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Alternatives to moralism

Political realist essays on power and legitimation

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Publication date

2021

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Aytaç, U. (2021). *Alternatives to moralism: Political realist essays on power and legitimation*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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Throughout the thesis, I have explored alternative sources of political normativity and how they can be employed in distinct contexts of legitimation. My inquiry proceeded from two points of departure. First, I situated my claims within the context of the debate on whether there are non-moral sources of political normativity. I identified three types of political normativity by either modifying the preexisting accounts in political realism or by utilizing new theoretical insights borrowed from other literatures. I held that the inner normativity of politics, epistemic commitments, and linguistic norms inform our judgments about political life in significant ways. Second, I linked the question of political normativity with the problems of legitimation at three different levels: the state, the socio-political order, and the limits of the political. While liberal realists are primarily interested in the legitimacy of state power, radical realists highlight the additional importance of other social institutions in legitimation processes. Partly mapping onto the distinction between these two perspectives, I showed that they are indeed compatible. I argued that different normative approaches can be adopted in these two contexts. Similarly, a third context is integrated into the picture by focusing on the question of how to legitimize certain limits for the political when there are potentially excessive instances of politicization, as in the case of science-denialism and post-truth politics.

The thesis paints a picture of pluralism around the sources of political normativity that is connected to a division of labor. In contexts where we should be able to make more minimalist normative judgments, I propose to utilize the inner normativity of politics, distinguishing ruling through legitimation stories from tyrannical governance based on sheer domination. However, the task of normative political theory is not limited to identifying the bare minimum. Epistemic commitments come into play when the object of inquiry becomes the broader institutional circumstances surrounding the exercise of state power. We then start investigating whether the legitimation stories emanate from acceptable cultural resources or whether the political systems are formed by non-state power structures that are not visibly political. Lastly, when our shared moral, political, and epistemic values fall short in accommodating conflicts, I propose to employ a linguistic understanding of normativity as a final recourse against the intensifying trend of post-truth politics. The third context of legitimation is to provisionally set a non-dogmatic boundary for the political in a way that is acceptable to historically situated agents of contemporary democratic societies.

What is the use of such pluralism? I believe my approach allows for more nuanced political judgments that capture different dimensions of the human condition in political life. For instance, regardless of whether one claims that political legitimacy should be state-centric, it is sensible to pay considerable attention to how state power relates to the other domains of social life. Say you are a radical realist with Marxian sympathies, holding that a theory of political legitimacy should primarily focus on how capitalism determines

political institutions. This does not make the problem of tyrannical states less problematic for you. Consider a socio-political order that is deemed illegitimate by some standards. In my account, the state can be justifiable in terms of certain local standards embedded in the culture and shared beliefs of the political community despite the illegitimacy of the socio-political order as a whole. This is something even the critics of state-centrism should take into account. Otherwise, the practical orientation derived from radical social criticism would fail to address the existing normative orientations in the citizenry. Second, perhaps more importantly, lumping together all types of states would generate a normative deficiency in realism since such an attitude would reduce one's ability to single out the most direct and violent forms of domination, observed in the states that mostly rely on sheer domination. Even if political legitimacy is not all about state power, the notion of (il) legitimate state power still captures a distinctive political phenomenon. I believe realists would be better off if they explicitly acknowledged the value of having these two layers of legitimation: the state and the socio-political order. By doing so, they would be able to reap the benefits of both without conflating them with each other. Let me clarify that this point is not a criticism of anarchism, suggesting that some states should necessarily be legitimate. In contrast, my claim is compatible with the anarchist critique of the state. You can argue that all states are illegitimate while still acknowledging that the state is an indispensable unit of analysis in theories of legitimation. Even an anarchist has an interest in distinguishing the worst types of states from other illegitimate states. Illegitimacy of the states might come in degrees for an anarchist.

