# Against Realist Ideology Critique

Among the variety of 'new' ideology critiques that have appeared over the past few years, there is one that claims a certain sort of realism (Aytac and Rossi Forthcoming; Prinz and Rossi 2017; Rossi and Argenton 2021; Rossi 2024).[1] Situating itself within the resurgence of realist political thought that has taken place over the past decade or so, this realist ideology critique (RIC) represents one of the main theoretical developments which aims to make good on what its advocates take to be realism's fundamental commitment to seek the foundation for political judgements and prescriptions in non-moral values, principles, or concepts.[2] On this understanding, the opposition between moralism and realism is one between theories that are grounded in moral claims and those that are not. As Enzo Rossi puts it, realists believe 'properly political principles don't draw on the same sources of normativity as moral principles' (2019, 640).[3] Advocates of RIC often take themselves to be espousing a particular variation of realism, however – one they usually label 'radical'. This 'radical realism' (Aytac Forthcoming; Brinn 2020; Westphal Forthcoming; Prinz and Rossi 2017; Prinz 2016; Raekstad Forthcoming; 2018; Rossi 2019; Thaler 2018) draws inspiration from the work of Raymond Geuss (1999; 2001; 2005; 2008; 2009; 2014), very similar in many ways to the realism espoused by Bernard Williams (2005) that has also proven to be hugely influential in the rejuvenation of realist thought but differentiated mainly in its open hostility to the liberal capitalist status quo. The willingness to critique rather than justify the status quo is, of course, familiar to all forms of ideology critique, realist or not. Where RIC may add a novel and valuable perspective is in the attempt to develop a non-moralist form of ideology critique.[4]

In this paper I want to present a two-fold critique of RIC. Having set out the main and distinctive features of RIC in the first section, in the second I provide an internal critique of the theory before turning, in the third section, to a more general discussion of why the very attempt to do political theory generally, and ideology critique more specifically, in a way that abjures morality is misguided. That final section also speaks to a broader debate within realism today. Whether a realistic political theory requires refraining from employing moral concepts and values as the radical realists insist or not is probably the main point of contention between contemporary realists. Those who deny that this is the case, like myself (Sleat 2016. See also Hall 2017; Jubb 2019), think that the key insight from realist thought is that we must be attentive to the ways in which our values and concepts, including those we ordinarily think of as moral, need to be somehow appropriate for the political sphere. To be political in the right way, as it might be put. This paper does not further develop that alternative case here, but it

[1] The paper by Enzo Rossi in this volume offers a potted but substantially identical account of his realist ideology critique as that developed more fully in an earlier co-written paper with Ugur Aytaç published in *American Political Science Review* (Aytac and Rossi Forthcoming). For that reason, my own paper makes greater reference to that earlier and fuller statement of the position, though I take what I argue here to be equally applicable to the paper in this volume also.

[2] Lest this is mistaken as a common feature of all forms of realist thought, as it often is, it is important to stress immediately that not all realists share this commitment to doing political theory with non-moral materials. More shall be said about this shortly, and I flag now that I shall take issue with this understanding of realism in the third part of the paper.

[3] For similar understandings of what is meant by a 'realistic' political theory see (Burelli 2022; Burelli and Destri 2022; Favara 2022; Cross 2021; Heysse 2017; Rossi and Argenton 2021)

[4] Not all radical realists have sought to develop and employ ideology critique. The main proponents of such an approach have been (the late) Carlo Argenton, Ugur Aytac, Janosch Prinz, and Enzo Rossi. For the purposes of this paper I shall talk of radical realists as the advocates of RIC, though that caveat should be kept in mind.

does seek to give us further critical reasons for thinking that the position adopted by the radical realists is untenable.

*Realistic Ideology Critique*

Any discussion of ideology is obviously fraught with contentious definitional issues. Matters are somewhat easier here because we are interested only in ideology as understood by contemporary ideology critics, and, while there are 'active disputes' between them, Kirun Sankaran has rightly and helpfully identified a common notion of ideology which they all share. For these ideology critics, and here he includes the likes of Robin Celikates (2006), Sally Haslanger (2012), Rahel Jaeggi (2008), Charles Mills (2017), Tommie Shelby (2003; 2014; 2016), and Jason Stanley (2015), an ideology 'is a pervasive epistemic distortion that helps maintain and reproduce bad social arrangements *in virtue of its distorting character*' (Sankaran 2020, 1443. Emphasis in the original). There are three aspects of this definition worth drawing attention to:

> Ideologies are a *shared understanding or common set of meanings* ('Ideologies provide sets of common understandings or interpretative tools that allow us to understand our circumstances and respond appropriately to them' (Sankaran 2020, 1443))
>
> Ideologies are *distortions* ('They [ideologies] guide our attention in ways that occlude important and valuable features of the world via mechanisms like moral legitimation, by which immoral social arrangements are portrayed as moral, as well as "naturalisation" or "reification" by which "something socially 'made' is imagined to be something naturally or irreducibly 'given'"' (Sankaran 2020, 1444; Quote from Jaeggi 2008, 65)
>
> Ideologies *explain the persistence of bad social arrangements* ('ideology stabilises and reproduces bad social arrangements by providing a distorted set of social meanings and shared understanding' (Sankaran 2020, 1445))

The role of ideology critique is to ameliorate those bad social arrangements by exposing them as ideological (Geuss 1999).

