

Political Realism as Ideology Critique

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Abstract

This paper outlines an account of political realism as a form of ideology critique. Our focus is a defence of the normative edge of this critical-theoretic project against the common charge that there is a problematic trade-off between a theory's groundedness in facts about the political status quo and its ability to consistently envisage radical departures from the status quo. To overcome that problem we combine insights from three distant corners of the philosophical landscape: theories of legitimacy by Bernard Williams and other realists, Frankfurt School-inspired Critical Theory, and recent analytic epistemological and metaphysical theories of cognitive bias, ideology, and social construction. The upshot is a novel account of realism as empirically-informed diagnosis-critique of social and political phenomena. This view rejects a sharp divide between descriptive and normative theory, and so is an alternative to the anti-empiricism of some approaches to Critical Theory as well as to the complacency towards existing power structures found within liberal realism, let alone mainstream normative political philosophy, liberal or otherwise.

Key words: Political realism; Ideology critique; Bernard Williams; Critical Theory.

0. Introduction

The accusation of status quo bias is a major obstacle in realism's path. Even theorists who are friendly to the realist enterprise express worries as to the approach's ability to radically *criticise* the reality to which, in some important sense, any realism worth its name must be tied. When it comes to *prescribing* alternative political scenarios this problem becomes, predictably, even more pressing. Crudely, there appears to be a problematic trade-off between a theory's groundedness in facts about the status quo and its ability to consistently envisage radical departures from the status quo. Or so the criticism goes.

In this paper we respond to that criticism by outlining an account of realism as ideology critique. More specifically, we investigate one avenue of realist defence against the status quo bias accusation: the idea that, if an empirically-informed analysis of the status quo is guided by an appropriate theory of ideology, it can yield a normative indictment of the status quo and, in some cases, even an account of a desirable alternative state of affairs. Here the challenge is to make criticism of ideology compatible with the realist rejection of moral principles external to the context and problem in question. And so we see an affinity between the realist project and the longstanding tradition of 'immanent critique' in Critical Theory. Moralistic critique of institutions or practices can be

internal in the sense it is still committed to articulating the normative commitments that *ostensibly* underpin those institutions and practices (think of the enormous liberal literature on what kinds of first-order political principles most truly express liberalism's normative commitments). Realist or immanent critique, on the other hand, seeks to transcend, transform, or even subvert those commitments without thereby relying on further, external moral standards (Jaeggi 2009). Put differently, immanent critique is *internal to the political context without being internal to the ideology that underpins that context*. In our specific account of realist ideology critique this critical standpoint will be reached by relying on epistemic rather than moral commitments.

To make space for such an understanding of critique we will reject some of the dichotomies that have pervaded recent debates about the self-conception of political theory, especially those between normative and descriptive theory, and between realism and radicalism. To wit, this involves rethinking the relationship of political theory to its political and social context in terms of the sources of normativity, the role of self-reflection, and the purposes of theorising.

On our understanding, realism aims both at action-orienting normative evaluation *and* at diagnostic critique. That is why we question the division between normative and descriptive forms of political theorising. In order to achieve this dual aim of diagnosis and evaluation, realist political theory needs to incorporate a wider understanding of what constitutes a normative approach besides making prescriptions. Ideology critique bases its normative evaluations on the diagnosis of specific problems, and so offers one way to challenge the aspiration of critical distance via an "uncluttered view" (Rawls 2005: 20), which has been very influential in post-Rawlsian political theory. An "uncluttered view" embodies the problems of excessive abstraction and idealisation (Mills 2005). What is more, criticism of ideology is committed to self-reflection with regard to how normative and epistemic concerns are intertwined, thus it addresses the political import of political theory itself. So we contend that the combination of realism and criticism of ideology opens up the space for rethinking the potential of realism as a distinctive approach to political theory.

We begin the first section with a brief, working characterisation of realism, and we set out the status quo bias charge. We then discuss the most developed response to this charge in current realist literature, namely Bernard Williams' 'Critical Theory Principle'. We argue that, while the Critical Theory Principle is a pioneering step in the right direction, it does not contain a sufficiently developed account of ideology to succeed. In the second section, then, we spell out the desiderata for a successful realist account of ideology. On that basis we outline such an account by combining elements from recent Frankfurt School-inspired Critical Theory and from contemporary analytic epistemological and metaphysical discussions of ideology and

social construction. The upshot is an understanding of criticism of ideology, which delivers tools for meeting realist commitments to diagnosing the patterns of power exercise, whilst thus preparing the basis for a non-moral criticism of the social and political order. In the third section we summarise our argument and canvass a few questions for further work on realism as ideology critique.

1. Realism and the status quo

Let us start by distinguishing between two incompatible *Idealtypen* of realism found in the growing literature on the topic. On one view, realism is merely a subset of nonideal theory. The idea is that realists “are looking for principles which are likely to be effective here and now” (Valentini 2012: 660). So realism can be a distinctive view only insofar as it picks out a specific subset of feasibility constraints (e.g. those to do with power) that are sometimes overlooked by mainstream, Rawlsian nonideal theory (Baderin 2013). Or perhaps realism can bypass reference to an ideal when devising the nonideal, along the lines of Sen’s ‘comparative’ approach to justice (Raekstad 2015). On another, more classical view,¹ realism breaks with contemporary anglophone political theory’s moralistic tendency to proceed as a branch of applied ethics (Geuss 2008, Williams 2005). Here the general idea is that the sources of political normativity are not—or not exclusively—to be found in pre-political moral commitments, but in a form of normativity inherent to politics (Jubb & Rossi 2015, Rossi & Sleat 2014, Sleat 2014). Hybrid views exist as well (Galston 2010, Hall 2015, Jubb 2015).

