# Realism Against Legitimacy
## For a Radical, Action-Oriented Political Realism

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**Abstract:**

This article challenges the association between realist methodology and ideals of legitimacy. Many who seek a more "realistic" or "political" approach to political theory replace the familiar orientation towards a state of (perfect) justice with a structurally similar orientation towards a state of (sufficient) legitimacy. As a result, they fail to provide more reliable practical guidance, and wrongly displace radical demands. Rather than orienting action towards any *state of affairs*, I suggest that a more practically useful approach to political theory would directly address *judgments*, by comparing the concrete possibilities for action faced by real political actors.

**Key words:**

realism, legitimacy, ideal/nonideal theory, pragmatism, proceduralism, moderation

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## §1. Introduction

This article challenges the priority often given to ideals of legitimacy by those who seek a more "realistic" or "political" approach to political theory.[1] In replacing justice with legitimacy as the central metric by which regimes are to be judged, political realists and others aim to make political philosophy less "idealized" or "moralistic." Unfortunately, however, substituting one "master concept" (Freeden 2018, 356) for another does not make their theories any more useful to political actors seeking guidance in complex circumstances. Responsible political action requires weighing a *variety* of concerns, not zealous devotion to a single value (see Satkunanandan 2014). As such, granting strong priority to concerns of legitimacy improperly forecloses practical judgment.

My argument is conceived in a realist spirit, and assumes some sympathy with recent critiques of what might be called "ideal justice theory." My primary objective, then, is to challenge the widespread claim that prioritizing legitimacy constitutes a more realistic or politically useful approach. In short, I argue, many realists simply replace the familiar orientation towards a fixed state of (perfect) justice with a structurally similar orientation towards a fixed state of (sufficient) legitimacy. As such, their theories fail to provide more reliable practical guidance.[2]

I also outline a more promising approach for realists to pursue. Rather than orienting action towards any *state of affairs*, I suggest that a more practically useful approach to political theory would directly address *judgments*, by comparing the concrete possibilities for action faced by real political actors. Though I can only offer a preliminary sketch here, this should be sufficient to establish it as a viable alternative methodology for political realism (see also Bagg 2016). And

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[1] This category is quite broad. In particular, I reject the narrow definition of realism in terms of the "autonomy of politics," which is defended by certain realist authors (Burelli 2020; Rossi 2019) and singled out for criticism by opponents (Erman and Möller 2015; Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018). As such, certain authors considered "moralists" by this standard count as "realists" for my purposes (see §3 for further discussion).

[2] Some realists may disavow the aim of practical guidance. Yet for many others, generating practically relevant guidance seems to be a central purpose of (realist) political theory (Ulaş 2020).

along with my critical project, these constructive suggestions support ongoing efforts to redirect realism towards more radical ends (e.g., Finlayson 2017; Prinz 2016; Raekstad 2018).

I first consider a prominent strand of realist thought that grounds the priority of legitimacy in *metanormative* claims about a "distinctively political normativity" (§2). I then turn to *procedural* accounts emphasizing basic liberal-democratic legitimacy as the fairest response to disagreement about more ambitious ideals of justice or morality (§3). Though I build on prior critiques in both cases, my argument is novel in tracing their flaws to an orientation towards states of affairs—an orientation they share with ideal justice theory. By contrast, the "action-oriented" approach I propose in the following section aims to speak directly to particular actions and judgments (§4).

There is one broadly "realist" argument for the priority of legitimacy that adopts something like an action-oriented approach, and I close by considering it (§5). Rather than privileging basic liberal or democratic legitimacy in absolute terms, *moderation* realists argue that defending it is a robust practical priority. Within many contemporary circumstances, they claim, any departures from status-quo norms will risk dangerous escalations of political tension, and must be avoided.