While radical realists readily accept the first two aspects of ideology here, as well as the general purpose of ideology critique, they disagree in their understanding of the third (explanatory) aspect. The fundamental complaint is that these ideology critics 'retain their discipline's tendency to centre morality in political theorising and so identify ideological flaws on the basis of moral commitments: ultimately, ideologies are flawed insofar as they contribute to injustice, oppression, and the like' (Aytac and Rossi Forthcoming, 1). The concern is the employment of moral values to explain the 'badness' of the social arrangements that ideologies help maintain and reproduce. Ideology critics may not employ the same moral values in their critiques or do so in the same way or to the same extent, but each seeks an explanation for the role of ideology in the persistence of *morally objectionable* social arrangements. Sally Haslanger, for instance, describes ideology (in its pejorative sense) as 'organis[ing] us in ways that are unjust, or ways that skew our understanding of what is valuable' (2012, 412). Stanley, Hänel, Jenkins and Shelby are also said to invoke moral notions in explaining the 'badness' of the systems ideologies maintain (Aytac and Rossi Forthcoming, 2–3). But it is not just the new ideology critics who are guilty

in this regard. It turns out that Bernard Williams, one of the leading influences on the recent renaissance of realist thought, is said to make a similar mistake. While the radical realists laud the central thought of his 'critical theory principle' (Williams 2002, 219–32) – 'there is something wrong with trying to justify a sociopolitical system through a normative commitment that is itself a direct product of the coercive power relations within that system' (Prinz and Rossi 2017, 355) – he supposedly takes a wrong turn in saying that it shares with the tradition of Critical Theory the interest that the disadvantages have in their own emancipation. As he puts it, '… the interest of the disadvantaged lies in an aspiration to the most basic sense of freedom, that of not being in the power of another, in particular not in the unrecognised power of another …' (2002, 231).

What is wrong with any of this? The charge that the radical realists are making against the ideology critics (which, for our purposes, includes Williams) is one of *moralism*. Realism, at least in its most recent form, defines itself as anti-moralist, though it should be said that there are increasingly disparate views among realists as to what the vice of moralism consists in (Sleat 2022). Insofar as different realists pursue different projects this is often because they have differing views of what a moralistic approach to political theory is and why or how it should be avoided. The radical realists tend to have the most stringent understanding of moralism: a political theory is moralist if it employs moral standards, values, principles, etc. (e.g. Prinz and Rossi 2017, 349). Hence it is a necessary, if not necessarily sufficient condition, of a political theory being realistic that it refrains from appealing to or employing moral values. Morality is to be avoided because as Geuss memorably put it, 'Ethics is usually dead politics: the hand of a victor in some past conflict reaching out to try to extend its grip to the present and the future' (2010, 42). What are often taken to be common-sense moral truths are often the result of sedimented power relations, the outcome of prior struggles whose political origins have become obscured to us. If that is the case, then appeals to 'pre-political' moral values cannot be assumed to be free from the sort of distortions that ideology critique is meant to uncover. Concepts and values such as justice and freedom, for instance, have a history and that history is at least in part political. What we think about such values, what they are, what they demand, and so on, is connected to the ways in which they developed in and through political contestations. As such, why assume that our ways of conceiving of justice and freedom do not distort our understanding and be themselves part of the explanation of the persistence of bad social arrangements? Might they not also be ideological? And so, radical realists contend, we need to find a different way of motivating ideology critique.

They find such non-moral grounds in epistemic considerations. The primary concern is with the epistemic defects of self-justifying power. The thought goes something like this[5]: we have good reasons for thinking that people who are judges in their own cases are more likely to reach verdicts that favour their own interests and less likely to reach a verdict that best fits the evidence. This is part of the reason, for instance, why we think it completely inappropriate for authors to be reviewers of their own work. And this is not a moral judgement, for we do not need to assume that an author is exceptionally self-interested or particularly over-confident in their own brilliance to think that any judgement they came to should be treated as suspect. The point is that we know human cognition is prone to a variety of biases and prejudices, all of which often fall under the heading of 'motivated reasoning', that make it very hard for people to come to appropriate judgements in their own cases. Now imagine a different case. A dominant group sits at the top of a social hierarchy and is, by virtue of its position within that system, empowered to disseminate beliefs that legitimise existing social practices, political institutions,

[5] In this and the following paragraph I am mainly summarising the argument of Aytac and Rossi forthcoming.

and power structures more widely across that society. The set of all such beliefs that play this legitimating role is our ideology.[6] We tend to think that it is a bad idea to take an authority at their word when they say they are an authority, and hence where social hierarchies are such that dominant groups can exploit power asymmetries to spread the ideology that legitimate their rule, potentially leading dominated groups to internalise that ideology themselves, we should be suspicious of such self-justifications. They seem to represent a form of epistemic circularity. But the real epistemic concern stems not from the circularity of the justifications of beliefs per se (there can be benign forms of circularity) but rather that self-justifying power will generate 'epistemically suspect' beliefs. This is because of the likely influence of politically motivated reasoning in the belief formation processes of hierarchical societies. Politically motivated reasoning has been helpfully summarised by Dan Kahan as the following:

> When positions on some risk or other policy relevant fact have come to assume a widely recognised social meaning as a marker of membership within identity-defining groups, members of those groups can be expected to conform their assessments of all manner of information – from persuasive advocacy to reports of expert opinion; from empirical data to their own brute sense impressions – to the position associated with the respective groups (2016, 1)

A substantial body of empirical work now exists which attests to the prevalence and ubiquity of politically motivated reasoning amongst individuals and groups. In that regard beliefs that have been reached via politically motivated reasoning are epistemically flawed. They have been reached for reasons other than that they best track the truth (though, of course, those who hold politically motivated beliefs are not conscious of that fact and both take their beliefs to be true and to hold them because they are true). Given its pervasiveness, and the obvious interest the dominant group has in reproducing and sustaining the ideology that buttresses their social position, we have reason to suspect that politically motivated reasoning has played some role in their support for and promulgation of those beliefs. We should therefore judge politically motivated beliefs to be epistemically flawed and so continued reliance upon them unjustified. Moreover, by virtue of their asymmetrical power and ability to successfully disseminate those epistemically flawed beliefs the dominant group can effectively shield them from contestation. This makes it much more difficult than it would be in less hierarchical societies, where various groups' beliefs would be able to compete on a more equal basis to curb the biases within the epistemically flawed beliefs.

