What Can Epistemic Normativity Tell Us About Politics? Ideology, Power, and the Epistemology of Radical Realism

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Abstract: This paper examines how radical realism, a form of ideology critique grounded in epistemic rather than moral normativity, can illuminate the relationship between ideology and political power. The paper argues that radical realism can has both an evaluative and a diagnostic function. Drawing on reliabilist epistemology, the evaluative function shows how beliefs shaped by power differentials are often epistemically unwarranted, e.g. due to the influence of motivated reasoning and the suppression of critical scrutiny. The paper clarifies those mechanisms in order to address some recent critiques of radical realism. The paper then builds on those clarifications to explore the how tracing the genealogy of legitimation stories can diagnose the distribution of power in society, even if ideology does not play a direct stabilising role. This diagnostic function creates a third position in the debate on ideology between culturalists and classical Marxists, and it can help reconciling aspects of structural and relational theories of power.

Key words: Political realism, political epistemology, power, ideology

Introduction

Ideology critique, like the Marxism of which it was originally a part, traditionally eschewed moral commitments, considering them the purview of bourgeois philosophising. Admittedly this approach was easier to sustain so long as the main target of the critique was bourgeois philosophising itself, as in Marx and Engels' most extensive writings on ideology. But over the last century or so ideology critique has been taking on heavier burdens. In the early 20th century, Western Marxism notably turned the study of ideology into a tool to understand the failure of revolutionary socialism against fascism (Gramsci 1971). In the second half of that century, Marxists and post-Marxists turned to a notion of culture to explain the stability of liberal-democratic orders and the decline of mass left politics (Hall 1986). More recently still, what has been called the "new" ideology critique (Sankaran 2020) has largely dropped that explanatory aspiration, and it has been added to the toolbox of liberalism, as yet another angle from which to diagnose moral ills whose amelioration would improve the current order,

rather than overthrow it (Haslanger 2012, Stanley 2015).

Radical realism, as we will see, modifies the descriptive agenda of 20ᵗʰ century Western Marxism by pivoting from explaining social stability to revealing power structures. And it also takes on the diagnostic and evaluative aims of the new ideology critique (Kreutz 2023, Prinz & Rossi 2017), yet it does so while eschewing moral commitments because, like classical Marxism, it considers them a prime candidate for the very ideological distortions it seeks to overcome (Rossi 2019, Cross 2022, Aytac & Rossi 2023). The normative foundations of radical realist critique are rather to be found in epistemic normativity. In a nutshell, the idea is to empirically uncover patterns of power self-justification that negatively affect the epistemic position from which we make political decisions. To use a toy example, in a patriarchal society the belief that "father knows best" can be traced back to paternal inculcation, which makes it epistemically circular, and so not a reliable guide to political decision-making. But what is the epistemic fault here, exactly? And how can we identify less obvious cases? As in some readings of classical Marxism (e.g. Miller 1984), the challenge is to answer those questions so as to show how a social-scientific description of the world can yield evaluative judgments about it without falling back on moral commitments.

The first part of this paper builds on some extant radical realist work to strengthen our response to that challenge. It begins by setting out the radical realist approach in more detail, in order to bring out the specific questions it raises—questions and objections that, in part, have already been raised in the small but growing literature on radical realism. Those worries are then addressed in two steps. The first one is to show how radical realism rests on a plausible version of reliabilist epistemology, which I will dub radical realiabilism. The next step is to spell out some of its implications for the philosophy of social science, to address worries about whether the empirical evidence used to trace patterns of power self-justification is itself so morally and politically loaded that it nullifies the anti-moralist advantages of radical realism. The upshot is a view that acknowledges the impossibility of a 'pure' epistemic normativity, while still carving out sufficient room for radical realism to remain a form of *Wissenschaft* in the traditional sense of the term—a method of inquiry that is distinct from forms of social critique grounded in morality as well as from activist approaches to scholarship.

With that epistemological picture in place, the second part of the paper outlines a further function of epistemic normativity. In a nutshell, the idea is that, by tracing the genealogy of widespread legitimation stories for the status quo, radical realist ideology critique can reveal which social groups hold the most power in society. By tracing the patterns through which power justifies itself, we can identify which widely held beliefs in society are shaped by the influence of different social groups—such as interest groups, elites, or classes. This allows us to determine which actors hold the power to alter our understanding of the social

world. While this influence might or might not contribute to maintaining the status quo, it does illuminate who holds significant power within a particular social structure. For example, this analysis can reveal which beliefs are mere vestiges of a previous social order (as they are not linked to the influence of any current social actors) and which beliefs are active outcomes of ongoing social hierarchies. This is a diagnostic rather than evaluative function of critique. But it has normatively significant consequences: as we will see, it is grist to the mill of social theories centred on power differentials between well-defined social groups, as opposed to the currently more fashionable theories that see power primarily as something diffuse and relational. What is more, this approach is able to account for why we should care about ideology and recognise that power is embedded in everyday practices, discourses, and institutions, but without committing to the view that ideology has a stabilising function in society—a novel third position in the longstanding debate between culturalist and structuralist or materialist approaches to social theory (Chibber 2022).

Radical Realism

Radical realism, at least in the variant I wish to focus on here (Aytac & Rossi, 2023, Rossi 2019, Rossi 2023, Cross 2021, Kreutz 2023, Rossi 2024a, Rossi & Argenton, 2021), is a form of ideology critique grounded in epistemic rather than moral normativity.[1] The exposition in this section should clear the ground from some objections that have been levied against this approach. Other objections will have to wait until the next section.