As I demonstrate, however, this conclusion depends upon an incomplete picture of the relevant contexts of action. If we develop a more comprehensive account of the potential actors involved, as well as the constraints and opportunities they face, we cannot conclude that liberal-democratic legitimacy deserves the kind of priority it is given by moderation realists. In addition to defending the possibility of "radical realism," therefore, rebutting their arguments enables me to elaborate the methodology I have sketched in the previous section. Relative to standard accounts, an action-oriented realism offers more responsible and reliable guidance in difficult situations of judgment.

## §2. The metanormative account: legitimacy as a distinctively political demand

Drawing on the work of Raymond Geuss (2008) and Bernard Williams (2005), several scholars have argued that political realism means recognizing the autonomy of politics as a distinctive realm of normative inquiry (see, e.g., Burelli 2020; Hall 2016; Horton 2012; Newey 2010; Rossi 2019; Rossi and Sleat 2014). On this model, political philosophy is not merely applied morality: rather, politics has independent standards of justification. Where "moralist" or "ethics-first" theories seek to "import" moral standards into politics, that is, the standards with which we evaluate political orders must arise from *within* the political context and its signature practices (Sleat 2013b, 63).

On Williams' classic account, for instance, politics is sharply distinguished from brute domination, which is merely a state of war between rulers and ruled. If no legitimation story is offered to subjects, he argues, rule cannot be considered political at all. This need for justification is called the "basic legitimation demand" or BLD. It demonstrates how standards of legitimacy may be said to be immanent in political order, or in the concept of politics itself, and need not be imported from morality or ethics. If it may be deemed a moral principle in some sense, Williams affirms that "it does not represent a morality which is prior to politics" (2005, 7).

This claim about the autonomy of politics is typically seen to justify an emphasis on legitimacy as a primary concern of realist political theory. As Matt Sleat writes, for instance, "a response to the political question need not be just, or fair, or equal… [but] it does have to be legitimate in order to count as an instance of politics rather than mere domination," and thus, "the concept of legitimacy is central to realist thought." (2013b, 48) In particular, legitimacy is often contrasted with *justice*, over which it is said to have priority. In Enzo Rossi's formulation, for instance, "justice tells us how to exercise political power, whereas legitimacy tells us what the exercise of political power is for," and thus, "the latter question should be prior to the former" (2012).

Yet claims about a "distinctive political normativity" have resisted a coherent and compelling interpretation. More specifically, critics charge that realists fail to show how "political normativity is genuinely separate from morality"—at least in any sense that is not "readily admitted by participants on both sides of the debate" (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 764; see also Baderin 2014; Bavister-Gould 2013; Erman and Möller 2015, 2018). Even if we accept the BLD as inherent to politics, this seems only to shift morality back a step: instead of explaining why we should "practice politics in one way rather than another," a moral principle is necessary to explain why we should "practice politics rather than something else" (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 784; see also Erman and Möller 2015, 540–41; Miller 2016a, 162–63; Wendt 2016, 241–45).

Advocates of the metanormative thesis have offered rejoinders (Jubb and Rossi 2015a, 2015b; Sagar 2018). On Edward Hall's account, for instance, Williams never actually claims that we *should* practice politics. The BLD simply describes what states must do whenever they *are* practicing politics—i.e., in their relationship with full members of society—but it has no bearing on their non-political relations with non-members (Hall 2015; see also Sleat 2010, 496–97). If this interpretation is correct, it rescues Williams' view from the charge that it relies upon a tacit moral principle. Yet it robs the account of its ability to provide plausible practical guidance. If we have no reason to "practice politics" towards non-members, after all, we have no reason not to enslave or dominate them—unless, as in liberal societies, full members of society happen find it distasteful. On this interpretation of Williams' account, then, the principle of legitimacy as such raises no objection to slavery and other abhorrent practices (see also Wendt 2016, 236–37).[3]

As Hall notes, this is by design: historically, many slave states have been widely considered legitimate, and Williams' account enables us to avoid "fantastically unhistorical" judgments to the

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[3] Other interpreters of Williams reject the notion that this is a necessary implication of his account (Cross 2020).