The central claim might be put thus - we lack epistemic warrant for continuing to hold beliefs in hierarchical societies where the following (jointly sufficient) empirical conditions hold: (1) they have been produced and reproduced by the dominant group within that society (the motivated reasoning concern); (2) the power of that dominant group has protected the beliefs from contestation such that becomes much harder for their biases to be identified and rectified (the rectification concern). In essence, where their prevalence across society can be explained by hierarchical power structures and we

[6] Aytac and Rossi follow Sally Haslanger (2012) in using the broader term cultural *techne*s - which includes beliefs but other socially generated cognitive mechanisms such as concepts, dispositions, and the like also – to explain the content of ideologies. However, all the examples they use and discuss tend to be straightforwardly about beliefs rather than anything else. Hence for the sake of not adding an unnecessary layer of terminological complexity I shall employ the term belief here and throughout, but do not think anything is lost in the analysis by doing so.

judge their persistence as instrumental to the preservation of the social order that relies upon those power structures then we should consider those beliefs debunked on epistemic grounds. The beliefs are ideological in the pejorative sense: it provides a common set of meanings whose distortion of our understanding of the world explains the persistence of hierarchical social arrangements.

It should be said that RIC is unlikely to identify beliefs as problematic that would not also be recognised as such by other approaches, though their reason for thinking them so is clearly where the meaningful difference is intended to lie. It is no surprise to find, for instance, that the justifications of patriarchal orders should be viewed with deep misgivings; more original to hear that the problem with those justifications is epistemic (that they are likely the result of politically motivated reasoning by the political elites who have an interest in retaining the dominant position in the social order the beliefs justify). 'Folk' commitments to a right to private property, of the ilk Robert Nozick famously invoked in his justification of radical libertarian social orders, should be disqualified from playing a role in political justifications by virtue of the fact that they were themselves (as a matter of historical fact, it is claimed) the product of the state and its elites. For 'reasons of epistemic caution', those beliefs should not feature in arguments about state legitimacy' (Rossi and Argenton 2021, 1055). And because what realist ideology critics are seeking to identify are beliefs' epistemic rather than moral flaws they believe they will be able to draw upon the findings of the empirical social sciences to show where self-justifying power has worked to create distortions – as when they employ historical anthropology to account for belief in private property despite it being the product of the very elites and social systems that it legitimates (Rossi and Argenton 2021).[7]

*Against Realist Ideology Critique*

The first point to make here, one that can be simply made but is nevertheless problematic for RIC, is that it is not at all clear that an agent is no longer justified or warranted in believing x follows from the empirical conditions. The thought, as we have seen, is something like:

> X is not justified in believing *p* where *p* has been produced or reproduced by the dominant group and through their power made it very different for *p* to be subjected to critical analysis.[8]

In what sense 'not justified'? What is it about the empirical conditions that are supposed to undermine the justification of *p*? Advocates of RIC are not as clear as they need to be on this crucial point. The answer I believe they want to give is that the empirical conditions demonstrate that *p* is biased in serving the interests of the dominant group. But there are two significant problems here. The first is that at most what follows from the empirical conditions is that it should render the belief *suspicious*. RIC is improbably strong on this reading insofar as it seems to rely upon a necessary causal chain along the following lines:

[7] The use of work from the wider social sciences presumably means that whether beliefs have been arrived at through distorted belief-formation processes is intended to be a falsifiable claim.

[8] There is a question, which RIC does not but would need to address, as to quite how we are to identify who the relevant dominant and oppressed groups are in any situation. After all, one feature of contemporary politics is that there is little consensus about precisely which are the groups with power, and accusations and counteraccusations of oppression abound. White males, for instance, might think they are oppressed by the power of the 'culture war warriors', whereas the latter will often point to the former as the source of their own oppression. It would be helpful to know more about how RIC intends to identify which account of where power lies is closer to reality.

The dominant group has an interest in legitimating its social position;
Those interests trigger the various cognitive mechanisms associated with politically motivated reasoning;
This corrupts the belief-formation process, leading the agent to a biased belief *p* which legitimates their position.

The difficulty is that we cannot say that there a straightforward automatic or inevitable causal connection between the presence of a relevant interest (or desire, wish, etc.) and the triggering of politically motivated reasoning. If there were then we would have to say, implausibly, that merely by virtue of a dominant group having the relevant interest in a belief being true that it is therefore biased. Moreover, it cannot be true that every belief which serves a significant interest and which therefore could possibly be affected by politically motivated reasoning necessarily will be. At most we can say that the presence of significant interests in *p* being true generates a reasonable suspicion that a belief is the result of politically motivated reasoning. There are moments when it seems radical realists are content for RIC merely to identify beliefs where such suspicion is appropriate (e.g. (Aytac and Rossi Forthcoming, 1, 2, 5). The trouble here is that it really is quite indeterminate what, *if anything*, follows from having identified a belief as potentially biased. And it certainly seems far too quick to think that such suspicion automatically renders beliefs 'untrustworthy' or that we lack epistemic warrant to believe them, as if even reasonable suspicion leads to or is equivalent to the stronger conclusion that *p* is not justified and *x* not justified in believing *p*.

There is also reason to suspect that if suspicion is intended to do that much work in the theory that it will essentially render the RIC a somewhat crude and blunt theoretical instrument. No actual hierarchical order is going to be justified by ideologies other than those that justify the dominance of the group that sits atop that hierarchy. If they did not then they would not be justifications of *that* social order. They would be justifications of different social orders, not necessarily less hierarchical but critical of the status quo with different groups in positions of dominance. In that sense all dominant groups will always have an interest in the preservation and dissemination of ideologies that justify their rule. And if we accept that that interest is significant enough to trigger politically motivated reasoning, then it seems that the interest in sustaining the status quo is sufficient to raise the suspicion. The upshot is that, on RIC's terms, belief in the ideologies supporting all hierarchical orders will be deemed epistemically unwarranted simply by virtue of justifying a hierarchical order. It is unclear how an ideology could escape such a judgement. As a matter of political preference I imagine that many advocates of RIC would be happy to endorse this outcome, but it further shows how simple suspicion that a belief has been affected by politically motivated reasoning cannot plausibly bear the epistemic weight the argument requires.