Adjudicating the relative merits of each of those approaches is beyond the scope of this paper. At any rate, given the question at hand—whether realism has a built-in status quo bias—it will be natural to take as our reference point the more classical conception of realism, the one that sets it apart from nonideal theory. There are two reasons for this choice. First, whatever the attractions of nonideal theory, it is explicitly anchored in the status quo, insofar as it is primarily concerned with balancing normative aspirations against feasibility constraints. That is not to say that a series of feasible incremental changes (‘transitional’ nonideal theory) can never lead to profound social and political transformations. The point is just that nonideal theory largely wears its relationship to the status quo on its sleeve, so there can be no general answer to the question as to whether a whole family of nonideal theories has a bias-inducing relationship to the status quo. Each nonideal theory will (or at least should) furnish its own answer, through its account of exactly how to accommodate feasibility constraints. Second, and more importantly, the classical view of realism presents a potentially more rewarding challenge. It is not

¹ We refer to this view as classical for two reasons: it is closely related to a longstanding realist tradition in political thought (Dyson 2005, McQueen 2015, Rossi & Sleat 2014), and it wishes to return political theory to its traditional blend of descriptive and normative elements, against the ‘normativist’ (Prinz 2015b) tendencies of mainstream contemporary approaches.

particularly surprising that one can call for a radical transformation of politics by invoking moral commitments that sit outside of politics (even when those commitments have to be implemented via a series of feasibility-conscious steps). Indeed, realists argue that moralist radicalism is just too easy, or a category mistake (Rossi 2010, 2015a, 2015b).² Such moralist radicalism is typically not interested in connecting to the specific motivations and patterns of action as they are mediated through the understanding of politics in a particular context. This lack of connection can lead to pernicious actions in the name of the prescriptions of moralist radicals that distort their intentions (if not their principles), or, if moral radicalism altogether fails to connect to its addressees, lead to little practical importance. The more probing challenge for a concretely action-guiding political theory is to start the generation of its normative purchase from within understanding(s) of politics to be found in the context(s) of action in question. This involves examining the presuppositions of any normative claims, including those that seek to claim that their validity is pre-political, i.e. not tied to the specificities of the context. This is why we seek to show that realists can call for radical change while drawing on resources immanent in, rather than external to, the political practice they criticise.

But why, exactly, is classical realism routinely accused of status quo bias? Here is one (somewhat sympathetic) critic's take on the problem:

...if, as realists, we place emphasis on historically constant factors which we regard as constraints on political possibility – and if our main objection to the liberal mainstream is that it overlooks these factors – then our realism will inevitably tend to nudge us towards a greater acceptance of the *status quo* ... Of course, it is *logically* quite possible to emphasise 'stability' (rather than 'justice' or 'equality') as a political aspiration, and at the same time to call for far-reaching social change, or even revolution, as the means to that end. But if – as I would suggest is the case – realists generally do no such thing, but rather preserve the areas where mainstream liberal theory affirms the *status quo* (e.g. its acceptance of the basic framework of liberal democracy) whilst eliminating the points where liberal demands most visibly exceed what is actually realised within that framework (e.g. by prescribing a significantly greater degree of material and social equality), then realism is a de facto conservative force in political theory. ... realism and idealism emerge as two sides of the same coin: a more and a less explicit expression of a fundamentally affirmative attitude towards existing political structures. (Finlayson 2015: 7-8)³

Note that this is not simply a denunciation of excessive attention paid to feasibility constraints. Though that passage arguably collapses the distinction between nonideal-theoretic and classical realism, it latches on to some important features of the latter: classical realists do place emphasis on constants in the realm

² Whether theorising without pre-political moral commitments is itself appealing is a question to do with the appeal of realism itself, at least as far as the classical version of the view is concerned. For this paper's question to be even worth asking, though, we have to assume at least the *prima facie* appeal of realism.

³ For comparable points see Honig and Stears 2011; Thaler 2012.

of politics, most notably on features often wished away by moralist theory such as coercive power relations (Sleat 2014b). Within realism, though, coercion is best understood not primarily as a feasibility constraint, but rather as a constitutive feature of any political practice. Feasibility constraints are not unwelcome hindrances. For realists coercion is not an obstacle to be removed or bypassed. The question of achieving political results without coercion (e.g. through consent) is ill posed. The art of politics just is, to a large extent, the art of coercing with good judgment—of distinguishing between good and bad coercion. So the problem here is whether this realist understanding of politics is tantamount to status quo bias. More generally, the problem is whether realists' commitment to working within the parameters of a sphere of politics with its own normative standards limits their political imagination.