contrary. This is fair enough, but still, it is hard to see why this historical observation should have any implications for normative theory, or the practical guidance we often hope to draw from it. At most, this view of legitimacy offers a *partial* accounting of the normative demands on political actors, instructing them to resist abuses of state power that full members of society consider to be intolerable. Yet if slavery and domination are *not* already considered intolerable, Williams' account of legitimacy gives us no normative resources for resisting them. If the aim of a realist political theory is to give practical guidance, therefore, this account falls short. The only conscionable response to slavery is to make its elimination a top priority—even if it is not already intolerable to the non-enslaved, and even if doing so entails destroying regimes that may appear "legitimate" by Williams' standard. If a distinctively "political" normativity says otherwise, it is not a "normativity" that deserves much weight in our actual political decisions.

For these reasons, among others, many who seek more realistic or practically useful approaches to political philosophy are either indifferent to or openly skeptical of the metanormative thesis. Even some of its apparent defenders have recently retreated from it, arguing that it is based on a misreading of Williams, and was never central to the realist project (e.g., Jubb 2019).[4] And though it has often been identified with realism as such, the metanormative thesis is not the only account of why legitimacy must be given priority. In the wider literature advocating more political, realistic, or practically useful approaches to political theory, indeed, it is not even the most common. That distinction belongs to what I call the "procedural" account.

## §3. The procedural account: legitimacy as a requirement of fairness

Procedural arguments for the priority of legitimacy claim that moralistic theorizing about justice fails to take seriously the depth of political disagreement; demanding an unrealistic degree

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[4] Others have not backed down (Burelli 2020; Rossi 2019). I thank Matt Sleat and Rob Jubb for discussion.

of consensus. Given that real people disagree about justice and morality, it would be unfair to impose a particular theory on everyone. At the same time, we must make decisions somehow. These "circumstances of politics" (Waldron 1999) are thought to generate a distinctive "political question": namely, "how we as citizens should proceed in the face of widespread and intractable disagreement over matters of justice" (Mason 2010, 659; see also Larmore 2018, 42; Sleat 2013b, 63). In this context, proceduralists conclude, the only appropriate response is to use a procedure for making substantive decisions that is fair to everyone—or in other words, *legitimate*.

Metanormative realists interpret these distinctively political *circumstances* as giving rise to a distinctively political *normativity*. Others, however, seek to answer the "political question" using normative resources that are avowedly "moral" or "ethical" rather than narrowly "political" (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 768–73). Though Charles Larmore (2018, 29, 42) denies the metanormative thesis, for instance, he maintains that "problems of authority and legitimacy" are "prior" to other questions, and should "constrain what can count… as the ideal of social justice to be pursued." Similarly, David Miller (2016a, 157–60) has sought to rescue Williams' insight from dubious metanormative claims, instead noting similarities between the BLD and Rawls' liberal principle of legitimacy. Though the latter is more "ambitious," he notes, both respond to the "justificatory burden carried by exercises of political power" by demanding that states give acceptable reasons to everyone subjected to their coercion (2016a, 167, 174). For Andrew Mason (2010) and Jeremy Waldron (1999), by contrast, Rawlsian theory does not take the problem of disagreement seriously enough, and thus cannot respond properly to the political question.

Whether friendly or hostile to a Rawlsian framework, all of these procedural approaches understand the task of properly "realistic" or "political" political theory as a response to a stylized set of circumstances designated as distinctively political. In Waldron's influential formulation, for

instance, these circumstances can be analyzed as a "partial coordination game," in which all parties prefer cooperation yet disagree about *which form* it should take (Waldron 1999, 101–5). And when we find ourselves within such political circumstances, it seems intuitive that finding a fair decision-making procedure should be our first priority. As a result, proceduralists conclude, we cannot apply theories of justice and morality "directly to politics," but must first consult intermediate "bridging theories" to determine how these goals may be legitimately pursued (Miller 2016a, 174).