The rough idea behind radical realism is to generate a non-moral argument against social hierarchy by critiquing the epistemic consequences of empirically observable patterns of power self-justification. Recall the toy example from the introduction. In a patriarchal society, people tend to believe that 'father knows best', and so comply with the power of senior males. But, as it turns out, this belief is due to paternal inculcation – an instance of power self-justification. One may see this is a moral problem, but radical realists highlight its epistemic dimension, and rely on that exclusively. Very roughly, the epistemic problem here is that beliefs and other cultural elements that result from power self-justification are not good sources of knowledge about society, and so put us in a suboptimal position to make choices about how to organise society. Power self-justification allows the powerful to be judges in their own affairs, and judges in their own affairs aren't likely to reach sufficiently epistemically accurate verdicts. This in turn yields a general epistemic case against social hierarchies: social groups with significantly more power than others are in a position to fog

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[1] There are also variants of radical realism less centred on ideology critique (e.g. Raekstad 2018, Thaler 2018, Cross 2020, Cross 2024, Wesphal 2021, Prinz & Scerri 2024), as well as slightly different variants of realist ideology critique (Prinz & Rossi 2017, Prinz & Rossi 2022, Cross & Prinz 2023).

society's cognitive windscreen in a way that further entrenches their position. The aim of radical realist social analysis is to empirically uncover these mechanisms of power self-justification, to criticise the beliefs, dispositions and social attitudes—the "cultural *technēs*" (Haslanger 2017)—they generate, and so to contest the social practices and institutions they underpin.[2]

Radical realist social analysis offers a distinctive approach to ideology critique, setting itself apart by focusing on the epistemic rather than moral flaws in systems of power. This approach aims to bridge the gap between empirical and normative perspectives on legitimacy. It grounds its critique in the ways beliefs about legitimacy are formed and maintained. Without resorting to moral commitments, radical realist social analysis critiques the processes by which power structures generate ideological distortions: these distortions hinder our understanding of social reality and, therefore, our capacity for meaningful political contestation and effective political decision-making. The ambition is to overcome both the moralised epistemisation of politics found in much Anglophone political epistemology, and the overpoliticisation and moralisation of the epistemic found in contemporary post-structuralist and critical theory.[3]

Like much contemporary realist scholarship in political philosophy, radical realism is inspired by the work of Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams. However, while Geuss (2008) maintains a more thoroughgoing scepticism towards the idea of establishing general normative standards in political theory, viewing such efforts as potentially ideological themselves, most radical realists, by contrast, seeks a middle ground: they retain a form of evaluative but not prescriptive normative critique, but one that is non-moralised and grounded in empirical analysis. A key point of departure between radical realism and the approach taken by Bernard Williams lies in the interpretation and application of his "Critical Theory Principle." Williams argues that the acceptance of a justification for power is not valid if that acceptance is itself a product of the power being justified (Williams 2005). Radical realism takes this insight further, suggesting that Williams's own framework remains too closely tied to moral concerns, even when he attempts to ground political legitimacy in empirical realities. Radical realists argue that Williams's approach ultimately relies on commitments, such as an underlying aspiration to freedom, which might still be influenced by ideological distortions (Prinz & Rossi 2017, Aytac 2022).[4]

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[2] I follow Haslanger in using the concept of a cultural *technē* to range over controversies about whether ideology critique should focus on beliefs or conceptual schemes. I will however use belief as the paradigmatic case of a cultural *technē*, against the backdrop of a dispositional theory of belief: roughly, if believing P is a disposition to accept the truth of P, then belief is functionally almost equivalent to a conceptual scheme. I thank Uğur Aytaç for conversation on this point.

[3] For a similar articulation of these twin excesses see Vogelmann (2024).

[4] Williams readily recognises that it is a bad idea to try to ground liberalism

In contrast, radical realism insists that ideology critique should be based on epistemic standards—specifically, the reliability of the processes through which beliefs about legitimacy are generated—an approach I defend in the next section. It focuses on how power structures shape the cognitive frameworks through which people understand their political predicament. For example, in patriarchal or capitalist societies, those in power can influence beliefs about the legitimacy of the existing order, making it difficult to discern genuine acceptance from acceptance shaped by the interests of those in power (Rossi 2019). This critique is not about moral judgment but rather about identifying when beliefs are formed through epistemically unreliable processes, which is crucial for a nonmoralised analysis of legitimacy.

This focus on epistemic critique does not mean abandoning normative concerns altogether. Rather, radical realism offers a way to make normative—evaluative, not prescriptive—claims about the legitimacy of political power by relying on epistemic rather than moral commitments—a polarity, but hardly the dualism many Anglophone political philosophers imagine when they seek to isolate and give priority to the moral (Aytac & Rossi 2023: 1222-1223, Queloz 2024).[5] Radical realists don't mirror this when they centre their focus on the epistemic. They do not presume that epistemic values float completely free of other values, including moral values, but simply that they are less prone to distortion from social power. So it is incorrect to say that radical realists wish to completely expunge morality from political theory (Sleat 2024: 1), or that they "assume" that "none our moral concepts have any chance of being anything like we take them to be" (ibid.: 10). The idea is rather that moral commitments should be filtered through epistemic ideology critique to see whether they relate to politics and power in a way that undermines them. "Unfiltered" moral commitments are epistemically risky, and so best avoided.[6] As it happens, unfiltered commitments are standard in political philosophy as well as in public life, hence radical realists' general weariness of moral language (Rossi & Argenton 2021, Cross 2022). But that is not to say that radical realists wish to "expunge" power from "politics' epistemological dimensions" (ibid.: 12). The aim is more modest: to be alert to and try to contain some of the worst effects of power on our capacity to make sense