It is implausible to think that, as a general epistemic norm, I am not justified in holding a belief simply if it serves the interests of any group for the obvious reason that there are lots of such beliefs that will nevertheless turn out to be true and we are certainly warranted in holding beliefs that are true (regardless of who they benefit or disadvantage). Is it more plausible as a norm in the sort of cases RIC is intended to apply to, i.e. those where a dominant group enjoys relatively much greater power in hierarchical societies? One natural concern we might have about such power is that it would allow the dominant group to produce and reproduce beliefs that we judge to be unfair, unjust, immoral, corrupt, or so on, by virtue of unduly legitimating the distribution of social goods (including power) to

themselves, and for those reasons we think it justified to reject them. But, of course, those are not the sort of (moralist) judgements RIC is interested in making and it cannot be bias – in the sense of unduly favouring of one's interests – that is cause of the radical realists' concern about power. So we still need to know why the power identified in the empirical conditions undermine the justification for holding the relevant belief. The only way that I can see this can be made coherent is if the concern is that the power of the dominant group taints or corrupts the belief-formation process in such a way that it generates *false* beliefs, false beliefs that are then disseminated through society more widely by that same power. Put differently: the worry is not that the belief-formation process has been distorted such that it produces biased beliefs that serve the interests of the dominant group, but that it produces beliefs that are false as a result of a belief-formation process corrupted by their biased interests in protecting their position in the social hierarchy. By virtue of being false we then have an answer as to why we are not warranted in holding them.

Why is this an issue for RIC? Initially because this is an answer Rossi and Aytac want to avoid giving. They want to 'emphasise justification rather than truth as the focus of ideology critique' (Forthcoming, 6, footnote 12). This comes out most clearly in how they believe their epistemic abstinence avoids the genetic fallacy, for, they remind us, it is the ways in which beliefs are produced and reproduced rather than their propositional content that is the focus of analysis in RIC and hence they are not making 'the mistake of confusing a blemish in the causal history of a belief, concept or practice with a lack of arguments in its support'.[9] Here I do not think they quite follow the implications of their own argument, and in particular what it means when we purport politically motivated reasoning to agents. But, and this is why I believe this to be a significant problem, while these implications hold the possibility of making better sense of RIC it does so at what I think its advocates will deem too high an epistemic price.

Here is the price. Politically motivated reasoning generates a certain sort of epistemic suspicion: that the belief-formation process has been corrupted in such a way that the resultant belief is untrue. Reasoning motivated at the directional goal of protecting one's existing political beliefs or identities contrasts with reasoning motivated by accuracy, the desire to arrive at true beliefs. The epistemic worry raised by politically motivated reasoning is that it renders people unable to evaluate information objectively and arrive at conclusions free from error given the evidence at hand. It leads people not just to convenient or self-serving conclusions but to the *wrong* conclusion, the conclusion other than that which the evidence best supports. We invoke politically motivated reasoning as a way of explaining why it is someone or some group hold false beliefs. But it is a quite particular sort of explanation, distinct from, say, cognitive errors caused by tiredness, lack of due attention, or selecting the wrong methodology or means of enquiry. So, to take a stock example of the motivated reasoning involved in self-deception: When a parent refuses to believe that their child is taking drugs despite the overwhelming evidence that they are, we readily identify this as an instance of self-deception rather than e.g. stupidity, because we can see how they would be (unconsciously) motivated to reach that conclusion (by their desire to think best of their children, etc.). The desire for the world to be the way other than it is triggers the various cognitive mechanisms that result in the self-deceived and false belief. What the appeal to self-deception explains is not just how a person came to believe not-*p but how they came to believe not*-p *when* p *is the belief that best fits the evidence.* Insofar as we might say that the parent's

[9] Or, in the language of *technê*: 'Debunking this cultural *technê* by identifying how it was generated by an epistemically flawed social process of indoctrination shows that the *technê* lacks epistemic warrant in its specific social context, but it does not directly falsify the *technê*'s propositional content, so the genetic fallacy is not triggered' (Aytac and Rossi Forthcoming, 7).

belief in not-*p* is untrustworthy or epistemically unwarranted because of motivated reasoning what we must mean is not just that the belief-formation process was flawed but because of that that the resulting belief is false. That is what the appeal to motivated reasoning is supposed to explain. Or, put differently, when we attribute motivated reasoning to someone we are saying that they are not justified in holding the relevant belief because it is false and where its falsehood is caused by particular failures in the belief-formation process.

It is certainly true that the presence of politically motivated reasoning in a belief-formation process is not itself a reason to think a belief false, but it is an explanation of why someone came to hold a false belief. It only makes sense to attribute politically motivated reasoning to someone in cases where, in some sense that would need greater specification, the evidence speaks in favour of *p* but they have come to believe not-*p*. There is a presumption, therefore, that if an agent were to follow the evidence or argument where it leads it would not lead to where they ended up. And that, for sure, does not mean that RIC falls foul of the genetic fallacy, but it does mean that in the process of analysis it is saying something about the propositional value of the belief. The worry is not merely that the dominant group are biased in their own favour, but that such biases lead them, and then through their power leads others also, to hold false beliefs.

Putting greater emphasis on this dimension of politically motivated reasoning offers one way in which RIC could be amended to make it more plausible and coherent. This is because the epistemic warrant for holding a belief turns not on whether it serves the interest of the dominant group, which is no reason at all, but rather how the power of the dominant group corrupted the belief formation process in such a way that renders the ensuing belief false. But it would not necessarily be an easy amendment to make in practice. Recall that advocates of RIC believe that they can draw upon the findings of empirical social science to show where self-justifying power has worked to create epistemic distortions. One of the empirical examples Rossi and Aytac discuss is the authoritarian populist transformation of Turkey over the past decade. We are told, very plausibly, that extensive analysis of Erdoğan's speeches 'identifies patterns of patriarchal framings that marginalize antigovernment opposition by portraying protesters as unruly women and youngsters who do not respect the norms defining roles and behaviour appropriate to their position in a patriarchal hierarchy' (Forthcoming, 9–10). That the (male) political elites have significant interests at stake means that we readily consider their own belief in and deployment of patriarchal framings and discourses as possible candidates for being the result of politically motivated reasoning. But when we purport politically motivated reasoning to them we are not just saying that they have interests in play, so to speak, which explain why they hold such beliefs but, further, that they are wrong to hold those beliefs, that they are false. To make good on claims regarding politically motivated reasoning RICs are going to need to do more than simply indicate alignment between beliefs and interests. They need to show that when elites portray anti-government opposition as 'unruly women' and 'tearaways' they are making the sort of cognitive errors associated with motivated reasoning that has led them to not follow the evidence as they should. It cannot only be that such beliefs are self-serving; they must be wrong.