Yet critics have also raised serious concerns about procedural arguments for the priority of legitimacy (Wilson 2019, 75–95). We might think, for one, that it is unwise to make clear practical recommendations on the basis of a stylized set of circumstances. In particular, it is unclear whether the circumstances facing political actors can faithfully be described in terms of a partial coordination game. There is always a status quo, and those most satisfied with it enjoy a structural advantage over those who feel the "need" for collective action more urgently. Especially if the latter are in the minority, it is hard to see how majority rule treats them equally (see Bagg 2018c).

More broadly, the proceduralist's inference to the priority of legitimate procedures becomes much less intuitive as soon as we move beyond stylized circumstances and admit more information about the actual situations of judgment under consideration (Raz 1998, 45–46). In contexts characterized by vastly unequal power, for instance, it is hardly obvious that Waldron's simple majoritarianism represents the fairest way of resolving disputes; much less that majority decisions deserve absolute priority when they conflict with other deeply held principles. It is no clearer, moreover, which institutions are actually "majoritarian" in a representative democracy comprising millions of federally distributed citizens such as the United States. Given these facts of real politics, it seems, there is simply nothing neutral or obviously fair about majority rule at the nation-state level. In other words, there may be just as much disagreement about legitimate procedures as there

is about "substantive" principles of justice, such that the former are no "better suited… to resolving disagreements" than the latter (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 768).

The procedural approaches we have examined can thus be understood as a sequence of proposals to expand the scope of permissible disagreement, each of which faces a similar objection from the next. First, theorists making ambitious demands about justice, such as Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, are criticized by "political liberals" like Larmore and Miller—and perhaps even the later Rawls himself, in *Political Liberalism*—for failing to account for the extent of disagreement about these substantive issues. The less demanding alternative they offer—i.e., the liberal principle of legitimacy—is then criticized on similar grounds by theorists such as Mason and Waldron, who seek to replace it with an even more basic, fully procedural, conception of legitimacy. Meanwhile, their account is still not basic enough for Williams, whose BLD contains few (if any) absolute requirements, and is allowed instead to vary widely between historical contexts.

In Sleat's view, finally, even Williams depends on an implausible level of consensus (2013b, 112–29). Because the BLD demands that all citizens be offered acceptable justifications, Sleat argues that it remains hostage to unrealistic assumptions about which justifications people will find acceptable. Thus, even Williams' avowedly minimalistic standard would appear to classify all hitherto existing political orders as illegitimate—precisely the kind of "unhistorical" judgment he sought to avoid. Sleat, by contrast, maintains that all liberal polities will contain "nonliberal persons" who must be coerced *without* being offered justifications they can accept. Few liberals are truly willing to face this reality, which Sleat makes central to his account (Sleat 2013a).

In a sense, this represents the logical conclusion of the procedural realist's case for legitimacy, and Sleat deserves praise for his comprehensiveness in this regard. Though liberal states will never be able to offer everyone a justification they can accept, he acknowledges, they can and should

serve as "restrained masters" over those they inevitably dominate. His account thus avoids requiring the unrealistic levels of consensus that haunted each preceding form of proceduralism.

In its place, however, his account substitutes a different vice. As the scope of permissible disagreement expands, the requirements of legitimacy are weakened, and its claim to practical priority simply loses plausibility. If legitimacy is really such a minimal standard, in other words, it is far from clear why we ought to pursue it at the expense of other worthy normative goals. It is implausible, for instance, that basic legitimacy should always take priority over substantive ends like fighting racial and economic inequality or mitigating the effects of climate change. In retaining the formal structure of procedural legitimacy while insisting that the resulting standard be realistically achievable, it seems, Sleat backs himself into an unattractively quietistic corner.