However, one might still object: what normative difference does it really make if domination is centralized, explicit, and violent in the form of a tyrannical state instead of being diffused, implicit, and ideological through the mediation of wider social institutions and cultural formations? What makes the first worse than the second? Why does the first deserve a particular conception of legitimacy tailored to state power? This is certainly not a question to which I can do justice here. However, there is at least one provisional answer that we might think is plausible. I believe state domination deserves special attention because it is easier to correctly identify it in contemporary societies (Rawls, 1996, p. 230). Diffused and ideological domination through social institutions are more difficult to study, as the alleged empirical links are often easier to dispute. Similarly, there seems to be more room for disagreement when it comes to what counts as ideological distortion. In contrast, there are relatively straightforward and verifiable ways of deciding to what extent a state gets closer

1 It is important to remember that I do not use the notion of domination in a neorepublican sense here. Also see the second footnote in the Introduction. More in line with Williams' characterization, domination here basically refers to any kind of power relations that are not genuinely endorsable. The criterion of endorsability depends on the context. In the context of state power, the epistemic requirements are less strict, as discussed in the first article.

to tyrannical governance through various methods of oppression. This is mostly because i) the exercise of state power is easier to trace due to its centralized and formal organizational structure, and ii) there seems to be a greater agreement about the coercive nature of state power in comparison to other forms of power. As a result, claims about state domination seem to be, *ceteris paribus*, more likely to be true due to a smaller margin of error. Hence, even if one thinks that two types of domination are normatively on a par, it is still a good idea to endorse the state as a distinct layer of legitimation. This is because having such a category expands the set of dominating social relations that is correctly identified.

Another reason why a pluralistic account of political normativity matters concerns capturing the complexities of political agency. One shared tenet of political realists is that political theorizing should stay sensitive to facts about political life. It would be odd for a realist approach to overlook the facts about agency, which is a key element of political life. Political agents have diverse normative capacities to evaluate institutions, social relations, and legitimizing narratives. While moral capacities assess institutions and social relations more directly, epistemic capacities focus on the underlying discursive and conceptual structures of legitimizing narratives that lend normative support to institutions. A realistic conception of politics would be deficient if it overlooked the epistemic aspects of the practices of justification and critique. Similarly, political agents are language users. Interpretation and meaning-making practices inevitably shape our understanding of fundamental categories including truth, legitimacy, and authority. To the extent that language is a rule-governed practical domain, its norms orient political agents in the context of contestations and power struggles colored by competing understanding of central concepts. Lastly, human beings have the distinctly political competence of purposefully organizing themselves into institutional orders. While this presupposes a combination of moral, linguistic, epistemic, and emotional capabilities, the political organization of social life lends itself to be understood in terms of a distinct agential capacity. It is beside the point whether this dimension of our agency is reducible to other agential capacities. At any rate, it seems sufficiently complex to be studied through its own conceptual scheme. The inner normativity of politics refers to this dimension of political agency, i.e., our collective ability to form purposeful institutional orders that can be evaluated by appealing to the point and purpose of the very same institutions. As a result, a pluralistic understanding of political normativity does justice to the complex and multifaceted ways agents understand and evaluate power relations and institutions in the social world.

I. A Brief Summary of the Articles

Let me now highlight how the abovementioned insights unfolded in the articles of this thesis. The first article disentangled the intricate relationship between two normative strategies

in Bernard Williams' account of political legitimacy. I argued that Williams' approach, understood as a theory of legitimate state power, suffers from a tension between his realist and epistemic commitments. His initial conceptualization of realist legitimacy stems from the idea that a properly political relationship between power holders and subjects would presuppose a genuine legitimation process. In a sense, he derives the notion of legitimacy from the inner normative structure of politics, centered on the distinction between political authority and sheer domination. In contrast, I showed that his Critical Theory Principle is fundamentally an epistemic principle that does not always lead to a dyadic relation of domination between the state and the addressee of a legitimation story. Further, once the conceptual link between Williams' non-domination requirement and the Critical Theory Principle is broken, there seems to be no non-arbitrary way to contextualize epistemic requirements. Two important consequences follow from my argument. First, the realist conception of legitimate state power should be more minimalistic, mainly focusing on the inner normativity derived from the idea of properly political relationships instead of external epistemic criteria. Second, when certain epistemic standards are used to identify subtle and indirect forms of state domination, such commitments should be constructed in a way that is compatible with the political rule–domination distinction.