This lands RIC in some rather choppy philosophical waters. Substantiating the cognitive mistakes dominant groups have made is going to require advocates of RIC to not only say something about the propositional value of such normative judgements, which they do not want to do, but to express something like an error theory of moral or normative judgements. This is easier to do with empirical beliefs such as whether a child is using drugs or not because we can relatively simply identify where and how cognitive errors have led their parent to the wrong conclusion (e.g. the negative or

positive misinterpretation of data conducive to the desired conclusion). But as Williams rightly notes in justifying why his critical theory principle employs only an error theory in relation to how people come to hold their beliefs, there is no agreement over what an error theory for moral or normative judgements would look like (2002, 230). In wrongly coming to see government opposition as unruly women, what did elites overlook or fail to consider? What factors should they have given more credence or gave undue significance in their deliberations? Which forms of evidence did they give undue weight (what even counts as evidence in such matters)? Did they apply the wrong methodology? And so on. Maybe advocates of RIC think that such accounts are available to us in such cases, though the onus will be on them to tell us what they are. The point is that without such accounts all we are left with is the thought that such beliefs are self-serving, but that is not all that is implied by politically motivated reasoning.

To sum up: my argument is that RIC as stated is inadequate insofar as 1) it can only explain why people might be suspicious of certain beliefs, but suspicion does not equate to lacking epistemic warrant in holding a belief; 2) the justification for holding a belief must make some reference to their propositional value and not just whether they serve the interests of the dominant group. I have suggested that RIC use of politically motivated reasoning potentially rectifies these issues by making the judgement turn not merely on whether the belief serve the interests of the dominant group but rather in how the interests of the dominant group negatively affect the belief-formation process such that the propositional value of the resulting beliefs is called into question. But doing so undercuts one of the aims of RIC which is to deliver something like objective normative judgements with a limited and uncontroversial set of epistemic resources.

*Against Radical Realism*

The attempt to develop a form of ideology critique which eschews morality and employs only critical tools from epistemology is radical realism's endeavour to make good on its ambition of developing a non-moral form of political normativity. Characterising realism as avidly non-moral is, I think, unhelpful in a myriad of ways. As we have seen, the radical realists take their cue from Geuss' comment 'Ethics is usually dead politics: the hand of a victor in some past conflict reaching out to try to extend its grip to the present and the future'. This essentially Nietzschean thought is not quite identical to but also not too distant from Williams' own realist motivations, captured in the slogan 'in the beginning was the deed', that underpinned the contrast he sought to draw between realism and moralism.[10] The key difference for Williams is in how, as forms of doing political theory, they relate morality to political practice. Moralist theories take their tasks to be the construction of moral principles, values, concepts, etc. that are then applied (through what he called either the enactment or structural model) to political practice. The construction of those moral values is something that takes place prior to politics in the sense that the realities of actual politics do not feature in how those values are constructed. You get the morality right first and then apply it to politics – hence Geuss preferred description of political theory as 'applied ethics'. Williams rejects this moralism because he accepts, with Geuss, that such a view overlooks the extent to which our moral concepts have histories that are themselves, at least in part, political. So, for example, he encourages us away from foundationalist approaches to the justification of the liberal state that give a central role to the autonomy of individuals because he recognises how

[10] Here I summarise the argument from 'Realism and Moralism in Political Theory' in (Williams 2005).

autonomy as a value or concept is itself a product of the same forces that led to the liberal state. It cannot provide the foundation for the very practices that created it. What this rules out therefore is a quite *particular* way of conceiving of the relationship between morality and politics. What it does not rule out is the more local application of moral values, including, presumably, in some forms of internal ideology critique. Neither, importantly, does it justify the outright denunciation of all moral values on the basis of being unacceptably tainted by political power. Much of Williams' oeuvre is an attempt to see what moral values we can and should continue to have confidence in, and not all values make it out of such analysis unscathed – those associated with the 'morality system' most famously (Williams 2011).[11] Towards the end of his life, Williams developed a form of vindicatory naturalist genealogy as a way of approaching the question of what can still be said for particular values.[12] And when he talks in *Truth and Truthfulness* of his critical theory principle as speaking to 'the most basic sense of freedom, that of not being in the power of another, in particular not in the unrecognised power of another' this should be read (I believe) in light of his attempt to provide at least the outlines of such a genealogical vindication of freedom *as a political value* in the synchronously published article 'From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value' (Williams 2001). To dismiss the appeal to freedom in the critical theory principle as simple moralism therefore misses a great deal of what Williams said about how we could construct freedom as a political value that is stable under reflection.

