against other lords” (1983, pp. 145–146). The lord’s protection is only beneficial because the feudal system creates the need for protection in the first place. Similarly, the patronage relations prevalent in neopatriarchal orders are beneficial only because citizens are put in a position of vulnerability in the first place. The patronage system protects subjects from vulnerabilities created by the very same system. If the socio-political order were not neopatriarchy or something similar, informal connections within the centers of power would not determine citizens’ economic fate. As a result, in the absence of neopatriarchy, clientelistic social protection would cease to exist as a need that

the socio-political order must satisfy. Since economic and political power are concentrated in the hands of authoritarian elites in neopatriarchal orders, the functional equivalents of patronage, e.g., a rights-based welfare state or the primacy of market allocation mechanisms, are not available alternatives. The existing power asymmetries make patronage the only game in town because a patronage-based economy uniquely enables elites to buy the citizens off, hence reproducing the prevailing social and political relations. Thus the output-oriented legitimation of neopatriarchy relies on self-justifying power. Clientelistic social protection can be conceived as a genuine satisfaction of a human need only by ignoring how local, regional, and national power holders manufacture this need by designing resource allocation mechanisms in line with their own interests. Accepting the legitimacy of neopatriarchy on the grounds of clientelistic social protection is epistemically circular. It requires forming a normative judgment about a system on the basis of the satisfaction of a need manufactured by the same system.

One might still ask if this circularity is benign or malignant. Is it a good idea to believe that the satisfaction of certain needs that are particularly created by a socio-political system can be a reason to support the system? We do not think so. As Bergman (2004) puts it, we have malignant circularities when we should be suspicious of the belief source in the first place. There are perfectly good explanations of why the way political and economic elites design or shape the system of economic distribution should not be trusted in the first place. They have an interest in designing the system of distribution to maximize their private political and economic gains, rather than the general welfare or some publicly acknowledged standard of justice. Hence, we believe it is fairly uncontroversial to hold that self-justifying power in this case implies a malignant epistemic circularity.

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

With our analysis of neopatriarchy in place, let us conclude by briefly considering how Haslanger may deal with the same phenomenon. It seems to us that Haslanger would

face several difficulties in trying to identify an adequate source of moral knowledge to criticize the ideology of neopatriarchy. First, both the considerable inter-cultural variation in moral intuitions and the hierarchical social structures of neopatriarchy make it difficult for social actors to recognize the basic matters of justice and moral goodness. In the context of steep hierarchies, “there is little opportunity for people to develop an ability to see the general perspective of others” (Clark & Gintis, 1978, p. 316). Since such social relations are commonly characterized by threat, antagonism, and fear, there does not seem to be optimal conditions enabling individuals to develop proper moral attitudes by virtue of their humanity. The deep hierarchical structure of neopatriarchal institutions would therefore be considerably suboptimal regarding the prospects of social actors from different segments normatively converging on the basic matters of justice. Second, the claims of the relevant social movements are not particularly likely to function as a sufficiently univocal source of moral input. There are simply too many different movements with competing moral commitments. Although they can form political alliances on more practical grounds, there is hardly enough overlap in their normative commitments to get a critical theoretical project off the ground. For instance, it is far from obvious that feminist movements with a degree of pluralism including liberal, nationalist, Islamic, and socialist groups have the necessary degree of homogeneity to present a shared moral foundation for the ideology critique of neopatriarchy. Islamic feminist movements have a considerably different approach to the moral evaluation of patriarchal institutions such as the family (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2008). Instead of diluting the critical potential of our debunking projects with endless processes of adjudicating competing moral claims, our approach relies on a thinner epistemic commitment, and one that is not bound to the perspective of any particular social movement.

What is more, as we have seen in our earlier discussion of Pateman, the outcome of our critique does not rest on a prior negative moral judgment of its object. It is the empirical discovery of self-justifying power that generates the negative evaluation. A prior commitment or an encounter with any of the relevant social movements may have led us to the empirical literature on the pertinent social phenomena, but ultimately the evaluative judgment comes from our analysis of the empirics, not from our normative priors—except for relatively uncontroversial epistemic ones, which Haslanger is presumably also committed to upholding. It is in this sense that radical realist social analysis is more parsimonious than moralistic ideology critique: the former may need moral commitments to formulate questions, but not to provide answers, whereas the latter relies on morality throughout. Still, since radical realist social analysis is open to complementary forms of normative theorizing, there may be a place for moral theory alongside it, including perhaps the “new” Anglo-American social criticism—which, in any case, is barely distinct from other forms of moral theorizing. But, as we have seen, that pairing would not be without risks, including the very risk of ideological distortion.

#### 4. Conclusion

The argument of this paper has a *pars destruens* and a *pars construens*. In the *pars destruens* we have argued that the sort of moral commitments Haslanger and others place at the core of ideology critique imperil the effectiveness and distinctiveness of this form of theorizing. In the *pars construens* we have shown how the tasks of ideology critique can be carried out by relying on epistemic normativity alone. This resulting form of ideology critique—radical realist social analysis—is in line with both the desiderata of the recent realist revival in political philosophy (Rossi, 2019), and with the mistrust of moral theory typical of several Marxian approaches (Wood, 2004; Leiter, 2015). We illustrated how our argument can be operationalized in the debunking of comprehensive socio-political and cultural phenomena, e.g., neopatriarchal orders. Whether our approach can be defended not just against the new Anglo-American ideology critique but also vis-à-vis the rich tradition of contemporary critical theory is a question for further work.

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