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in autonomy, because the political salience of the value of autonomy is entangled with the rise of the liberal state. But somehow this mechanism does not come to the fore in his analysis of the political value of liberty (Williams 2001). I cannot engage in a direct critique of this move here. At any rate, Raymond Geuss (2012: 149-151) already pointed out the pitfalls of this kind of liberal complacency.

[5] On the non-dualistic character of the distinction between realism and moralism also see Bermejo-Luque 2024. Both Bermejo-Luque and Queloz's views strike me as consistent with and quite similar to the account of anti-moralism as the view that there are "no overarching principles that span personal morality and politics" (Rossi 2019: 640).

[6] One may think of this filtering process of moral commitments as akin to expanding what Rawlsians call reflective equilibrium (Raekstad 2024).

of the social world.

A distinctive aspect of radical realist social analysis is its emphasis on tracing the genealogy of cultural *technēs* to uncover the hidden mechanisms of power. It seeks to identify which social agents—such as elites, interest groups, or dominant classes—have the capacity to shape societal beliefs and attitudes and create and maintain ideological distortions. This analysis is empirically grounded, as it examines the actual conditions under which beliefs are formed, and it strives to expose the ways in which power relations shape our understanding of social reality (Rossi & Argenton 2021). By focusing on how these dynamics produce ideologically flawed beliefs, radical realism allows for a critique that is not abstract or moralised but instead rooted in the empirical study of belief formation and social dynamics.

There are various ways to model the epistemic effects of social power and its distribution. The most developed one in the literature relies on the idea of motivated reasoning (Aytac & Rossi 2023). Here is a schematic reconstruction of the argument. An examination of the prevalent cultural technēs within a society S reveals that Group A—the dominant social group in S—constructs a cultural *technē* L to legitimise the existing hierarchy H to groups B, C, etc. Given the widespread prevalence of politically motivated reasoning, especially among those intent on preserving their advantageous position, it is highly probable that L emerges from such reasoning by Group A. Motivated reasoning undermines the epistemic warrant of beliefs, dispositions and attitudes due to its circular and self-justifying nature. Moreover, the hierarchical power dynamics exacerbate this issue: Group A's dominant position enables them to disseminate L more effectively and to shield it from critical scrutiny or contestation from B, C, etc. This lack of contestation is detrimental to the epistemic quality of L, as it prevents the exposure of biases and errors that might otherwise be identified and corrected through open discourse. In contrast, a more egalitarian social structure would facilitate the contestation of cultural *technēs*, promoting epistemic hygiene by allowing beliefs and attitudes about power to be challenged and rigorously evaluated.

The radical realist approach, at any rate, does not rest entirely on this application of the idea of motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning can be seen as just one exemplification of how social hierarchies lead to adverse epistemic consequences, effectively serving as a placeholder for various mechanisms through which power dynamics influence culture and distort our perception of social reality.[7] Beyond motivated reasoning, there are numerous complementary and overlapping mechanisms that contribute to these epistemic shortcomings, such as information asymmetry and control by dominant groups, epistemic injustices

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[7] Pace Rebecca Clark (2024: 5), radical realists never claimed that motivated reasoning is necessary for debunking, but only that it is sufficient. On this point also see Kreutz (2024).

that marginalise subordinate voices, communication barriers that limit diverse perspectives, the formation of echo chambers reinforcing dominant ideologies, social pressures enforcing conformity, and structural impediments hindering critical inquiry. Empirical exploration of these factors may offer a more comprehensive understanding of how hierarchies undermine our collective epistemic performance.

Whatever the account of the mechanism leading to epistemic flaws in power self-justification, radical realist social analysis yields an idea of legitimacy as "critical responsiveness" (Rossi 2024a), which reconciles Weberian empirical accounts of legitimacy with a normative, critical perspective by using empirical measures of belief in legitimacy while filtering these through an epistemic critique of how those beliefs are formed. It retains the descriptive insight that legitimacy depends on the alignment between the rulers' actions and the ruled's beliefs, but does not accept the Weberian view that ruling power necessarily generates its own support. Pace the Weberian inclinations of some 'ordorealist' accounts (Sleat 2014, Cozzaglio & Greene 2019), radical realism introduces a critical dimension by assessing whether beliefs in legitimacy are shaped by ideologically distorted processes. This ensures that empirical accounts of legitimacy are not only about how power is perceived but also critically examine whether such perceptions are epistemically justified. If beliefs about legitimacy are generated through manipulation or self-justifying mechanisms, then that legitimacy is epistemically flawed, even if it is stable.

Ultimately, radical realism presents a method for evaluating legitimacy that remains closer to the empirical realities of power than many standard normative approaches.[8] It retains a normative edge by highlighting when power undermines a genuine understanding of social conditions, challenging the assumption that apparent acceptance of political power equates to genuine legitimacy. In doing so, it seeks to expose how ideologically influenced perceptions can mask power asymmetries, offering a critique based on an understanding of the interplay between power and culture.