Nothing I have said here, of course, amounts to a defence of Williams' position against the radical realists. Though I am myself sympathetic, I raise it as a way of insisting that radical realists owe us more. They need to tell us why the point about ethics being dead politics justifies a fully morally abstentious political theory (granting the possibility, which few would actually accept, that any theory can escape being ethically laden). In fact, what we said before in the previous section holds true here also. At most their arguments justify adopting a stance of suspicion towards our moral values but it does not, by itself, support their wholesale abandonment.[13] Indeed, to think it does would be to give a certain primacy to moral theory over our lived moral lives in which those values may play an important role that we should expect would be anathema to the realist spirit. Those misgivings show that the terms we use deserve careful examination before they can be put to work in our theorising of politics, but there is no reason to prejudge the outcome of those analyses. They assume what Williams surely rightly thought could only possibly be shown through analysis, that none our moral concepts have any chance of being anything like we take them to be. Even Geuss' caveat that ethics is 'usually' dead politics should guard us against such sweeping and indiscriminate assumptions. Radical realists also need to tell us why the sort of *vindicatory* naturalist genealogy employed by Williams among others (see Queloz 2021) is not something that they too could endorse and employ in relation to moral values, not least because they themselves have often voiced naturalist aspirations and support for genealogical approaches (Prinz and Raekstad Forthcoming; Rossi and Argenton 2021; Rossi 2024). The necessity of a non-moral political normativity is, therefore, under-determined by what radical realists tell us.

[11] For an excellent account of what Williams meant by 'confidence' and how he believed it might be achieved in relation to specific values see Hall 2014.

[12] An insightful overview of Williams' genealogic approach can be found in Queloz 2021.

[13] For a similar point against radical realists see Favara 2022, 335–36. In response to Favara, Ben Cross has argued that radical realists do not assume 'that all our normative ideas are guilty of being so distorted until they are proven innocent … but neither is it to say that they are innocent until proven guilty. Radical realists are suspicious of the distorting role of illusions in and amongst our normative ideas. The purpose of ideology critique, then, is to sift through our various ideas and weed out illusions where possible' (Cross 2022). That interpretation seems hard to square with the blanket anti-moralist character of radical realism. As we saw, freedom was not given the benefit of the doubt before it was rejected as the basis for ideology critique, nor has subsequent analysis showed that it is the sort of illusion that we need to be rid of.

Separate from the question of whether we can provide a defence of the values the radical realists reject out of hand as moralist is the further question of why we should consider them *moral* values at all. Precisely how are the radical realists distinguishing moral values from all other types of values? We are not really told. But the demarcation is not an obvious one. Is freedom not a *political* value, for instance, either distinct from being a moral value, or in addition to such, or in such a way that renders the distinction between moral and political values unhelpful in the first place (Sleat 2016; Williams 2001)? A case could presumably be made for all those positions. But then I am inclined to believe that it does not make sense to think the central concern underpinning RIC is the desire to avoid moralism at all. The worry about morality is that it is in an important sense tainted by or the product of the power that it is then used to justify. In principle there is no reason why that same concern might not be applied to all sorts of domains, legal, aesthetic, technological, and so on. Rossi and Aytac concede the point that epistemic norms might also be dead politics though insist a) that this does not threaten our central epistemological notions of objectivity, justification, and the like; b) as a matter of (presumably historical) fact, epistemology is less politically compromised than morality and hence epistemic norms can be considered less controversial than moral ones (Forthcoming, 8). The issue is essentially one of proximity to power. Morality is closer to power by virtue of including amongst its materials the concepts and values often used to justify social orders, a consequence of which is that their very meanings are rendered politically suspicious. However, if that is right then the objection is only contingently related to morality. What radical realists are really against is how power corrupts the justification of social orders through essentially hijacking the meaning of the relevant justificatory concepts to the benefit of the dominant group, *whatever those concepts might be*. It is not really the use of morality radical realists oppose in the justification of social order as much as the ways in which power politically taints morality as it features in those justifications. In fact, building upon what was said a moment ago, even if one believed freedom to be a political rather than moral value, however that was explained, it would still seem vulnerable to the central charge that it is the product of the very power that it seeks to justify. Same would be true of justice, equality, etc.. Nothing in essence changes whether the value in question is deemed political or moral (or, one can presume, legal, aesthetic, and so on). Put bluntly, the issue is proximity to power not morality.

This is important in three ways. The first is that it means casting realism as anti-moralism cannot be right even on its own terms. It misidentifies the true worry which must apply, at least in principle, to a broader category of values and concepts than those of morality – essentially any that are used in the self-justification of authority. One thing that might be said in response is that, *in practice* rather than principle, contemporary political theory is dominated by moralist approaches and hence casting realism as anti-moralism captures or draws attention to its uniqueness vis-à-vis the status quo. Even according to how radical realists understand moralism that just does not seem correct. For that to be true it would have to be the case that most theorists understand and employ terms like freedom as if they were exclusively moral *and not political* values, again however that distinction is understood. I see no reason to think that is right as a current feature of the discipline.[14] Secondly, if the central issue is

[14] To note, the way in which other realists understand moralism, and hence realist approaches as opposed to moralist approaches, is to say not that moralist political theories employ moral values or concepts but, crudely put, they do so in ways that are not appropriately sensitive or responsive to what I have called the constitutive features of politics (Sleat 2016) or Ed Hall has called the 'realist constraint' (2017). In this regard the charge is more like moralist political theorists have not adequately considered what it means for a value, including moral values, to be values appropriate for the political sphere; they are not political in the right way.

how power taints morality then that seems to not only leave open the possibility for philosophical projects that aspire to develop universal moral theories free from power (*a la* Kantian or Habermasian approaches, for instance) but, moreover, posit such theories as the ideal solution to the problem it identifies. That would put radical realism quite at odds with much of the rest of the realist tradition which has, for various reasons, judged such approaches anathema.