First, as long as realists engage their moralist (liberal or not) opponents in discussions about the nature of the political and especially if their characterisations are based on assertions e.g. of the conflictuality of politics, the limitation of the political imagination is a plausible impression. Such attempts at getting an accurate picture of the political (McNay 2014) and then issuing prescriptions that meet this characterisation are questionable, and do not warrant claims to a greater degree of prescriptive and descriptive fit, nor a claim to settling ontological questions of what is real (Little 2015). If anything, this issue marks a starting position for understanding how politics is a thick evaluative concept (Jubb & Rossi 2015)—and even for this goal realists could consult sources that actually study how political speech and action can be distinguished from non-political speech and action (Freedman 2013).

Second, the source of normativity does not necessarily prefigure the stance of a political theory to its political context. Moralism can be connected to radical political goals (think of utopian animal rights ethicists) or may be status quo supporting (as Geuss (2005, ch. 2) argues for Rawlsianism). Likewise realism may support a broad range of positions toward the status quo.⁴

While some general, in-principle defences of the emancipatory or radical potential of realism have been put forward (e.g. Geuss 2010a, Prinz 2015b, Rossi 2010, 2015a), Bernard Williams' theory of legitimacy⁵ remains the main systematic attempt to explain how one may tackle a classic problem of normative political theory within a realist framework. So for our present purposes Williams' theory of legitimacy is an explorative exercise into how one may criticise a set of political practices or institutions while remaining committed to evaluating them with standards internal to political practices themselves.

⁴ This, however, does not imply that realism is exclusively a methodological stance, as the way in which political positions are supported through moralism and realism differ and self-reflection is crucial here, as we argue below.

⁵ And the various exegetic extensions of it that have been recently put forward (e.g. Hall 2013, Sagar 2014, Sleat 2013: ch.5).

Williams' first move is to delimitate the sphere of politics by identifying a "first political question", namely "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation." (2005: 3). But, unlike in Hobbes, solving the first political question is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a polity's legitimacy. To achieve legitimacy a polity must meet what Williams calls the "Basic Legitimation Demand" (BLD): "Meeting the BLD can be equated with there being an 'acceptable' solution to the first political question." (2005: 4).

For Williams, "making sense" is "a category of historical understanding, [...] a hermeneutical category" (2005: 11) which assesses whether the legitimation being used can be understood within the context (including its concepts) to which it is addressed. More precisely, however, the idea is about checking whether an "intelligible order of authority makes sense to us as such a structure" (2005: 10) which "requires [...], that there is a legitimation offered which goes beyond the assertion of power". Williams adds that "we can recognise such a thing because in the light of the historical and cultural circumstances [...] it [makes sense] to us as a legitimation" (2005: 11). This qualification underscores Williams' commitment to contextualism. However, it also invites worries about the standing of the idea of "making sense" to evaluate rationales of legitimation.

This idea relies on 'our' ability to differentiate legitimations based on assertions of power from legitimations for the endorsement of which there are reasons other than their hold of power over us. To flesh out this distinction and render it politically viable Williams introduces his 'Critical Theory Principle' (CTP): "the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance has been produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified" (2005: 6)⁶ For Williams, "the difficulty with [this principle], of making good on claims of false consciousness and the like, lies in deciding what counts as having been 'produced by' coercive power in the relevant sense" (2005: 6). This commits Williams to looking at the actual beliefs of people, who accept the legitimacy of a regime only because they have not come to realise yet that there are no other reasons to accept it as legitimate than the power of this regime over them to accept it as legitimate (Williams 2002: 231), not simply as they are now, but from the point of view of their transformation (and not simply as they are now):

If we are supposing that the background is simply these people's current set of beliefs, then almost anything will pass the [Critical Theory Principle] test (except perhaps some cases of extreme internal incoherence). If we suppose, on the other hand, an entirely external frame of reference, then nothing very distinctive is achieved by the test. We need a schema by which we start with the people's current beliefs and imagine their going through a process of criticism, a process in which the test plays a significant part. (2002: 227; see also p. XX below)

⁶ Also see Williams (2002: 219-232).

The schema which Williams endorses and which helps with clarifying what “counts as having been ‘produced by’ coercive power in the relevant sense” (2005: 6) is based on an idea which has been called ‘reflective unacceptability’ (Geuss 1981: 55-65). This entails encouraging a process of reflection in people on whether they would still hold on to their beliefs (directly or indirectly about the legitimacy of the regime), once they had realised how they came to hold them. This process will lead to context-sensitive evaluations based on reasons actually available to the relevant agents. However, whilst the Critical Theory Principle enables Williams to offer some protection against internalised oppression ‘making sense’ and passing as legitimate, this arguably comes at the price of a tension with Williams’ realist commitments. Williams’ contextualism could be taken to imply that he seeks to develop criteria for legitimacy without recourse to a framework of justification based on moral criteria unmediated by the particular political context. This does not imply that Williams rejects moral criteria per se, but rather that he rejects criteria for legitimacy that are ‘doubly moral’, i.e. moral in substantive content and moral in terms of the reasons why they are brought forward. Williams rejects the latter sense of “moral” for at least two reasons: Firstly, he views the demand for legitimation is initiated primarily by political, not moral considerations (Williams 2005: 3-6). Secondly, given the conditions of pluralism which obtain in modern societies, it would be difficult to individuate moral criteria that can hover above the political fray without undermining said pluralism (see Schaub 2012: 445-447).⁷ If this distinction is applied to his discussion of the Critical Theory Principle, the question is if the moral criteria that are introduced are sufficiently mediated through the political context. Concretely, moral criteria enter the Critical Theory Principle test in through Williams’ morally charged assessment of the situation in which the state fails the test as one of “injustice” (Williams 2002: 231). This assessment arguably relies on an idea about the moral standing of agents, which is unjustly violated through the abuse of power. This could be linked to the understanding of ‘power as right’, which holds that authority only springs from power if power is exercised in accordance to moral and legal right (Hindess 1996), irrespective of the specificities of the context.