It is worth stressing, however, that radical realism is primarily concerned with evaluation rather than prescription, aiming to critique the ways in which power and ideology shape beliefs without directly prescribing specific courses of action—an approach in line with the more general realist distrust of the language of obligations in political philosophy. Its focus lies in exposing the epistemic flaws of cultural *technēs* widely seen as supportive of specific power structures, revealing those *technēs* as ideologically distorted. This evaluative process is meant to illuminate the underlying dynamics of social and political life, but

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[8] This is a longstanding realist concern that cuts across the division between ordorealists, contextual realists, and radical realists. See e.g. the essays in Ceva & Rossi (2012).

it does not dictate how individuals or institutions should respond. Therefore, concerns that radical realism either prescribes overly radical changes (Favara 2021) are misplaced, as is the presumption that it should offer prescriptive action-guidance (Erman & Möller 2024).[9] Radical realists do not claim to provide concrete instructions for political action but instead seek to clear the ground for more reflective, well-informed deliberation about political decisions. Radical realism does not provide criteria or procedures for judgment. It offers a method for improving the perspecicve from which one judges—a method to make judgment more epistemically reliable. By offering critical insights into the justifications that support political and social power structures, radical realism aims to shape how people see and evaluate political realities. But power structures ca be supported by many different cultural *téchnes*, even though some such *technēs* are more strongly held or more prevalent or otherwise more important than others. So, since provides evaluations of specific cultural *technēs* in support of specific power structures, it does not offer all-things-considered evaluations of the legitimacy of power structures. It is more accurate to think of this approach as an aid in making judgments about the legitimacy of specific power structures.[10]

The aim of radical realism, then, is to improve the epistemic position of political agents, and so their capacity to make political decisions, without directly telling them what to do, nor even what to think all-things-considered, nor even whether they should use primarily their moral commitments or other considerations. One could even say that radical realism aims to make politics epistemically safer for moral and other normative judgments, and it does this by urging caution about those judgments, given their likely genealogy. The reason for this is, in turn, also epistemic. The central idea can be understood as an empiricist version of standpoint epistemology: those who are subject to political power are best positioned to judge whether it is justified because they have the clearest understanding of its effects and significance (Bright 2024). Radical realist social analysis, or ideology critique, serves as a tool to improve the reliability of their perspective. That is not to say that victims or the oppressed or the dominated always know best in virtue of their subordinate position.

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[9] Ditto for the argument that radical realist ideology critique fails to orient most political agents because it is too complicated (Ulaş 2023: 547-548). The general idea that judges in their own affairs aren't reliable is extremely simple. It would be too demanding to require that ordinary agents also understand the epistemology, philosophy of social science, etc. that underpin the theory. One can understand the reasons behind a theory to different degrees. Compare this case with, say, Marxist political economy. Hardly anyone would deny that it has had an enormous and distinctive impact on real-world politics, despite the intricacies of its intellectual foundations.

[10] In this sense, radical realism may be quite close to the neo-pragmatist conceptualisation of legitimacy as a problem of judgment put forward by Thomas Fossen (2024). In which case, unlike other realist approaches to legitimacy, radical realism should not be considered "normativistic" (ibid. 25-3)

Those most affected know best, all else equal. One of the unequal circumstances is precisely that subordination often creates epistemic distortions. And so the idea is to try to identify and reduce the ways in which power compromises the epistemic capacities of those over whom it is held and exercised. This approach is the most cautious from an epistemic standpoint—mainly because expert knowledge, which might claim to override the views of those directly affected, often turns out to be entangled in the very hierarchies that need to be scrutinised. That last point, however, raises some issues about the social-scientific expert knowledge deployed in radical realist analysis. I turn to this issue in the next section.

Radical Reliabilism

Objections to the epistemological machinery of radical realism tend to posit that the view either proves too little or too much, that it is either underinclusive or overinclusive. I will consider those charges in that order, and set out the underlying epistemology in the process.

The charge that radical realist ideology critique proves too little takes issue with the idea that the likelihood of bias in a belief or other cultural *technē*—such as the motivated reasoning bias described in the previous section—does not suffice for establishing that the belief lacks epistemic warrant. Matt Sleat puts the point as follows: "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" (2024: 6). We need a more demanding standard instead, Sleat continues: "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" (ibid.: 7). But, according Sleat, the problem with such a move would be that it would require "an error theory for moral or normative judgments" (ibid.: 9), which, according to Sleat, radical realists do not or cannot provide.

My reply is that understanding the reliabilist epistemological underpinnings of radical realism can show how suspicion removes epistemic warrant, because it zeroes in precisely on how power corrupts epistemic processes, which in turn is an error theory for moral or normative judgments with a pedigree of power self-justification. In a nutshell, and pace Sleat, it is not the case that suspicion is simply due to the belief in question being in the interest of the dominant group. If I know that motivated reasoning (or other comparable mechanisms) tends to generate false beliefs, then I know that a process strongly affected by motivated reasoning is not a reliable process to generate true beliefs, and so beliefs generated through that process are not justified—even on the

(rare) occasions in which they are true. This is an error theory, though one that focuses on justification rather than truth.