Thirdly, there is just something peculiar about a theory of politics which makes a claim to being realistic – both in the sense of attentive to the realities of politics and situated within the realist intellectual tradition – viewing power as something that needs to be essentially expunged from political life, at least insofar as power might function in relation to politics' epistemological dimensions and the ever-central question of the legitimation of coercive orders. A sense of the ubiquity and permanence of power is a familiar, characteristic, maybe even defining, feature of realist theories of politics, and the realist credentials of a theory which seeks to diminish power (maybe completely) must be questionable. Issues directly pertinent to the topic and which you would probably expect an avowedly realist approach to at least recognise fall completely out of the picture. Maybe most importantly is the question of when and the extent to which politics might require or depend upon individuals or groups holding beliefs that from an epistemic perspective they are not warranted in holding. Might the demands of epistemic normativity clash with the demands of politics? In politics is it always good that our beliefs be justified or true? Is true what we always want or need our beliefs to be? Might there not be good political reasons for thinking it sometimes better or appropriate for people to hold beliefs that are only imperfectly justified or maybe even outright false? Are epistemic standards the only relevant criteria for judging beliefs? Nowhere are these issues probably more significant than with the legitimation of political power. The aspiration to an epistemically egalitarian society whose legitimation stories are accepted as the result of belief formation processes completely uncorrupted by power presupposes answers to a series of questions that not only deserve to be asked but which you would expect realists to be the ones to raise most forcefully. And not only raise but to do so with a presumption towards underscoring the importance of treating that which is distinctive to politics with appropriate seriousness. Having politics bend its knee before the epistemic in this way seems like a profoundly anti-realist act.

There is a related point here. What is the appropriate stance a realistic theory should take to ideology? The radical realist position is that ideology is a distorted understanding of the world that can and should (on epistemic grounds) be overcome. It presumes the possibility, shared with much other ideology critique, of forms of social order devoid of ideologies. These orders will, almost by definition, be more just and more equal given that ideologies are represented as one of the main mechanisms via which unjust and unequal social relations reproduce and sustain themselves. This is, as many papers in this issue attest (e.g. Bird, Leiter, McGrath), a familiar view of ideology and perfectly in keeping with much ideology critique. However, whereas Marxist-inspired accounts can situate and justify their understanding of ideology within the general Marxist framework it is not clear on what grounds a *realist* account can help itself to the same understanding. What is the realist basis for adopting that account of ideology? This question is especially pressing given alternative accounts that insist ideologies are inevitable and inexorable features of politics (maybe specifically of politics in modernity), and hence that they must feature somehow in any theory which makes some claim to being realistic. To theorise a non-ideological politics, either in descriptive or normative terms, is to engage in the sort of wishing away of important features of politics that realists often accuse moralists of doing.

Hall reports Judith Shklar as holding a view such as this in his contribution. Ideologies are expressive of the emotional reactions people have to their social experiences (REF). There is simply no escaping ideological thinking, and our political theories need to be responsive to that fact. Michael Freeden, who Hall rightly points out shares Shklar's view as to the inescapability of ideology, has strongly critiqued realists (and here the target is not just Geuss and his followers but of Williams and his also) for either adopting the pejorative distorting view of ideology or of ignoring it all together. Ideologies play a necessary and fundamental role in political life. In fixing the meaning of essentially contested political concepts and relating them to other similarly decontested concepts they produce the 'specific conceptual patterns from a pool of indeterminate and unlimited combinations' through which humans both interpret and act in the world (Freeden 1996, 4). As such, 'thinking ideologically is an inevitable subdivision of thinking politically - that is to say, all thinking politically is embedded in ideological frameworks that showcase thinking *about* politics' (Freeden 2014, 7).[15] To think about politics without thinking about ideology, or, maybe worse, to think about it in such a way that assumes ideology is something necessarily distorting to be overcome, is therefore a mark against any theory that makes a claim to being realistic. But the deeper challenge this poses for radical realists is that if ideologies fix the meaning of our political concepts, it is not clear on an account such as Freeden's that the very aspiration of a non-ideological social order freed of distorted understanding can even make sense. The distinction between distorted and clear or accurate views of the world simply breaks down if all political thinking is ideological. Hence, and to return to the point made above, we are left in need not only of a justification for why radical realists have adopted the pejorative view of ideology but of how that account can be made at all consistent with the plausibly realistic claim that ideologies are permanent, essential, and constructive features of political life.[16]

Is it right to think that epistemology is quite as distant from power as the radical realists believe? Even if we granted that our epistemic norms are not the products of political power in the manner that problematises morality as the basis for ideology critique, such direct pedigree is not the only way in which we might think power relates to epistemology. Epistemology's 'political innocence' seems far from self-evident in a political culture in which the most basic notions of facts, expertise, and reality, have become heavily politicised in ways that have seeped into those 'practical categories' of politics (e.g. if Obama was not born in the United States then his presidency was not legitimate; same if Biden 'stole' the 2020 Presidential election through widespread voter fraud). Who are the cognitive authorities we should consult? Who generates, possesses, and should possess knowledge? What counts as knowledge or facts? What are the limits of what we can know? These have, throughout history, been enmeshed in the struggles for power. As Nietzsche has told us (2017), the will to truth comes from somewhere, and that history, wherever we buy his particular story or not, is likely to feature power and political interests. We should expect that will to truth to express itself unevenly across human societies, which is, of course, precisely what we do find. The desire to live in a fully transparent social order, one in which its power relations, distribution of benefits and burdens, and the justification of its main practices and institutions, can and should be known to us individually, and not obscured by tradition or religious mystification, aligns itself with certain political projects and against others (Waldron 1987).

[15] See also Freeden 2012; 2018.

[16] One obvious option for the radical realist at this point would be to argue that though we may not be able to free ourselves from ideologies altogether there are nonetheless more or less distorting forms of ideology, and that the latter are to be preferred over the former. Something like that may well be right, though making such judgements will require them to necessarily draw upon resources beyond the epistemic.

Even in matters of the hard sciences, following the evidence where it leads rather than finding evidence that gets us to where we want to be certainly makes good epistemic sense, but it is not one that serves all political ends. Bertrand Russell has been far from alone, for example, in thinking that there are deep connections between empiricism or 'the scientific outlook', which encourage the rejection of traditional epistemic authorities and encourage people to think (or look) for themselves, and what he called 'it's intellectual counterpart of what is, in the practical sphere, the outlook of liberalism' (Russell 1947). Moreover, our willingness and capacity to sustain our epistemic norms, which are regularly put under significant internal and external strain, is, in large part, a question of how far they can be buttressed by our wider set of moral and political values or how they feature in our modes of life (individual and collective). Recognising any of this does not cast a shadow over the epistemic norms employed by RIC themselves. It does mean, though, that we need to acknowledge how the extent to which those norms generate findings that will have any critical purchase for those within the societies under scrutiny is a question in which their proximity to political power and interests will be directly relevant. It also shows the degree to which the very ambition of attempting a form of external ideology critique employing only epistemic norms itself reflects a very particular ethical outlook. Anti-moralism is itself an ethical stance.

