Radical Realism and the Motivated Reasoning Connection

FORTHCOMING IN POLITICAL STUDIES REVIEW

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Abstract: Advocates of radical realist theories of legitimacy propose that political legitimation narratives are often void where they show signs of motivated reasoning. In a recent critique of the method, example cases have been put forward in which an analysis and critique of flawed justification narratives seems urgently called for, and yet motivated reasoning is absent. This, critics suggest, should deflate the prominence of motivated reasoning within the radical realism. I argue here that those cases are misconstrued. Motivated reasoning can either be easily identified therein, or the cases are irrelevant to begin with. The issue with realism's motivated reasoning connection is another: the explanatory direction of fit between epistemic circularity and motivated reasoning. The former explains the normative salience of the latter. Hence, I hope this intervention clarifies a misunderstood and underexplored aspect of contemporary radical realist theory and adds to the contextualisation of the psychology of motivated reasoning within normative social theory more broadly.

(1) Introduction

Accusations of inherent status-quo bias levelled against contemporary realist advances in normative political theory have prompted realists to lay out and defend the critical and subversive potential of political realist theory.[1] The result of recent developments in this cortical branch of realism has come to be known as radical realism, or sometimes radical realist ideology critique.[2] Advocates of this approach propose that normative legitimation narratives are often void where they show signs of motivated reasoning. However, a recent critique of the method outlines example cases where despite a critique of flawed justification narratives being seemingly urgent, motivated reasoning is absent.[3] This, it is suggested, deflates the role of this psychological phenomenon (motivated reasoning) within the radical realism. I argue in this response paper that those proposed cases are misconstrued. Motivated reasoning can either easily be identified therein, or the cases are irrelevant to begin with. The issue with realism's motivated reasoning connection is another: existing accounts have left underexplored the explanatory direction of fit between epistemic circularity and motivated reasoning. The former explains the normative salience of the latter. Hence, I hope this intervention clarifies

[1] See Rossi, 2019 which can be seen as an almost direct response to Lorna Finlayson proclaiming, "with radicals like these, who needs conservatives?", 2018.

[2] Aytac & Rossi, 2022; Brinn, 2020; Cross, 2022; Kreutz, 2023; Prinz and Raekstad, 2020; Raekstad, 2021; Rossi, 2019; Rossi & Argenton, 2021. Some clarification: I think the label of "ideology critique" is misplaced. Radical realism, the way I want to introduce, understand, and discuss it, is a theory of *legitimacy* (social, legal, political, etc.) attentive to ideological circumstances (i.e., epistemically non-ideal scenarios in and from which legitimacy assessments are made and justification narratives spelled out), but not itself a *critique* of those ideological circumstances.

[3] See Clark, 2024.

a misunderstood and underexplored aspect of contemporary radical realist theory and adds to the contextualisation of the psychology of motivated reasoning within normative social theory more broadly.

This short paper outlines the workings of radical realist ideology critique, introduces a conceptual framework for thinking about the role of motivated reasoning in normative political theory, and responds to the objection that radical realism must squash the role of motivated reasoning within its account. Ultimately, I will argue that, concerning the radical realist project, the motivated reasoning connection can be downplayed, but not for the reasons laid out in the extant critique of the radical realist approach. Rather, the foundational connection of radical realism to the normativity of epistemic or logical norms provides all the necessary explanatory power for the realist to practice analysis and critique of legitimation narratives.

(2) Forms of Motivated Reasoning and its Normative Applications

I wish to start with some definitional and conceptual matters concerning motivated reasoning. Unfortunately, the existing literature on the normative significance of motivated reasoning is (safe some exceptions) sparse, disparate, and convoluted.[4] Only some very recent research articles attempt at a taxonomy and analytic definition of the phenomenon itself.[5] However, in many ways, the literature on the normative significance of motivated reasoning is picking up in pace: motivated reasoning has recently received significant attention and application across numerous areas of philosophy, including political philosophy[6], social philosophy[7], epistemology[8], moral psychology[9], and other cognate disciplines. That said, a short and rudimentary overview will suffice for the purposes of this paper.