With that intuitive reply in place, let's unpack the epistemology. Reliabilism is a theory in epistemology that asserts that a belief is justified or warranted if it is produced by a reliable cognitive process—that is, a process that typically yields true beliefs (Goldman 1986, Comesaña 2010b). Under reliabilism, if there is sufficient reason to suspect that a belief-forming process is unreliable, then the epistemic warrant of beliefs produced by that process is undermined, even if the believer is unaware of the unreliability. Therefore, evidence of unreliability can indeed be sufficient grounds for withdrawing epistemic warrant. Within a reliabilist framework, realist ideology critique posits that beliefs disseminated by dominant groups in hierarchical societies are epistemically unwarranted if they arise from unreliable belief-forming processes—specifically, those corrupted by motivated reasoning and shielded from critical scrutiny due to power asymmetries. Reliabilism maintains that a belief is justified if it is produced by cognitive processes that reliably lead to truth.[11] When power dynamics enable the dominant group to propagate beliefs that serve their interests while suppressing contestation, the reliability of the belief-forming process is compromised. Motivated reasoning, driven by the desire to maintain dominance, introduces biases that render these processes systematically prone to error.

Sleat's objection contends that mere suspicion of bias due to motivated reasoning is insufficient to undermine the epistemic justification of a belief, asserting that justification must reference the belief's truth value rather than the interests it serves. However, from a reliabilist standpoint, evidence of unreliability in the belief-forming process is sufficient to withdraw epistemic warrant. Since motivated reasoning and the lack of contestation provide credible grounds to suspect that the cognitive processes involved are unreliable, the resultant beliefs are epistemically unjustified regardless of their propositional content (McKenna 2023: 161ff). Therefore, radical realism effectively counters the objection by demonstrating that the interplay of motivated reasoning and power-imposed barriers to critique systematically undermines the reliability of the belief-forming process (Goldman 1986). This unreliability justifies withdrawing epistemic warrant from the beliefs in question, aligning with reliabilist principles that prioritise the dependability of the processes leading to belief formation.

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[11] But, importantly, we can understand reliabilism as targeting epistemic warrant, not truth directly. This is expedient for radical realism, since it provides a reply to more extreme forms of social constructionism that maintain that cultural technes can "make themselves true", and so can become invulnerable to epistemic critique (Haslanger 2017: 150, cf. Aytac & Rossi 2023: 1220).

More specifically, evidentialist reliabilism, as articulated by Comesaña (2010a), is particularly suited to radical realism, and not just because it is a relatively ecumenical position. This hybrid epistemological theory combines elements of reliabilism and evidentialism. It maintains that a belief is epistemically justified if and only if it is produced by a reliable cognitive process and is supported by the evidence available to the believer. This approach can highlight how beliefs disseminated by dominant groups in hierarchical societies—formed through unreliable processes corrupted by motivated reasoning and shielded from critical scrutiny—are epistemically unwarranted. Furthermore, since subordinate groups often lack access to sufficient evidence to support these beliefs due to suppression and lack of contestation, and due to the poor quality of evidence produced via unreliable processes, both the reliability and evidential conditions for justification are unmet. We may call this form of evidentialist reliabilism that puts emphasis on the effects of political power on evidence formation processes 'radical reliabilism'.

Radical reliabilism will also help addressing a version of the under inclusion worry recently put forward by Rebecca Clark: could

> RIC [realist ideology critique] fails in this crucial respect, since it is unable to challenge beliefs that buttress the status quo (such as beliefs in the legitimacy of the capitalist state and neopatriarchy in capitalist and neopatriarchal social orders, respectively) so long as people can point to another justification for their belief that is not malignantly epistemically circular. (2024: 7)

My reply is this. Radical realists aren't interested in necessary truths about any possible belief one may form. In the politically salient cases discussed by radical realists—neopatriarchy in the MENA region, common sense beliefs about private property, the New Right doctrine that "there is no alternative", etc.—the cultural *technēs* in question are, as a matter of fact, widely accepted due to an unreliable belief formation process. While other reasons to support those technēs are available, they are not widespread and play little to no role in explaining the prevalence of the *technēs* at hand. That is enough for social critique in the real world. Reliabilism comes in handy here too: as Goldman (1986) argued, we need to be concerned with belief-formation processes in "normal worlds": the actual world and possible worlds sufficiently similar to it to be relevant to our predicament.

I should note that Clark presents her worries not as a full-fledged objection, but as horns in a false dilemma. Her "moderate" solution to the dilemma, however, strikes me as not particularly different from the position actually put forward in Aytac & Rossi

(2023) and Rossi (2024), as I hope to clarify here. At any rate, considering the other horn of the dilemma allows us to transition to the charge that radical realist ideology critique proves too much.

Before addressing the specific objections, it is worth noting a general potential problem with radical realism: this view uses social-scientific evidence to point out the bad epistemic effects of social hierarchies, but social science itself relies on hierarchical structures of authority for its own functioning, so why should we trust its results? This over inclusion or self-defeat issue is a version of a longstanding problem with Marxist accounts of science: Marx argues that ruling ideas, including the belief in scientific objectivity, often serve the interests of dominant classes by presenting their perspectives as universally valid. This suggests that science itself could be ideological in the pejorative sense. However, Marx also claims scientific status for his own theories, drawing analogies between his method and those of natural sciences like physics and biology. My replies to those objections should show how radical realism is in line with accounts of Marxism that reconcile its radicalism with its status as a *Wissenschaft* (e.g. Railton 1984, Cohen 2012 [1968]).