This assessment of “injustice” could also be viewed to connect to the moral ideal of autonomy, which Williams might have more or less accidentally brought in from Critical Theory when constructing the Critical Theory Principle.⁸ This is particularly visible in Williams’ hope that the Critical Theory Principle help the disadvantaged realise the “most basic sense of freedom, that of not being in the power of another” (2002: 231). This seems to imply a

⁷ Note the difference to the position taken by Larmore (2013: 289-290) who views criteria external to the political context that are explicitly moral as an inevitable source for criteria of legitimacy.

⁸ In fact Williams’ account of critique bears a strong resemblance to Raymond Geuss’ (1981) reconstruction of Habermas’ position in the 1960s and 1970s.

near total lack of freedom in a situation in which the polity fails the Critical Theory Principle test—perhaps a way to displace the question of whether the mere fact of a coercively generated belief automatically disqualifies it from providing legitimacy. But the move may seem rather quick. It may be a problematic assumption about the totality of power typical of key texts of Critical Theory and the early Foucault (see Honneth 1993). Williams’ hope, even on a rather minimalist construal, could then be seen as receiving at least some of its appeal from the moral ideal of autonomy, especially in cases where “being in the power of another” is not a matter of physical captivity but rather a limitation of the (mental, social etc.) development of the persons in question—a matter of ideology’s ability to induce “voluntary servitude” (Rosen 1996).

Arguably this interpretation is in tension with Williams’ understanding of the political (rather than moral) value of liberty (2005: chapters 6 and 7). Within Williams’ project of realism, the injustice might be viewed to refer to the fact that the abuse of power makes it – in the long run – impossible for those suffering from it to enjoy the benefits of politics in the full sense of the term. Those benefits at least entail that the first question of politics – the “securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation” (2005: 3) – is answered. More precisely, the way out of the problem, for Williams, would be to stress the work done by the very *concept* of politics. Raw domination of the sort endured by the Helots in Sparta just isn’t politics, and this is a conceptual rather than a moral claim. (Williams 2005: 5; Hall 2014; Sagar 2014).

Still, then the the worry remains that the Critical Theory Principle—introduced by Williams to prevent his “make sense” criterion of legitimacy from sanctioning political orders whose acceptance is based on (the abuse of) their existing power—succeeds at the price of relying on a moralised definition of politics.

To put it another way, it is questionable whether we can anchor a whole theory of ideology to a conceptual claim about the nature of politics, given that the concept of politics is itself essentially contestable, and decontestation is achieved precisely through ideologies’ ability to highlight or even introduce a concept’s normatively controversial connotations (Freedman 2013). We have no usable concept of politics (or freedom, or equality) until we decontest it, i.e. we flesh out its meaning by reference to a wider set of normative commitments. If, say, ‘freedom’ means one thing to liberals and another to socialists, then ‘politics’ may just mean one thing to realists and another to moralists. The moralist may well maintain that politics can include raw domination, and that would be precisely why we need moral standards to guard against the excesses of politics. And so the question re-emerges as to whether the contentious normative connotations used by Williams in his decontestation of the concept of politics do not themselves originate in pre-political moral commitments (as

argued by Sleat 2010).⁹ It looks as though Williams oscillates between admitting only those moral criteria mediated through the valuations of a political context and buying the critical-normative edge of his view of legitimacy at the cost of a lapse back into moralism, i.e. by admitting moral criteria and conceptual stipulations that are unmediated by a particular political context. We maintain that in order to generate a distinctively realist form of critical purchase which is compatible with the goal of contextual action-guidance, a stronger case for the compatibility of contextualist and critical commitments is required.

2. Radical realist ideology critique

If Williams' attempt to dispel the worry of status quo bias while remaining true to realism fails, it fails in an illuminating way.¹⁰ So, before discussing options to fill in the gaps in Williams' Critical Theory Principle, it will be useful to set out the desiderata for a successful realist account of ideology critique.

The enduring appeal of Williams' Critical Theory Principle lies in the general thought that there is something wrong with trying to justify a socio-political system through a normative commitment that is itself a product of that system. As Williams puts it, "if one comes to know that the sole reason one accepts some moral claim is that somebody's power has brought it about that one accepts it, when, further, it is in their interest that one should accept it, one will have no reason to go on accepting it" (2002: 231). Formulating the point in terms of the specific interests of some groups might be seen as overly controversial, insofar as it introduces further normatively charged elements into the picture, and might even have a not exactly ecumenical Marxian ring to it. Besides, one may worry about the familiar genetic fallacy: might the truth not happen to be aligned with the interests of the powerful, at least sometimes? But the general appeal of the point can be preserved by presenting it as more of a matter of epistemic bias: crudely, we do not let rulers set the standards of legitimacy for the same reasons that we do not let authors referee their own papers. We do not need to spell out exactly why the perspective of the authors or rulers is flawed, but only why it carries an epistemic risk. In other words, we need to work out what are the properties of beliefs¹¹ such that, once they have been uncovered, undermine credence in the belief at hand.