Motivated reasoning, on the most common definition, occurs when someone has a desire or preference for a specific conclusion, and this desire influences their reasoning in a way that helps them reach that conclusion. This is known as directional motivated reasoning, which is reasoning driven by "any wish, desire, or preference [...] to arrive at a particular, directional conclusion".[10] There is also a related but distinct type of motivated reasoning, defined by what the goal or preference is not: it involves reasoning guided by some goal or end "extrinsic to the formation of accurate beliefs," or "collateral to assessing its truth".[11]

Second, and more controversially, we may say that motivated reasoning does something suspicious to evidence, evidence-collection, or the interpretation of evidence. For instance, certain types of evidence are

[4] Motivated reasoning has received significant attention and application across numerous areas of philosophy, including political philosophy (Brennan, 2016), social philosophy (Stanley, 2015), epistemology (Avnur & Scott-Kakures, 2015), moral psychology (Schwitzgebel & Ellis, 2017), and more.

[5] See Ellis, 2022.

[6] Brennan, 2016.

[7] Stanley, 2015.

[8] Avnur and Scott-Kakures, 2015.

[9] Schwitzgebel and Ellis, 2017.

[10] Kunda, 1990, p. 480.

[11] Kahan, 2011, p. 19; 2016, p. 2.

selectively suppressed to guarantee, in one way or another, arrival at a predefined conclusion. It may though be noted that not all accounts of motivated reasoning in the literature recognise those obscuring techniques as necessarily part of motivated reasoning, or indeed find grounds for its objectionability in evidence-interference *per se*. [12]

Radical realists have recently adopted a rough and ready concepted of motivated reasoning, closest perhaps to the directional type, to identify situations in which power is sustained via what they call "ideological" channels and argue that this power is unjustified. The idea, simply, is that power holders often maintain their power through a "social lie" which they have a desire, wish, or motivation to maintain.[13] For instance, the patriarch is motivated to sustain the "social lie" of justified male dominance by his wishes, desires, or preferences to maintain the benefits of power. In general, then, the idea is that political legitimation narratives are often void where they show signs of motivated reasoning. In recognition of this diagnosis, this paper wishes to discuss the following two questions:

1. What is the place and role of motivated reasoning in normative assessments of legitimacy?

2. What are the payoffs, if any, of a critical normative examination of political legitimacy through the channels of motivated reasoning, as opposed to one without such psychologism?

(3) Radical Realist Ideology Critique

At the core of radical realism is the idea that we can debunk beliefs about political legitimacy by exposing how those beliefs are caused and distorted by the social institutions that those beliefs are thought to legitimate. When this form of distorted self-justification can be exposed, those beliefs are marked as epistemically "suspicious" or "suspect".[14] More concretely, Aytac and Rossi propose that "social orders cannot be genuinely legitimized by circular narratives where hierarchal power relations generate their own acceptance".[15] This general critical gist echoes Bernard Williams' Critical Theory Principle, which holds that "the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified".[16]

[12] See also Ellis, 2022.

[13] Within the debates on motivated reasoning, there is question as to the status of motivated reasoning respective to consciousness. Is motivated reasoning a sub-conscious or a conscious phenomenon? There is very little consensus here. Compare, for instance, the phrasing in Kunda, 1990 and Kahan, 2011. However, as a reviewer for this journal suggested I must highlight, verdicts on its psychological status have effects on whether we can convincingly describe political actors as reasoning with motivation. We might expect a political actor driven by a desire to maintain power to reason consciously in this direction, while those who accept the "social lie" tend to do so unconsciously. However, this distinction relies on broader definitional choices regarding the concepts of 'ideology' and 'power'. Hence, conceptual clarification is requied. Future research on radical realism should address and clarify these issues further.