Clark's version of this overinclusion/self-defeat worry relates to Sleat's objection about the need to focus on the truth or falsity of ideological beliefs: "Strong RIC [realist ideology critique] rests on a deeply implausible epistemic norm that minimizes the chance of believing false propositions, but […] at the expense of a high chance of rejecting true beliefs" (Clark 2024: 6). The worry is that one may have many reasons for a belief, and if one such reason is epistemically suspect, that is not enough to abandon the belief, all things considered. Radical realism would be over inclusive because it would debunk beliefs that shouldn't be debunked. The question, however, is whether the sorts of legitimation stories radical realists are interested in tend to work like that. It is easy to come up with vignettes about individuals with ninety-nine good doxastic justifications for P, and one bad one. So my reply is specular to the one I offered above.[12] How many widely believed legitimation stories for social orders work like that, in the actual world and in Goldman's "normal worlds"?

Sleat's version of the overinclusion/self-defeat worry takes a different approach, one more focused on how power contaminates epistemology and social science:

> 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,

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[12] Hence my claim that radical realism—as formulated in (Aytac & Rossi 2023, Rossi 2024a)—does not occupy either horn of the dilemma.

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 […] 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. (Ibid.: 13)

I could reply by rehearsing the discussion of pragmatic encroachment epistemology and contextual values in the philosophy of social science in Aytac & Rossi (2023: 1222-23), since Sleat does not engage with it. I will instead simply reiterate that the political innocence sought by radical realists in their use of epistemic normativity is relative to the innocence (or lack thereof) of moral normativity.[13] Sleat does acknowledge this (2024: 11), but then argues that the focus on morality is merely a special case of a radical realist suspicion of "proximity to power" (ibid.).[14] It seems Sleat is weary of trying to constrain the epistemological ill-effects of power. But this indicates that his more fundamental worry is not epistemological, but rather due to an underlying difference in political orientation. Consider this passage:

The upshot is that, on RIC [realist ideology critique]'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. (Sleat 2024: 6)

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[13] This, in turn, can be explained in terms of a discontinuity between moral and epistemic common sense, as I argue in forthcoming work (Rossi 2024b).
[14] Sleat then says that this casts doubt on radical realism's framing of realism as anti-moralism, given that radical realists are suspicious of all values that are too cozy with power, not just moral values. My reply is that one should distinguish between radical realists as political philosophers and radical realists as social critics. As political philosophers, radical realists focus on morality because it's the key way in which power makes itself be felt in political philosophy. When critiquing actual social orders radical realists can indeed focus on other values as well.

Sleat is correct in saying that most radical realists would endorse this upshot. But it remains unclear why this is supposed to be a problem. From what premises does it follow that a theory is to be considered implausible simply because it produces a (ceteris paribus) argument against any or most social hierarchies? It seems this is no longer a disagreement about epistemology, but one about what range of first-order evaluative answers are to be deemed acceptable—a political disagreement about how anti-status quo political theory can or should be. This is evident in Sleat's discussion of the inevitability of ideological distortions as well: "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." (Ibid.: 12). First, it's worth stressing that radical realism does not presume that such a social order is possible, but merely that it is a useful regulative ideal. Also note that radical realists don't use "ideology" in this pejorative sense, but rather talk about ideological distortions, or flawed ideologies.[15] Terminological issues aside, the question here is whether one should follow Max Weber and take it for granted that legitimate political rule must generate its own support, or whether that is flaw to be critiqued.[16] Again, this is mostly a political disagreement. Sleat comes close to saying as much:

> 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. (Ibid.)

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[15] Compare: "The set of all our cultural technēs is our ideology, and if any of its important members are epistemically flawed we can speak of a flawed ideology. So ours is not a pejorative definition of ideology. We seek to show how ideologies become flawed when hierarchical power structures legitimize themselves." (Aytac & Rossi 2023: 5). A somewhat confusing oscillation between pejorative and non-pejorative use of "ideology" goes all the way back to classic discussions of the concept (e.g. Mannheim 2013 [1929]; cf. Geuss 1981, chapter I).

[16] For a sustained discussion of this issue see Cozzaglio & Greene (2019) and Rossi (2024).

What is not clear to me is why Marxism and realism are taken to be incompatible. If anything, Marx is widely seen as a key figure in the realist canon (Geuss 2008, Leiter 2022, Raekstad 2022). If some realists prefer the Weberian to the Marxian position on ideology, they need to argue for it, rather than rule out Marxism by policing the borders of realism. The tension between what I have called ordorealism and radical realism runs deep in the tradition (Rossi 2019). Unlike moralists, all realists want to face some uncofortable facts about power. Unlike ordorealists, radical realists think that those facts often aren't what they seem.

Diagnosing Power

So far we have seen how radical realist ideology critique can withstand objections about its critical purchase. We can now move on to the question of what this approach may have to contribute beyond improving our ability to make evaluative normative judgments. In this section I will roughly outline radical realism's potential contribution to the sociological debate about ideology, and so to the social theory of power. What follows is to be taken as programmatic—a tentative research agenda more than a fully developed position.