As a result, the foregoing sequence of procedural realisms may seem to vindicate a common criticism of realistic approaches. From Rawls through Larmore and Waldron to Williams and Sleat, we observe an inverse relationship between the "ambitiousness" of an ideal and the "realism" of its demands, such that the logical endpoint of the quest for a realist account of legitimacy appears to be Sleat's ultra-minimalism. We might conclude with realism's critics, then, that it is inherently conservative, reflecting unnecessary concessions to contingent realities (Estlund 2011, 2014).

In my view, however, this supposed tradeoff between realism and ambition depends almost entirely on the assumption that political ideals must be oriented towards just or legitimate *states of affairs*. If we orient our ideals towards particular *judgments*, by contrast, we can develop political theories that are simultaneously ambitious and realistic—thereby generating more useful and reliable practical guidance for real political actors. Or so I shall argue in the following section.

## §4. An action-oriented model of political realism

On standard models of contemporary political philosophy, political ideals are meant to assess the normative justification of entire social systems or political regimes. They are often used to generate scalar evaluations and practical guidance in nonideal contexts as well, but such "applied" judgments are typically derivative of—or otherwise dependent upon—a prior picture of *full* justice or legitimacy. In various ways, therefore, the guidance offered by many different political theories is oriented towards some specific state of affairs. In this section, I show how this orientation causes trouble for two forms of ideal justice theory, prompting realist doubts about their ability to provide reliable practical guidance. I then show that realist accounts of legitimacy exhibit a similar orientation, concluding that if we are moved by realist critiques of ideal justice theory, we ought to be skeptical of prominent realist alternatives as well. Finally, I sketch a more promising approach to realist political theory, which addresses concrete actions and judgments directly, and therefore avoids the troublesome implications of an orientation towards states of affairs.

### §4.1. Ideal justice theory: two orientations towards states of affairs

For many ideal justice theorists, a regime is fully just when its political institutions, social structure, and economic distribution meet certain conditions. Regimes should therefore be evaluated on the basis of how closely they approximate this state of full justice, and political action should be oriented towards attaining it. Williams labels this approach "enactment" moralism, meaning that "political theory formulates principles, concepts, ideals, and values; and politics… seeks to express these in political action" (2005, 1). For Williams, the paradigmatic example is utilitarianism, but Rawls' *Theory of Justice* is often read along similar lines—i.e., as an ideally just set of institutional arrangements, which we must strive to achieve (Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012; Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; Phillips 1985; Sreenivasan 2012).

As critics have noted, however, such "transcendental" ideals are neither necessary nor sufficient for comparing concrete states of affairs (Sen 2009). Indeed, they may even yield actively harmful guidance. As Jacob Barrett notes, for instance, "making institutional arrangements more similar to the ideal can, due to combinatorial complexity, result in a decrease in justice, or, due to transitional complexity, constitute progress away from the ideal" (2020, 112; see also Wiens 2015). In encouraging us to strive for a distant state of affairs, enactment moralisms tend to obscure these complex social dynamics, thereby leading us to ignore serious practical tradeoffs, as well as the unintended consequences of our actions (Farrelly 2007; Schmidtz 2011). They may urge us to pursue ideals that no real-world agent could responsibly pursue (Huemer 2016, 226–28).

Most defenders of ideal justice theory are willing to accept this much (Estlund 2019; Simmons 2010; Stemplowska 2008; Swift 2008; Valentini 2009). As Ingrid Robeyns puts it, ideal theorists must reject the temptation to "play with real-life examples," which creates the "false impression" that their ideals can be applied directly in nonideal circumstances (2008, 360). Instead, they must accept that highly complex nonideal bridging theories are required to generate practical guidance, and that ideal theory constitutes "only a small fraction of all the work that needs to be done" (2008, 352). Nevertheless, precious few actually pursue something called nonideal theory in practice, and even fewer do so on the model implied by ideal theorists: i.e., as a transitional account of the action required to reach or approximate a pre-determined ideal (2008, 348; see also Frazer 2016).[5]