[14] See Rossi, 2019.

[15] Aytac and Rossi, 2022, p. 10.

[16] Williams, 2008, p. 6.

Aytac and Rossi explain that social institutions self-legitimize through the process of motivated reasoning, which is a widespread psychological phenomenon. The idea is that a more powerful actor can produce belief in their legitimacy among less powerful actors because the underlying power disparities facilitate motivated reasoning. In the next section, I will describe this phenomenon more carefully. Before that, however, we may want to address why, in explanatory terms, motivated reasoning is considered problematic. The answer, in short, is a reduction to epistemic norms. The issue with motivated reasoning can be explained in epistemic vocabulary, and more precisely with the concept of epistemic circularity. To see this, it might be helpful to look into example cases of radical realism in practice. Let me outline Aytac and Rossi's analysis and critique of justifications of neopatriarchy.[17]

Neopatriarchy describes a social order that can observed in the Middle East and Northern Africa. At its core is a paternalistic legitimation narrative "modelled on the analogy between father and ruler".[18] Through fostering belief in the validity of paternalist justification, neopatriarchal states reinforce "submission of women to men", "gender roles", and "intra-family relations of authority".[19] Since the stability of this social order rests on the stability of paternalistic narratives, the "cultural reproduction of patriarchal norms within the family is essential for the stability and legitimation of the social order".[20] This, then, suggests the following picture: paternalist justification narratives both causally uphold neopatriarchal social orders and are simultaneously produced and maintained by those orders. What are the indications for motivated reasoning?

Motivated reasoning occurs in the state's (or father's) perpetuation of paternalist justification. To maintain the power structure from which patriarchal rulers or fathers gain a profit, it is best if paternalistic justification is widely accepted regardless of the merits of the actual paternalist justification. Hence, those who profit from the power disparities are motivated to reason and bring about beliefs that support and maintain this power structure. In sum, the diagnosis is that pro-patriarchal paternalist beliefs are both causally effected by the state or the head of the family and used to legitimise the power wielded by the state or the head of the family.

The legitimation narratives produced by motivated reasoning, however, are *circular.* Aytac and Rossi conclude that there is an "epistemic circularity generated in the neopatriarchal family," and that "if one wants to legitimize neopatriarchy or any other social order, one needs to find some other non-circular argument." The ills of motivated reasoning are hence explained by a reliance on epistemic normativity, and particularly by a rejection of the idea that a circular argument can support its conclusions. As we will see down below, the literature on motivated reasoning largely agrees with this epistemic diagnosis.

[17] 2022.

[18] 2022, p. 9.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid, p. 10.

(4) Deflating Motivated Reasoning

I now want to turn to a critique of the motivated reasoning analysis present in radical realism. This critique was proposed by Rebecca Clark, who uses two example cases to demonstrate that there are scenarios in which an ideology critique seems urgently called for, circular justification is present, yet motivated reasoning is absent.[21] I will directly quote these two scenarios and contest the notion that in all significant interpretations of the cases in question, motivated reasoning is absent—this is the critical point Clark must establish to argue successfully that "the strong correlation frequently drawn by critics of realist ideology between motivated reasoning and [radical realism] should be reconsidered".[22]

> **First Case:** "It is plausible […] that legal reforms of land ownership caused the public over time to regard private property as the kind of entity which should intuitively be owned by individuals rather than a collective, without this belief having been formed via motivated reasoning. This is because laws themselves often have expressive effects which can influence people's beliefs. Here, then, is an example of epistemic circularity without motivated reasoning".[23]

Contrary to Clark's assertion, it seems equally plausible to consider that legal reforms in land ownership are driven by those who stand to gain from such changes. Any undergraduate studying British land law will have grasped as much.[24] Clark dismisses the idea of capitalist land law being shaped by motivated reasoning as implausible, arguing that laws themselves can have expressive effects that shape people's beliefs. However, irrespective of whether this assumed normative power of law is defensible, a central question persists: where have these laws originated and for what purpose?