We have already noted several affinities between radical realism and Marxism. In the most general sense, radical realism shares an affinity with Marxism in its focus on the material conditions and power structures that shape social realities, emphasising that ideology often serves to obscure these realities. A standard question within Marxist debates is whether this role of ideology also helps stabilising the capitalist status quo, or merely makes it more bearable. Perhaps the most prominent debate is between culturalists like Stuart Hall and classical Marxists like Vivek Chibber. Hall, drawing on Gramsci, argues that ideology is key to maintaining hegemony. Ruling classes secure consent not through force alone, but by shaping the beliefs and identities of the dominated classes. For Hall, ideology doesn't just make domination bearable; it stabilises the system by preventing resistance. Ideological narratives frame capitalism as natural and inevitable, fostering consent through cultural institutions (Hall 1986). This creates a form of stability that goes beyond material conditions, making workers internalise their subordination. Classical Marxists take a different view. Chibber argues that capitalism is stabilised by material forces, not ideological consent.[17] Workers don't accept exploitation because of ideological manipulation, but because they see no viable alternatives. Material constraints, such as the need to survive, drive resignation (Chibber

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[17] On how capital structurally constrains labour also see Cicerchia (2021).

2022). Chibber's position aligns with Michael Rosen's account of the coordination problem, though the latter is offered in a more anti-Marxist key. Rosen argues that the stability of oppressive systems often rests on individuals' rational calculations. People may recognise their oppression but refrain from acting due to the perceived futility of individual resistance (Rosen 1996). This logic of resignation, not ideological consent, is what stabilises capitalism. As Rosen notes, Jon Elster's idea of adaptive preferences adds further support to this view. Elster argues that individuals adjust their desires to align with what is materially feasible. This preference adjustment isn't driven by ideological false consciousness, but by practical constraints. Like Chibber and Rosen, Elster suggests that people submit to systems not because they are ideologically duped, but because they adapt to the conditions they face (Elster 1983).[18] Together, these arguments suggest that the stabilisation of capitalism is primarily driven by material forces and practical constraints, not ideological hegemony.

A consequence of the structure of that debate is that those attracted by the classical Marxist position may come to regard the study of ideology as secondary if not entirely pointless. After all, if capitalism's stability is primarily ensured by the material compulsion of wage labour and workers' inability to collectively organise, then ideology becomes an idle wheel, at least from the point of view of structural social change. Studying how culture makes structural constraints more bearable would begin to look more like an intellectual past-time than like a key component of emancipatory scholarship.

However, I submit that radical realism provides reasons to care about ideology even if the classical Marxists are correct and ideology plays no stabilising role. In fact, radical realism does not need to commit to either side in that debate. I want to argue that the radical realist approach to ideology should be seen as worthwhile by both culturalists and classical Marxists. Crudely, by tracing the origins of the most prevalent and widely accepted narratives that legitimise the status quo, radical realist ideology critique reveals which social groups hold the most power in society. Analysing how power justifies itself allows us to identify which prevalent beliefs are shaped by influential actors like interest groups, elites, or classes. This helps determine who has the ability to alter our understanding of the social world.[19] Whether or not

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[18] Brian Kogelman (2024) also makes a similar point when the emphasises the 'demand side' of ideology.

[19] To be sure, this idea about the link between a cultural technē being prevalent and the power of its originators requires further empirical hypotheses about the exact mechanism in play. But this is not a question I can take up here, especially as any full answer would have to be accompanied by a detailed theory of power. Tentatively, one can imagine a range of

their influence maintains the status quo, it highlights who holds significant power within a given social structure.

Radical realism's diagnostic function can reveal that identifying the powerful isn't straightforward. A first issue to note is that, often, what matters most to the genealogy of a cultural technē is not its literal ideational origins, but whose agency is causally responsible for its becoming politically salient and widespread (Rossi & Argenton 2021). Tracing the genealogy of legitimation stories in that way allows us to distinguish between ideologies that are legacy beliefs spread by groups no longer in the most powerful positions, and those that are live, i.e., a product of actually powerful groups. Contrary to appearances, many widespread beliefs that seem to justify the status quo may turn out to be dead—no longer actively promoted by dominant actors. For instance, and exceedingly crudely, the ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family may endure as a cultural norm long after the male breadwinner model has ceased to be economically viable for most households (Fraser 2016). Now that is not to say that patriarchal power is not real or important. Rather, it is a way of saying that, in some contexts, it is not as central as it once was—power may be diffuse and layered, but not all power structures are equally politically salient. However, as the radical realist analysis of neopatriarchy in the Middle East and North Africa region shows (Aytac & Rossi 2023), the power of patriarchal family structures can remain very much alive in different contexts, and become enmeshed with other power structures such as those of a particular variety of capitalism. This radical realist critique reveals how the ruling elites in neopatriarchal societies actively promote and benefit from the legitimation stories surrounding the patriarchal family, even as economic modernisation undermines the material basis of the male breadwinner model. This demonstrates how realist ideology critique can uncover the different ways in which power structures operate and sustain themselves across various social and cultural contexts. Conversely, some marginal ideas may be revealed as the work of rising powers, poised to become tomorrow's common sense. The neoliberal valorisation of "entrepreneurship of the self" and flexible labor, for example, may have started as a fringe belief promoted by a small network of economists and think tanks, but it has now become a governing ideology for a sizeable part of the global economy (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Peck 2010). Those tentative illustrations of fairly straighforward cases should give some sense of how radical realism provides a method for detecting shifts in the ideological landscape and corresponding changes in

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explanations: from the idea that a strong grip on power affords the "luxury" of ideological buttresses beyond brute force, to the complementary thought that culture is downstream from and lags behind raw material domination.

power relations.