It is not hard to understand why. Given the vast distance between contemporary realities and the "fully just" regimes imagined by ideal theorists, little can be said with certainty—either about the consequences of implementing those regimes, or about the best way of reaching them (Barrett 2020, 108–9). Indeed, the further we get from the sort of regimes and contexts we are familiar

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[5] A notable exception here is Shelby (2007)

with, the more speculative and uncertain our predictions become. As a result, many critics push their critique even further, doubting whether ideal theory properly plays *any* role in practical guidance whatsoever (Gaus 2016; Goodhart 2018; Levy 2016; Schmidtz 2016; Wiens 2015). As Barrett puts it, "we cannot identify the ideal institutional arrangement with sufficient confidence to warrant pursuing it at the expense of short-term justice. And even if we could, we would still lack the epistemic wherewithal to identify changes to our current arrangement that would constitute progress toward it with this requisite degree of confidence." (Barrett 2020, 114–15)

I do not adjudicate this dispute here. As noted, I assume some sympathy with recent criticisms of ideal justice theory's ability to provide practical guidance. My aim in this article, rather, is to cast doubt on the prospect of providing more reliable guidance by striving for legitimacy rather than justice. Before turning back to realist arguments for prioritizing legitimacy, however, we must examine a second variety of ideal justice theory, which might seem to escape these criticisms.

On these accounts, most basically, the presence of justice depends on the conduct of agents, rather than the achievement of specific outcomes. Robert Nozick objected to Rawls' "patterned" account of justice as an "end-state," for instance, favoring a "historical entitlement" account based on justice in transfer instead (1974). More recently, Elizabeth Anderson has criticized "luck egalitarians" for seeing justice a particular distributive state of affairs (1999). Instead, she favors a "relational" approach, whereby "justice as an evaluation applied to states of affairs is entirely derivative of justice as an appraisal of the conduct of agents" (Anderson 2010, 5, see also 2009).

As Robert Jubb (2016) points out, this reflects broader disputes between consequentialist and deontological approaches to normative reasoning. Any theory that evaluates action on the basis of its teleological tendency to produce particular outcomes or maximize certain values, he argues, will exhibit objectionable features of consequentialism—even if it uses deontological reasoning to

decide which outcomes to strive for. On a more thoroughly deontological model, by contrast, a regime is just only if everyone within it follows certain norms of right conduct. In Jubb's terms, therefore, such theories articulate "norms" rather than "evaluations." Similarly, Williams (2005, 1) understands them as exhibiting a "structural" form of moralism, in which "theory lays down moral conditions of co-existence under power, conditions in which power can be justly exercised."

Such "structural" ideals do not outline any specific pattern of distribution or substantive outcomes, which political actors must strive to reach, and this distinguishes them from the sort of "enactment" ideals discussed above. In my view, however, they are ultimately subject to many of the same critiques. They are still oriented towards a distant state of perfect justice, in which every agent has fulfilled their duties or behaved rightly. And given the immense complexity of social life, the obstacles they face in generating sound practical guidance are no less daunting.

On the strictest deontological interpretation, of course, structural ideals do not seek to guide action towards the achievement of a state of perfect justice: they simply instruct people to obey certain norms of right conduct, and can be considered action-guiding in that respect (North 2016). In many cases, however—when others behave unjustly, perhaps—unilaterally following norms of just behavior will have obviously harmful effects. A common worry about deliberative ideals, for instance, is that when well-meaning actors abide by norms of sincerity and reciprocity, this simply facilitates domination by the unscrupulous (Bagg 2018b; Shapiro 2017; Young 2001).

Structural ideals owe their plausibility to the thought that a society in which *everyone* followed moral norms would enable the just exercise of power. Yet absent "full compliance," obeying those norms does no such thing. As realist critics point out, political contexts are "strategic" rather than "parametric," meaning that success requires the cooperation of others (Hope 2016, 387; Huemer 2016, 226–28; Schmidtz 2016, 6; Stemplowska 2016, 276–77). This poses a dilemma for structural

ideals: if they endorse unilateral compliance despite widespread noncompliance, they will often yield deeply counterintuitive guidance. If not, however, they simply generate no guidance at all. This explains why, despite explicitly disavowing the aim of achieving specific outcomes through political action, structural ideals should nevertheless be understood as oriented towards states of affairs. Since they generate plausible practical guidance only within a state of perfect justice, they are inextricably linked to, oriented towards, and perhaps even derivative of that state.