Let us entertain the possibility that Clark upholds a staunch belief in the sanctity of the rule of law, somehow existing outside the reach of human reasoning—an assertion that demands a host of foundational jurisprudential assumptions. For instance, a very strong natural law theory might explain Clark's intuition. But even then, most natural law theorists would still not deny that the practice of law is a social enterprise which is by definition not exempt from the prevalent ways in which people reason.

In fact, we like all other people secretly "think they think like scientists", says Jonathan Haidt in his 2016 Hayek Lecture at Duke University, but "they really think like lawyers presupposing the conclusions they want to reach". Using the court room scenario as en example, Haidt explains that the vested interests on one side are balanced by the vested interests of the other. Let us assume that the motive of legal reasoning is still, ideally, a quest for the truth—the trial embodies the truth-finding and fact-finding process. Haidt's motivated reasoning studies indicate that individual lawyer's reasoning, however, is most often guided by motives other

[21] 2024.

[22] 2024, p. 263.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Echoed in, *inter alia,* Palmer, 1995.

than truth, namely the interests they are defending. This makes legal procedure regardless of our foundational jurisprudential assumptions plausibly an aggregative case of motivated reasoning.

> **Second Case:** "Suppose that the more powerful social group A straightforwardly deceives the weaker social group B into believing that LEG, even though A knows LEG to be false. This is arguably still a case of epistemic circularity: B's belief that LEG is the result of A's testimony and is "caused" by the hierarchical social order insofar as this is why B takes A to be authoritative; this belief then but- tresses the hierarchical social order in which A has power over B. Moreover, this epistemic circularity is malignant insofar as B is not justified in believing that LEG—for instance, because A intentionally indoctrinated B, and thus B's belief-forming process was unreliable. If this example holds, then we have another instance of malignant epistemic circularity without motivated reasoning".[25]

Now, even assuming that only unconscious processes meet the definition of motivated reasoning, which is not clear[26], Clark herself undermines her own argument. She quotes Williams saying that a rejection of self-justification "will certainly apply very forcibly to a society in which the story is not believed by the powerful party [...] In those examples, however, the coercive element is so blatant that one hardly needs [ideology critique] to make the point".[27] Hence, Clark's second example case simply is not a proper candidate for radical realism. It describes a situation of brute and overt force that to be apparent requires no discovery process. Referring to this case as a reason to deflate the role of motivated reasoning in radical realism thus misses the mark.

(5) Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to address a connected worry, namely that dominant interpretations of radical realism misunderstand the priority ordering of the explanatory relations within the radical relist programme. Clark argues that "[if] either of these two examples hold, then an improved account of [radical realism] must not assume that malignant epistemic circularity is necessarily caused nor explained by motivated reasoning. Instead, motivated reasoning may just be one mechanism among others that causes an individual to believe that LEG and explains what is epistemically wrong with self-justifying power".[28] This implies that Clark attributes the problems of epistemic circularity to psychological factors, attributing the problem of circularity to motivated reasoning. However, this interpretation misconstrues the explanatory direction of fit between the epistemic and psychological element of radical realism.

[25] 2024, p. 263.

[26] See the possibility of conscious involvement left open in Kunda, 1990.

[27] 2024, p. 263.

[28] 2024, p. 263.