⁹ Moreover, for reasons we shall introduce in the next section, critics of ideology ought to be weary of merely descriptive conceptual analysis.

¹⁰ We should note that many of the texts in which Williams puts forward his political realism are posthumous and unfinished; so part of what we are trying to do here is simply taking Williams' position in one of the directions it might have taken, had he had the chance to develop it fully. Arguably the direction we are driving at is the one Raymond Geuss (2012) would also have liked Williams to embrace.

¹¹ We refer to all mental states that support politically salient attitudes and actions as 'beliefs', but we remain neutral on the exact nature of this type of mental content (belief, 'Alief', etc. — See Gendler 2008 and Stanley 2015: 186-193)

The account of ideology we require to underpin our theory of realism as ideology critique, then, has two main desiderata: (i) it must avoid moralised versions of salient political concepts (realistic desideratum), (ii) it must steer clear of the genetic fallacy (critical desideratum), and (iii) it must offer a broad framework for generating evaluative criteria for the social order in question (evaluative desideratum).

The realist desideratum's purpose is to allow the critic to distance herself methodologically from the object of critique. One may see this as a familiar move from Marxian *Ideologiekritik*: "effective norms of right and justice (if correctly understood in their actual social function) are largely weapons of the oppressive class" (Wood 2004: 145). But again, we need not endorse that approach, though the position we defend is compatible with it. The point is simply that pre-political moral commitments such as Williams' aspiration to "the most basic sense of freedom" cannot be assumed to be free of the bias the critique is meant to uncover.

The critical desideratum addresses a related concern. Those who press the genetic fallacy objection correctly point out that implicit normative commitments tend to do the normative work, thus making the critic's genealogical account of the ideological belief redundant. If what is wrong about belief in the legitimacy of a political order is that the order contravenes "the most basic sense of freedom", then the fact that the order is also the cause of the belief seems irrelevant. Williams proposes a solution to this problem:

...the references to causation should not treat the society and its members simply from outside, like a physical system, but consider the situation rather from their, possibly improved, point of view. We can introduce the following test of a belief held by a group: If they were to understand properly how they came to hold this belief, would they give it up?" (2002: 226-227)

That test is hypothetical, so to see whether it succeeds we need to unpack its conditional: "If they were to understand that they came to hold this belief as a result of a violation of their basic freedom, then they would have reason to give it up", or something of that sort. Note how the critical work, here, is done by the freedom violation, not by the causal story as such. The belief turns out to be flawed just because it supports a morally unacceptable use of power. The causal story is at most a heuristic to discover this sort of freestanding moral flaw. Our alternative account, then, will concentrate on epistemic instead of moral flaws.

The evaluative desideratum serves to make good on the realist claim to the practical orientation of political theorising. It is key for realism as ideology critique to take seriously the challenge that the epistemically-focused account of ideology presents for the generation of evaluative criteria for the social order in question. Whilst this challenge cannot be addressed fully here, it is necessary to provide at least a preliminary framework.

As anticipated, Williams' residual moralism prevents his Critical Theory Principle from meeting both the realistic and the critical desideratum, and its way of meeting the evaluative desideratum

turns out to be rather restrictive. A solution to the three related problems we highlighted can be found with the help of recent developments in analytic philosophy of language and metaphysics, as well as of recent Frankfurt School Critical Theory. In broad outline, the solution is to retain the importance of the causal or genealogical element in the Critical Theory Principle by motivating it with epistemic rather than moral considerations. To carve out that position we make three moves. First, we change the object of the causal enquiry: we focus not on the process of belief acquisition, but on the formation of the meaning of the relevant concept. Second, we explain in epistemic terms why some beliefs are problematically resistant to rational revision, and thus ideological. Third, we unpack the connection between diagnosis and critique, in order to explain the practical reach of the latter.

Sally Haslanger's recent reformulation of the social constructionist critique of ideology will provide the backbone of our version of genealogy. Haslanger draws particular attention to "hegemonic naturalizations", that is phenomena of valuations (preference formations, judgments etc.) which are so internalised that they appear to be qualities of the objects concerned. Such "hegemonic naturalizations" are part of the fabric that allows social orders to function. They are ideologies at least in this *prima facie* descriptive sense. Only a close scrutiny can bring to the fore how they shape our common ground, a structure of schemata and material resources which all too easily escapes our scrutiny. More specifically, Haslanger's account of ideological social construction focuses on the meaning of the relevant concepts, and employs an externalist semantics to show that to uncover ideological hegemony we need to look not just at speakers' ordinary understandings of concepts (the internal perspective), but also at the social factors that shaped the speakers' grasp of the concepts (the external perspective). Concepts are embedded in social practices, so their meaning "is determined not simply by intrinsic facts about us but at least in part by facts about our environment," so our investigation of the concepts "will need to draw on empirical social/historical inquiry" (2012: 395-396). This empirical inquiry, then, will provide a better account of how the concept works within the social practice. For there is a difference, on this approach, between the 'manifest' and the 'operative' concept, i.e. between the concept as it appears to ordinary speakers as opposed to the concept revealed by an empirical investigation into the causal history of how the concept came to play the role it plays within the relevant social practice (Haslanger 2012: 92, 370). This practically-oriented perspective looks not at ideas but at what people do by saying certain things (which reflects certain schemas of social knowledge they hold) and connects criticism of ideology (traditionally focused on ideas) with genealogical approaches (usually focused on practices).