The second article complements the previous discussion in that it shows how a more radical understanding of legitimacy might utilize epistemic commitments. In this article, the object of inquiry shifts from the question of state domination to whether the socio-political order as a whole runs a legitimacy deficit. Epistemically deficient legitimizing narratives, which are the products of self-justifying power, are now debunked even when they are not generated by state domination. There are many cases in which oppressive social systems are maintained through a combination of social institutions, including the family, economic structures, and other traditional social formations. It is not always clear whether state power precedes them or not. However, the notion of a socio-political order enables one to understand political domination as a matter of an institutional network. Epistemic shortcomings induced by power-related distortions are then effectively criticized without the need to show that they are products of state-led indoctrination. At this second layer of legitimation, we hold that a realist conception of ideology critique should be employed based on epistemic normativity. By doing so, a normative outlook for radical social criticism emerges without sacrificing complementary normative categories that are required for more minimalist normative judgments about political life.

The third article takes a different tack by facilitating radical social criticism through empirically informed conceptual engineering. Combining radical realism with the empirical findings from the Transnational Capitalist Class literature, I argued that the subject matter of global political legitimacy should be expanded in a way that includes the structural

power of transnational business elites. International political theorists often characterize political power and its legitimacy by referring to dyadic power relations in which an actor intentionally influences others. I showed that such conceptions of political legitimacy are too narrow, given that structural power dynamics are one of the major institutional factors in maintaining the existing socio-political order in global politics. Revising the conceptual scope of global political legitimacy substantially expands the set of social relations and institutions that is evaluated by a realist conception of political legitimacy. On the other hand, I refined radical realists' understanding of legitimacy. Instead of Geuss' overly broad view suggesting that legitimacy is applicable to all sorts of collective action, I developed a particular conception of political legitimacy tailored to my notion of a socio-political order. By doing so, I distinguished the questions of institutional legitimacy as an umbrella category from those of power relations. I argued that a distinctly political understanding of legitimacy would require focusing on the latter. While the argument of this article is not directly normative, its motivation is grounded in epistemic commitments. It illustrates how an empirically informed approach to political categories leads to conceptual innovation that improves the functionality of preexisting political categories, by improving the fit between the concept and the socio-empirical reality it aims to capture.

The fourth article investigates the affordances of linguistic normativity in political life. The argument of this article applies to the final context of legitimation, i.e., the limits of the political. A radical realist approach to the legitimacy of a socio-political order arguably politicizes many domains of social life by emphasizing how culture and the economy are formed by power relations that are subject to the constant demands of legitimation. However, a sufficiently stable social life relies on a certain degree of depoliticization that keeps particular institutions at arm's length so that their functioning is not be undermined by continuous legitimation demands. One example of such institutions is the scientific community. It is hard to deny that the scientific institutions themselves wield certain powers and substantially influence political bodies. On the other hand, the excessive politicization of science is likely to endanger the basic epistemic infrastructure which the organization of social life is based on. The article contends that a Wittgensteinian conception of linguistic normativity can offer useful criteria in identifying and criticizing problematic cases of politicization, e.g., science-denialism. Through a close reading of Chantal Mouffe's critique of depoliticization, I demonstrated that it is possible to strike a balance between the critique of depoliticization and avoiding overpoliticization.

2. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

I will now discuss the limitations of the thesis and highlight avenues for future research. First, while the thesis has extensively focused on the notion of political legitimacy as the

primary value in political life, I have not offered a detailed account of how the logical space of political values should be structured. The third article engaged in some discussion about what methodological reasons are available for radical realists to use the notion of legitimacy in broader contexts that political theorists usually associate with justice. However, this does not say much about how other political values can and should be constructed in realist political theory. For example, whether and how a realist conception of justice—another central concept in contemporary political theory—can be developed is not covered in the thesis. One particular direction future research on realism might take is to focus on how different political categories might be organized and utilized, including justice and democracy. Geuss (2017) recently asserted that realism and utopian thinking are compatible with each other. A starting point for a realistic inquiry into the idea of justice might be to investigate the function of utopian discourses in real political life and then develop a context-sensitive conception of justice from the actual practices of social actors' utopian thinking. This could potentially lead to a division of labor between realist legitimacy and justice, i.e., evaluating existing relations of power and imagining future political possibilities from within the given context of real political life.

Another limitation of the thesis is that there is a further need to identify and discuss other potential uses of epistemic normativity in political theory. My cases were limited to the analysis of self-justification of power and empirically informed conceptual innovation, as discussed in the third article. However, there are many other ways epistemic commitments can be utilized in the evaluation and critique of political phenomenon, e.g., whether legitimizing narratives are empirically sound in addition to not being a product of self-justifying power. I limited the scope of my inquiry to keep the main themes of discussions closer to the preexisting literature on realism. The critique of self-justification of power is an issue that is extensively discussed by Bernard Williams (2002; 2005). Further, it is a very minimalistic epistemic requirement that attacks certain forms of extreme circular reasoning. By revitalizing this theme in the criticism of socio-political orders, I synthesized Williams' contribution with the ambitions of radical realism. The result is that this minimalistic epistemic requirement is tailored to the criticism of social structures that were not initially covered by Williams' formulation. Similarly, in the third article, my empirically informed conceptual revision drew on the preexisting literature on radical realism, claiming that the scope of legitimacy should be widened. For the sake of better continuity with the literature, I picked these particular strategies. However, I believe that future research on political realism is now well-positioned to identify and implement new epistemic resources that can evaluate and debunk legitimizing narratives.

Lastly, future research is needed on to what extent a conception of linguistic normativity embedded in social practices is different from context-sensitive versions of public reason

liberalism. For instance, Rawls' (1996) later work arguably derives the fundamental normative commitments of his account from what he calls the public political culture of democratic societies. This approach claims to be sensitive to the historical and cultural specificities of Western liberal democratic societies. One might ask in what ways my Wittgensteinian conception of linguistic normativity is different from deriving certain interpretations of political concepts from the intellectual resources that are available in the public political culture. One crucial difference is that the Rawlsian route seems to be more about the interpretation of fundamental moral-political values. In contrast, linguistic normativity is grounded in language users' grasp of basic social facts by participating in certain meaning-making practices, which are beyond interpretation. While these facts might be related to moral and political ideas, they fundamentally refer to the relationships between practices and language use, rather than what plausible interpretations are available in the intellectual and legal traditions of societies. Nevertheless, the differences and similarities between these approaches deserve a more nuanced and well-elaborated discussion. While my argument offers an entry point for linguistic normativity to contemporary democratic theory, it is far from identifying its full implications in relation to alternative approaches to political conflict and disagreement.

To conclude, despite its limitations, the thesis has expanded the set of evaluative standards that we can reasonably use in assessing several aspects of institutional orders and relations of power. It has offered a multifaceted approach to political normativity that employs the inner normativity of politics, epistemic normativity, and linguistic normativity in distinct contexts of legitimation. The context-sensitive and methodological pluralist approach of the thesis allows one to reconcile radical social criticism with the possibility of making more nuanced judgments, indicating legitimacy problems in degrees and various forms. By doing so, the thesis has brought together various sensibilities among political realists without undermining what is really useful in their approaches.

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