Bibliography


Aytac, Ugur. Forthcoming. 'Global Political Legitimacy and the Structural Power of Capital'. *Journal of Social Philosophy*. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1111/josp.12464.

Aytac, Ugur, and Enzo Rossi. Forthcoming. 'Ideology Critique Without Morality: A Radical Realist Approach'. *American Political Science Review*. https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0003055422001216.

Brinn, Gearoid. 2020. 'Smashing the State Gently: Radical Realism and Realist Anarchism'. *European Journal of Political Theory* 19 (2): 206–27.

Burelli, Carlo. 2022. 'Political Normativity and the Functional Autonomy of Politics'. *European Journal of Political Theory* 21 (4): 627–49.

Burelli, Carlo, and Chiara Destri. 2022. 'The Sources of Political Normativity: The Case for Instrumental and Epistemic Normativity in Political Realism'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 25: 397–413.

Celikates, Robin. 2006. 'From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique: On the Critique of Ideology after the Pragmatic Turn'. *Constellations* 13 (1): 21–40.

Cross, Ben. 2021. 'Normativity in Realist Legitimacy'. *Political Studies Review* 19 (3): 450–63.

———. 2022. 'How Radical Is Radical Realism?' *European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (3): 1110–24.

Favara, Greta. 2022. 'Political Realism as Reformist Conservatism'. *European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (1): 326–44.

Freeden, Michael. 1996. *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Map*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2012. 'Interpretative Realism and Prescriptive Realism'. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 17 (1): 1–11.

———. 2014. 'The "Political Turn" in Political Theory'. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19 (1): 1–14.

———. 2018. 'Political Realism: A Reality Check'. In *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice*, edited by Matt Sleat, 344–68. New York: Columbia University Press.

Geuss, Raymond. 1999. *The Idea of a Critical Theory - Habermas & the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2001. *History and Illusion in Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2005. *Outside Ethics*. Princeton University Press.
———. 2008. *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
———. 2009. *Politics and the Imagination*. Princeton University Press.
———. 2010. 'Realismus, Wunschdenken, Utopie'. *Deutsche Zeitschrift Für Philosophie* 58 (3): 419–29.
———. 2014. *A World without Why*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
Hall, Ed. 2014. 'Contingency, Confidence, and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams'. *Social Theory and Practice* 40 (4): 545–69.
———. 2017. 'How to Do Realistic Political Theory (and Why You Might Want To)'. *European Journal of Political Theory* 16 (3): 283–303.
Haslanger, Sally. 2012. *Resisting Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Heysse, Tim. 2017. 'Power, Norms and Theory: A Meta-Political Inquiry'. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (2): 163–85.
Jaeggi, Rahel. 2008. 'Rethinking Ideology'. In *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, edited by B. de Bruin and C. F. Zurn, 63–86. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
Jubb, Rob. 2019. 'On What a Distinctively Political Normativity Is'. *Political Studies Review* 17 (4): 360–69.
Kahan, Dan M. 2016. 'The Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm, Part 1: What Politically Motivated Reasoning Is and How to Measure It'. In *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource*, edited by Robert A. Scott and Marlis C. Buchmann. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0417.
Mills, Charles W. 2017. 'White Ignorance'. In *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 49–71. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2017. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Prinz, Janosch. 2016. 'Raymond Geuss' Radicalization of Realism in Political Theory'. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 42 (8): 777–96.
Prinz, Janosch, and Paul Raekstad. Forthcoming. 'The Value of Genealogies for Political Philosophy'. *Inquiry*. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1762729.
Prinz, Janosch, and Enzo Rossi. 2017. 'Political Realism as Ideology Critique'. *Critical Review of International and Social Political Philosophy* 20 (3): 334–48.
Queloz, Matthieu. 2021. *The Practical Origins of Ideas - Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Raekstad, Paul. 2018. 'Realism, Utopianism, and Radical Values'. *European Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1): 145–68.
———. Forthcoming. 'The Radical Realist Critique of Rawls'. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2021.1891377.
Rossi, Enzo. 2019. 'Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible'. *Constellations* 26: 638–52.
———. 2024. 'Critical Responsiveness: How Epistemic Ideology Critique Can Make Normative Legitimacy Empirical Again'. *Social Philosophy & Policy*.
Rossi, Enzo, and Carlo Argenton. 2021. 'Property, Legitimacy, Ideology: A Reality Check'. *Journal of Politics* 83 (3): 1046–59.
Russell, Bertrand. 1947. *Philosophy and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Sankaran, Kirun. 2020. 'What's New in the New Ideology Critique?' *Philosophical Studies* 177: 1441–62.
Shelby, Tommie. 2003. 'Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory'. *The Philosophical Forum* 34 (2): 153–88.
———. 2014. 'Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism'. *Du Bois Review* 11 (1): 57–74.
———. 2016. *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Sleat, Matt. 2016. 'What Is a Political Value? Political Philosophy and Fidelity to Reality'. *Social Philosophy & Policy* 33 (1/2): 252–72.

———. 2022. ‘Realism and Political Normativity’. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, no. 25: 465–78.
Stanley, Jason. 2015. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Thaler, Mathias. 2018. ‘Hope Abjuring Hope: On the Place of Utopia in Realist Political Theory’. *Political Theory* 46 (5): 671–97.
Waldron, Jeremy. 1987. ‘Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism’. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (147): 127–50.
Westphal, Manon. Forthcoming. ‘Against the Status Quo: The Social as a Resource of Critique in Realist Political Theory’. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2022.2120660.
Williams, Bernard. 2001. ‘From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value’. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 30 (01): 3–26.
———. 2002. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press.
———. 2005. *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
———. 2011. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Routledge.