So, for instance, Haslanger shows that generic statements such as "blacks are criminals" are used in a way that reflects a

specific form of social knowledge, embedded in a web of schemata and resources in which they are true. However, such generic statements are misleading at the same time. They seem to be making a claim about the *nature* of an object/set of persons when the claim is in fact about its/their *socially and historically developed position* in the requisite social order. Haslanger (2012: 468-470; see also chapters 13-16; see also) illustrates this by considering the claim that Afro-Americans as such are (more) criminal (than other human beings) against a historical inquiry into the causes for the alleged connection between being Afro-American and being criminal (Alexander 2010).

We draw three consequences from Haslanger's intervention. The first consequence is to divide the process of criticism of ideology into two steps. The first step concerns problematizations of the use of language in practice through a theory of pragmatics and semantics. The second step then introduces normative evaluations that guide the axiological ordering of valuations (see Haslanger 2012: 471-475).

Haslanger thus offers an approach that allows us to clarify our understanding of ideology, without, however, resorting to commitments to a politics of emancipation (or any other pre-political moral commitments) at the stage of analysis. Of course, at the stage of evaluation, commitments will have to come in but can now do so in a way that makes the process transparent and shows that potentially criticism of ideology can operate as a philosophical tool that has two distinguishable components as against the view that in criticism of ideology methods and commitment are necessarily inseparable.

The second consequence is to bring so called descriptive and pejorative understandings of ideology (see Geuss 1981: 4-21; Leader-Maynard 2013) more closely together by broadening the view of ideology beyond questions of justification to questions of day-to-day action. Studying how language is used to make contested and in the widest sense politically/socially relevant evaluations invisible (or difficult to see) reveals that such language uses are not only relevant to the justification of the social order, but are an integral part of acting within it.

The third consequence is to consider the question of ideology from a comparative point of view: if there must be ideologies as a kind of common ground, the question is not one between being ideologically blinded or emancipated, but one about trying to achieve a high level of self-reflection about the presuppositions that form the common ground on which the structures of a social order thrive or fail. At any point there will likely only be a limited range of alternative bases available for generating this common ground and fabricating it will not be up to the political theorist *ad libitum*. The (public understanding(s) of the) purposes of the social order in question will shape to a considerable extent the criteria for normatively evaluating the specific ideological formations of the common ground.

Haslanger refers to that sort of constructionist genealogical criticism as ameliorative conceptual analysis (2012: 386). The idea is that even competent users of concepts may not be fully aware of their actual meaning in the externalist sense of the term, i.e. of the role played by the concept within the way in which the society makes sense of its world. Some might try to resist that sort of project by invoking the unreconstructed appeal of intuitions about meaning and ‘common sense’ grasp of socially or politically relevant concepts. To counter this objection we can deploy Jason Stanley’s (2015) theory of ideology as epistemically flawed, rational revision-resistant belief (the second move mentioned above). Consider Haslanger’s example of “Blacks are criminal”. She provides empirical evidence (the mass incarceration history, etc.) to show that there is a difference between the manifest and the operative concepts of blackness and criminality. Now, according to Stanley, those resisting Haslanger’s ameliorative conceptual analysis even after being presented with the empirical evidence would be exhibiting an ideological belief in a pejorative sense of the term: “The distinctive feature of ideological belief is that it is very difficult to rationally revise in light of counter evidence”, because of its connection to social practices (2015: 184). Note, in fact, the affinity between this account of flawed ideological belief and Haslanger’s semantic externalism: “...while I theorize with a category of ideological belief ... this does not mean that I think that being ideological is an intrinsic property of mental states” (ibid.: 186). The point here is that there are social structures that provide epistemic obstacles to rational belief revision. In other words, resistance to rational revision is the product of social and political power used to inhibit our appreciation of evidence—the ideological flaw is an epistemic flaw.¹²

Another example should help cementing that point and showing what realism as ideology critique may look like. Consider Robert Nozick’s (1974) famous entitlement-based argument for the legitimacy of the minimal state (and against the legitimacy of other kinds of state). The argument relies on common sense notions of private property (including self-ownership), i.e. notions that are in the common ground. However a genealogical investigation on the common sense concept of private property reveals that the operative concept property differs from the manifest one. While the manifest concept is construed independently of the authority of the state, the operative one is in fact the deliberate causal product of the coercive power of past states: the political centrality of private property was introduced by ancient states to make the social world more legible and

¹² This epistemic flaw does not necessarily connect to conservatism and *status quo* bias. Radicals and revolutionaries could equally resist (and have in fact resisted) rational belief revision. However, our primary concern (if only temporarily) is with instances of resistance to rational belief revision that have conservative effects, given this paper’s focus on realism’s potential for overcoming status quo bias. Not only are such instances of ideology currently the most pervasive, reflecting the interests of elites, they are also particularly salient for probing the critical potential of realist political theory.

governable (to grossly simplify an argument developed in Rossi and Argenton 2016). So while the manifest concept looks like it can be reliably used to adjudicate claims of state legitimacy, it turns out that the operative one is epistemically suspect, given the state's implication in its genesis. So Nozick's argument cannot work as intended.