As with enactment ideals, defenders of structural ideals usually accept that they are incapable of providing reliable practical guidance under nonideal conditions. Some renounce the project of giving relevant practical guidance altogether (Cohen 2003). More frequently, they make a similar call for nonideal bridging theories, which could outline the best norms to follow under conditions of partial compliance (Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; Simmons 2010). Perhaps the most natural approach here is to articulate the conditions in which full compliance would be possible—or, at least, in which unilateral compliance would not be deeply counterintuitive—and then to orient political action towards the achievement of these conditions. In response to criticisms along these lines, for instance, many deliberative democrats now accept that non-deliberative tactics may be required to bring about a more purely deliberative politics (Fung 2005; Mansbridge et al. 2010). Yet clearly, this only reproduces the challenges facing enactment theories. And even if they reject a straightforwardly teleological orientation towards particular outcomes, meanwhile, those who articulate nonideal norms for responding to noncompliance cannot entirely ignore the realm of consequences. It is the obviously negative effects of unilateral compliance, after all, which make it so counterintuitive. As such, they must still face the obstacles posed by social complexity.

Of course, not everyone accepts these critiques of ideal justice theory. Yet my argument here is primarily directed at those who do—and among this audience, many have turned to legitimacy

as a more promising target for theorization. In at least one crucial respect, however, such accounts fail to improve upon ideal theories of justice. Because they retain an orientation towards states of affairs, I argue, realist theories of legitimacy cannot provide more reliable practical guidance.

*§4.2. Realism as legitimacy: another orientation towards states of affairs*

We are now in a better position to understand this claim. For some realist proponents of the priority of legitimacy, a regime is (sufficiently) legitimate if it implements certain institutions. Waldron, for instance, defines legitimacy in terms of majoritarian elections. The resulting concept of legitimacy thus mirrors the concept of justice employed by enactment moralists, and this brand of "enactment realism" can expect to face parallel objections. For others, meanwhile, a regime is legitimate if and only if all of the relevant agents abide by certain norms. Most of the realists we have examined, for instance, understand legitimacy at least partly in terms of the justifications offered to the subjects of state coercion. We can understand this view as a form of "structural realism," and again, we can expect it to face worries mirroring those facing structural moralism.

Because ideals of legitimacy are typically less demanding than ideals of justice, of course, the states of affairs targeted by both enactment and structural realists will be marginally closer to reality than those targeted by their moralist counterparts. Because each realist theory of legitimacy is still oriented towards *some* state of affairs, however—deriving the appropriate action in any given circumstances from the requirements of (sufficient) legitimacy rather than those of (perfect) justice—its practical guidance will be no more reliable. In short, this exchange of one "master concept" for another does little to resolve the underlying challenge of providing reliable practical guidance in the face of massive social and political complexity.

We may begin at the most "ambitious" end of the realist spectrum, with those who require significant public justification or deliberation as a condition of legitimacy. Whether this

requirement is conceived as a set of institutions that must be implemented, a set of norms that must be followed, or some combination of the two, it is usually quite distant from current realities. As a result, those seeking guidance will confront the same epistemic hurdles that limit our ability to discern which present actions are most conducive to distant ideals of justice. At best, they will require the use of extremely complex bridging theories to translate the requirements of the ideal to nonideal circumstances.[6] As such, this approach makes no clear advance over ideal justice theory.