To see this, we can look at much of the clinical literature on motivated reasoning outlined above, which does not explain, but simply assumes, that motivated reasoning is somehow *bad*. What could account for this "badness"? The most plausible and widely shared answer is a foundationalist picture of logico-epistemic explanatory priority. That means, to explain why motivated reasoning appears suspicious to us, we will want to refer to the epistemic or logical properties it embodies. As Maarten van Doorn says, "[c]entral to many discussions of motivated reasoning is the idea that it runs afoul of epistemic normativity".[29] Ellis, too, points out that "motivated reasoning can be regarded as epistemically problematic only against robust assumptions about epistemic normativity",[30] and carries on noticing that "when a researcher does regard motivated reasoning to be everywhere epistemically problematic, it will always be the result of an attendant view of epistemic normativity".[31] It is the fact that motivated reasoning creates circular reasoning that explains it "badness", not vice versa.[32]

Frankly, the present radical realism literature is not always very clear about this. For instance, Aytac and Rossi say that "epistemic recklessness is due to a justificatory deficit caused by the interaction of motivated reasoning and circularity".[33] It would have been great to be told what this 'interaction' looks like, but I think from the context it can reasonably be argued that the authors had some tacit normative foundationalism in in mind when first outlining the radical realism method: the central normative element of radical realism is an epistemic objection to circular self-justification.

To clarify the above, there is no *prima facie* case against providing a more complex machinery of critical legitimacy assessment, like those put forward in recent radical realist publications. But in my submission, we would want this extra theoretical toolkit to justify itself by providing *better* (by whatever metric still to be determined) outcomes vis-à-vis questions of legitimacy. This is because we can assume that applying the Critical Theory Principle will have the same normative effects on legitimation narratives. We would want the psychological substantiation of the theory to be worth something, or else Ockham's Razor—the objective of saving unnecessary methodological complexity– advises parsimony in theory-building.

In my submission, the psychology around the CTP is an embellishment irrelevant to the normative dimension of radical realism. Yet ultimately, whether such a psychological approach has wider appeal, and why, remains an open question and one that I would like to see being explored in future research projects.[34]

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[29] Van Doorn's extensive research does have some scepticism over the idea that all instances of what passes as motivated reasoning in the literature displays logical circularity, which is the opposite of what Clark argued. See Van Doorn, 2023 and also Ellis, 2023.

[30] 2022, p. 4.

[31] 2022, p. 7.

[32] . This foundationalist understanding is well-supported and might best be described as some form of 'positivism'. See Jovanovic, 2022. This can be contrasted with 'psychological foundationalism', see Audio, 1978. For the idea of "ultimate explanations", see Bliss, 2024.

[33] 2022, p. 5.

[34] What is more, as the reviewers for this journal suggested to me, the psychologization of a normative theory of legitimacy invites other foundational questions. For instance, to have the full normative effect elicited, one would have to more broadly inquire to what extent motivated reasoning is avoidable or a different case from human beings' overall limited capacity to discern between facts/interests/values: the

In conclusion, then, for what concerns the radical realist project, the motivated reasoning connection can be downplayed but not for the reasons laid out in extant critique of radical realist approach. Rather, the foundational connection to the normativity of epistemic or logical norms provides all and sufficient explanatory power for the realist to practice this form of ideology critique. The normative sting of the matter is circularity, which is a logic-epistemic notion that explains why motivated reasoning appears problematic, at least in the context of normative justification.

Some final words of caution: Radical realism prompts several vexed foundational questions not discussed in this paper: First, is it true that circular argument cannot support its conclusions? Second, and even more integral perhaps: are logico-epistemic norms *really* immune to politically motivated reasoning itself?[35] Could it be that epistemic norms are fundamentally social norms, and therefore, according to the realist, equally unfit at normative guidance in politics as moral norms? Could it be that the belief in the critical potential of the epistemic tools used by radical realism to challenge political legitimation narratives is also a product of political power? Potential starting points for further exploration include the literature on epistemic normativity and social norms, but answering those foundational questions is beyond the scope of this paper, or *any* single paper for that matter.[36]

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literature on objectivity and neutrality in the social sciences argues that most if our observations of social phenomena is inevitably biased by our interests and preferences, which if correct and applied to normative legitimacy assessment puts up a high threshold for legitimacy.

[35] Echoing Haslanger, 2021 p. 23.

[36] See Graham, 2015 and Hannon and Woodard, 2025.

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