The identification of that epistemic flaw, then, rests on the plausibility of the causal account of the operative concept, which allows us to meet the critical desideratum. The debunking process does not invoke any moral notions: the flaw is epistemic, and so the realistic desideratum is met. That is how the origin of specific components of an ideology matters (de-naturalization of hegemony, identification of sources of epistemic bias); but this alone does not offer grounds for the evaluation of a social system as a whole. To meet the evaluative desideratum we need to locate those grounds. This is a central concern for a (radical) realist approach, for the following reasons: first, realists take seriously the task of providing orientation, which requires valuations and rankings of political states of affairs. Second, given that structurally problematic conceptual practices are already operative in thick evaluative concepts such as "politics" or "democracy", realism as ideology critique needs to make space for a self-reflection about the purposes of the polity. In short, realism as ideology critique needs to make sure that it does not depoliticise concepts like politics or democracy through the analytical epistemology backdoor, thus failing to provide tools for radical self-critique.

Rahel Jaeggi takes on this question of generating criteria for evaluating what she calls "ways of living" (2014). Those depend on the kind of common ground that, as Haslanger has shown, is considerably stabilised through ideologies. Jaeggi's approach incorporates the idea that the process of ideology critique does not only aim at changing the reality in question but also at changing the norms and evaluative criteria at issue. This idea is based on the following understanding of ideology critique.

First, ideology critique combines diagnostic analysis and critique. It straddles normative and non-normative forms of theorising. This combination means that "ideology critique as analysis means to be critique, and not just a description of the status quo, and as critique to be analysis, and not just a set of norms with which the status quo is confronted" (Jaeggi 2009: 280; our translation). Analysis is "not only the precondition of critique, but itself part of the critical process" (Jaeggi 2009: 270; our translation). Jaeggi's interpretation directs attention to the entangled relationship between diagnostic analysis and criticism. The necessary combination of analysis and critique is indicative of how ideology critique can overcome the tension which characterises the realist relationship to the political context: whereas the component of diagnostic analysis covers the contextually-immersed ambitions to relevance, and critique covers the ambitions of realists for evaluation, only taking them together can redeem the practical ambition to guide future-oriented action.

Second, ideology critique is normative but not normativist, or moralist.¹³ For ideology critique thus understood to get started, an analysis of the relevant aspects of the political context in question has to be carried out in the way which realists have stressed on the one side of the tension, i.e. by concentrating on, to mention only a few central concerns, real political institutions, motivations of agents, and structural power relations. The normative element of ideology critique is already present therein through the concern with the inner normativity of the context in question, as e.g. highlighted through the difference between ordinary and operative meanings of concepts. The normative element does not need to be externally introduced, hence it is not a normativist understanding of criticism (Jaeggi 2009: 283-284).

Third, ideology critique combines the goal of epistemic clarification with the goal of political transformation and hence (especially if successful) is a kind of practical philosophy. The status of flawed or pejorative ideologies is peculiar in so far as they are at the same time true and false, that is they are at the same time “adequate and inadequate, appropriate and inappropriate toward ‘reality’” (Jaeggi 2009: 275-277; our translation), because they are not simply a cognitive error, but an error which is caused by the phenomena of this ‘reality’. The point is that the critic of ideology has to criticise the perception of a political or social reality and at the same time this reality, too (Jaeggi 2009: 276). Ideology critique is hence engaged in addressing ideologies, which are always at the same time a normative, a practical and an epistemic problem.

Realism as ideology critique thus makes a virtue of upholding a tension between objectivist and subjectivist tendencies with regard to the bases of its critical purchase. According to the understanding of ideology critique presented above, it cannot lean on an external standard of truth, but has to reconstruct the perspective from within the context at issue. This process is part of societal self-understanding, which connects to Raymond Geuss’ (2010b: 422) idea of political theory as ‘a kind of experimental science (of concepts)’. For the understanding of the generation of critical purchase (or critical distance) this means that it matters how the subjects to ideology view the situation. Their views, even if they turn out to be epistemically flawed, are in part constitutive of the understanding of the situation. Any transformation of the social order must initially address the agents from within a thicket of evaluative concepts. The outcome of ideology critique cannot be predicted, as the meaning of concepts (and often much else) will change in the process.