This has implications for theories of power. The currently fashionable 'relational' approaches, often inspired by Foucault, see power as diffuse, emanating from everyday practices and discourses rather than held by defined agents (Hayward 2000; Foucault 1982, 780). For Foucauldians, power is capillary, circulating through the social body rather than concentrated in the hands of a ruling class (Foucault 1980, 39). But if radical realism can identify the specific origins of the most prevalent legitimation stories, it suggests that the most politically salient forms of power may be more concentrated than such theories assume. By tracing ideological narratives back to their sources, radical realism can reveal the disproportionate influence wielded by particular groups or classes. This is grist to the mill of Marxist approaches that analyse power differentials between well-defined social actors, such as workers and capital, say—though extant radical realist studies also show that the categories of classical Marxism need to be complicated in context-sensitive ways. Radical realism's genealogical aspect can challenge the 'death of the author' tendency in Foucauldian theories, showing that powerful agents leave identifiable traces in the ideological realm. In this sense, it offers Marxists a way to reassert the importance of class conflict and material interests against the Foucauldian emphasis on anonymous discourses and micro-powers.

Yet this need not entirely undermine Foucauldian theories. Radical realism still recognises that power manifests in diffuse ways, embedded in everyday practices and institutions. Its goal is to uncover the agents behind the most consequential manifestations, not to deny the ubiquity of capillary power relations. Radical realism acknowledges that while a wide range of relational power dynamics exist, not all are equally important for understanding and challenging dominant social structures. By identifying the key legitimation stories and their origins, radical realism can help distinguish the most politically salient power relations from the background noise of micro-power. I expect the salient structures will often align with the power relations emphasised by Marxist class analysis. Yet this method does not require Marxist priors and, in principle, it may well contradict Marxist expectations: tracing the genealogies of prevalent cultural technes will *test* whether there are significant power cleavages between distinct social group. In this way, radical realism finds a third position between structural and relational approaches to power.

Moreover, by remaining agnostic on ideology's stabilising function, radical realism provides a distinctive rationale for studying ideology that goes beyond the perspectives of both structuralists and culturalists. For structuralists and classical

Marxists, who see material factors as the primary drivers of social reproduction, ideology is often treated as epiphenomenal, a mere reflection of underlying economic conditions (Chibber 2022). For culturalists, ideology is central to maintaining hegemony and securing consent (Hall 1986). Radical realism, in contrast, suggests that the study of ideology matters because it can diagnose power relations, regardless of its role in stabilising the status quo. By tracing the genealogy of legitimation stories, radical realism can uncover the distribution of power and identify the most influential actors, even if these stories are not the main lynchpin of the system. This opens up a new line of inquiry into the significance of ideology for understanding power.

However, there are several open questions about radical realism's ability to deliver on this diagnostic promise. First, tracing the genealogy of legitimation stories is an empirically demanding task that requires extensive historical and sociological research. It remains to be seen whether this approach can be applied systematically across a wide range of cases to build up a comprehensive picture of power relations. Second, even if radical realism can identify the origins of specific legitimation stories, it may not always be clear how to aggregate these findings into a macro-level analysis of power structures. There may be multiple competing narratives with different sources, making it difficult to determine which actors or groups are truly hegemonic. Finally, the relationship between the ideological power revealed by radical realism and other forms of power, such as economic or political power, needs to be further theorised.

Addressing these questions will require both empirical and theoretical work. Extant radical realist detailed empirical case studies are focused on the evaluative function. Further empirical studies applying the radical realist approach to specific legitimation stories and social contexts will reveal the extent of the diagnostic power of this approach. At the same time, engagement with broader debates in social theory can situate radical realism's contributions within the larger landscape of power analysis and explore potential synergies with other perspectives. So the agenda for radical realism set out in this section is two-fold: further theoretical integration with contribution from social theory, and further empirical studies focused on the diagnostic function. Only by grappling with these issues will radical realism manage to make good on its promise to shed new light on the nature and workings of power in society.

Conclusion

Let us recap. I have argued that radical realism, by grounding ideology critique in epistemic rather than moral normativity, can

provide novel insights into the relationship between ideology and political power. Drawing on reliabilist epistemology, I have shown how beliefs shaped by power differentials are often epistemically unwarranted, due to mechanisms such as the influence of motivated reasoning and the suppression of political contestation.

I have also explored how radical realism's genealogical approach to tracing the origins of legitimation stories can serve a valuable diagnostic function, illuminating the distribution of power in society even if ideology does not directly stabilise the status quo. I suggest that this offers a distinctive rationale for studying ideology that goes beyond the perspectives of culturalist or post-structuralist and classical Marxist or structuralist theories of power.

However, I acknowledge that realising radical realism's full potential as a tool for diagnosing power relations will require further work beyond the preliminary methodological ground-clearing done here. Radical realism is in its early days and, to date, most first-order (evaluative) work using this approach relies on existing empirical results (e.g. Rossi & Argenton 2021, Prinz & Rossi 2022, Aytac & Rossi 2023, Cross & Prinz 2023). The next step will require conducting social-scientific research directly guided by the radical realist framework. This will require empirical studies designed to apply the radical realist framework to specific legitimation stories and social contexts. This should also be accompanied by deeper engagement with broader debates in social theory to situate radical realism's contributions within the larger landscape of power analysis. By pursuing this agenda, I believe radical realism can shed new light on the interplay of ideology and power.

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