In short, realism as ideology critique uses a contextualist, immanent perspective, without thereby losing critical purchase. It starts from views within a specific historical context, but with the intention to transform both the views and the reality. In contrast

¹³ ‘Normativism’ is a term of art of recent Critical Theory and Hans Sluga’s Wittgenstein-inspired criticism of analytical political philosophy (Sluga 2014: introduction and chapter 1). It is not entirely overlapping with the realists’ ‘moralism’, but for our purposes the two concepts are close enough.

to internal understandings of criticism, the diagnostic-critical process also affects the norms, the appeal to which might have initiated the process, in so far as they are not restored but rather transformed.¹⁴

When focusing on the epistemic properties of ideologies, it is important to consider the agency (limitations) of those subject to the social order. Here, Jaeggi's account of criticism of ideology offers a way to incorporate these insights of analytic epistemology, semantics and pragmatics into a scheme of critical social and political theory. The understanding of ideology critique we have employed thus leads to a conception of realist political theory as a kind of practical philosophy. Its aim is to contribute to a process of transformation of social reality and its perception. In short, realism as ideology critique fuses diagnosis and critique so as to improve our grasp of the relationship between social reality and social norms.

3. Concluding remarks

Realism runs the risk of coming with a status-quo affirming tendency. This risk has two main origins. First, some realists' emphasis on order and stability, which associates potentially radical criticism with the dangers of disappointed utopian hopes. Second, the apparent contradiction between realist commitments and a normative basis for criticism.

We considered Williams' Critical Theory Principle as the most advanced attempt to introduce a critical edge to a realist view of politics (and of legitimacy in particular). Williams considers ideological oppression as a nearly complete lack of freedom, and as the moral wrong of being in someone else's the power. His Critical Theory Principle, however, does not offer a clear stance on the kind of normative criteria it invokes. We argued that it oscillates between invoking normative criteria that are compatible with his realism and between offering critical purchase on the basis of moral criteria that are not mediated by the particular political context and hence incompatible with his realist commitments. This problem led us to reconsider what other ways are available to conceive of realism as ideology critique which (i) avoid moralised versions of salient political concepts, (ii) steer clear of the genetic fallacy, and (iii) provide criteria for the broad evaluation of political orders for the agents involved.

The resources from analytical epistemology, semantics, pragmatics and Frankfurt School-style Critical Theory lead realism as ideology critique to embrace the close connection between empirical and normative elements in political theory as combined in the focus on social practices. Diagnosis and criticism are then

¹⁴ This is a specificity of immanent critique (at its limit): "In contrast to internal critique, immanent critique is not only directed against the contradiction between norm and reality (the lack of the realization of norms in reality), but it is rather directed against the internal contradiction of reality and of the norms which constitute reality." (Jaeggi 2014: 291; our translation)

analytically separable, yet intertwined through the practical need to react to ongoing political processes.

The diagnosis of historical developments of structural forms of domination in the forms of “coding” concepts and conceptually shaping exclusionary practices are an important ingredient to realism as ideology critique. However, it is not because of our assessment of these historical developments that the particular concepts are ideologically problematic, but due to forms of epistemic error. For example, the statement “blacks are violent” is wrong because of a false attribution of “violence” to “blackness” (in Haslanger’s terms) or because the statement is the result of “flawed ideology” (in Stanley’s terms) of a legitimising myth that makes it difficult to revise even against better evidence.

This approach could be viewed to appeal principally to a notion of distorted communication through the criticism of common grounds, which reproduce potentially coercive structures - an appeal which is also central to (particularly Habermasian) Frankfurt School Critical Theory (Geuss 1981: 60). However, we are not committed to an ideal of undistorted communication and focus on the diagnosis of structural (communicative) practices instead against the changing backgrounds of evaluation, e.g. of the purposes of the polity or the value rankings of the citizens. This corresponds to the key realist commitment that the point of political theory is not to free us from coercive practices in toto, but offer tools for distinguishing good from bad coercion, or, communicatively structured social practices. Stanley and Haslanger offer tools for the first step of ideology critique, the diagnosis of social conceptual practices, whereas Jaeggi not only offers tools for the second step, the furnishing of criteria for evaluation, but also shows how these two steps are still closely interrelated.

Realism as ideology critique then emerges as locally normative, but not normativistic: it allows checking particular claims to authority or legitimising rationales against their own aspirations whilst opening up hermeneutic resources for challenging the norms, criteria, valuations on which these aspirations are based. Realists, or at least those who take criticism of ideology seriously, have thus far not offered much in terms of first order theorising. The tools of ideology critique offer one way to fill this lacuna: engagement with the views of actual agents, and perhaps intervention into current political debates. This seems a promising way to get started on generating evaluative criteria against which to measure the use of concepts in a social order. The sophistication of these interventions will be one indication—by no means the only or main one—of how far realism is in realising its claim to being a distinctive approach to critically thinking about politics.

Finally, is our proposed realism a form of critical theory, i.e. does realism offer an emancipatory theory? Does it try to enlighten agents about what they should do (and think)? The goals of realism as ideology critique are less ambitious – realism seeks to be an instrument for agents’ understanding of their political and social

order, an understanding which may include preference-formation, ideas of the good, a hierarchy of values, the parts of the order immunised from the political process. Taken together, those elements shall afford the tools to distinguish between good and bad coercion. As this involves offering tools for the questioning of the status quo, understanding and critique are intertwined. The critical distance needed in order to become clear about the current order needs to be wrested from a diagnosis of the status quo which brings to the fore the ways in which a given social order tries to limit political imagination.¹⁵

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¹⁵ [Acknowledgments removed for blind review]

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