Of course, less ambitious theories of legitimacy may appear more promising. Rather than asking us to discern which action is most likely to yield a deliberative utopia, Waldron appears to demand only that we defend certain minimal procedures. In fact, however, his account is no less dependent on idealizations, and his guidance is no more plausible. Indeed, where ideal theorists generally admit the folly of applying ideal justice theory directly to real world cases, Waldron claims the mantle of "*political* political theory" (2016), and seeks to do just that. On the basis of his observation that majority decisions treat everyone equally in the context of partial coordination games, for instance, he argues that we must always oppose counter-majoritarian measures like judicial review—no matter how unjust or shortsighted the majority decision appears (1999, 2005).

As I suggested above, however, it is rather dubious to draw such concrete practical inferences from the intuitions generated by a stylized model. In the real world, some groups are vastly favored by the status quo, and so the metaphor of a partial coordination game is not very apt (Bagg 2018c). Thanks to agenda control, ideology, and other distortions enabled by the indeterminacies inherent to all collective choice procedures, meanwhile, the results of "majoritarian" elections are often predictably biased in favor of the interests of wealthy elites and other privileged groups (Achen and Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Lukes 1974; Riker 1982). In order to responsibly apply such

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[6] As suggested above, we can understand recent efforts to incorporate power and interests into deliberative theory in this light. For contrasting critiques of these efforts, see Medearis (2015, 37–44) and Owen and Smith (2015).

procedural theories of legitimacy in practice, we must employ a bridging theory to account for these deviations from the stylized circumstances that motivate their recommendations (Bagg n.d.).

That said, there are certain realist accounts—like those of Williams and Sleat, for instance—which do not appear to rely on *any* such idealizations, and thus require no bridging theories. In such cases, practical guidance *can* be straightforwardly derived from their proposed requirements of legitimacy. Yet this is only because the requirements in question are even less demanding. Such theories thus leave us in precisely the sort of unattractively quietistic corner that Williams and Sleat are frequently accused of occupying. At this most minimalistic end of the spectrum, in sum, the practical requirements of legitimacy are perfectly clear, yet there is no longer any reason to prioritize them over other concerns. So long as we remain on the terrain of legitimacy, in other words, the tradeoff between realism and ambition appears insurmountable.

In my view, of course, occupying this terrain is the crucial mistake. On the standard model shared by ideal theories of justice and realist theories of legitimacy, more specifically, the point of a political theory is to assess the justification of entire social systems and political regimes. The precise target may be a set of political institutions, a pattern of economic distribution, or the joint product of many agents acting rightly. Insofar as a theory aims to be a *political* theory, however, it must be oriented towards the justice or legitimacy of the system as a whole. And this orientation towards holistic states of affairs has a number of important and under-appreciated consequences.

To make such systemic analysis tractable, most basically, we must limit our scope to certain pre-determined features of the social systems in question. Before assessing the justification of any *particular* regime, that is, we must declare that certain elements of *all* social systems have unique normative significance or priority, as requirements of justice or legitimacy. In particular, realist accounts of legitimacy tend to adopt three scope-limiting assumptions. First, each theory positions

*coercion* as the primary politically relevant form of power in need of justification. Second, more specifically, each focuses on justifying the use of coercion by the *state*. And third, each theory conceives the legitimacy of a regime in terms of the degree to which state coercion can be understood as consistent with the *agency* or will of those subjected to it. In other words, justifying political power is a matter of ensuring that it is, in some sense, acceptable to its subjects.

The realists we have examined are hardly alone in making these assumptions: on the contrary, they are often taken as definitive of political philosophy itself (Valentini 2009, 335). In my view, however, we ought to be skeptical of all three. As critical theorists have long emphasized, for one, there is no reason to treat coercion as uniquely deserving of political concern (Hayward 2000; Lukes 1974). In outlining his alternative vision of realist liberalism, therefore, Andy Sabl surmises that "an obsessive focus on the role of coercion… reflects either a fantasy of autonomy… or an overly defensive realist reaction to such a fantasy"—and that realists ought to discard it along with the "philosophical fairy tale" of autonomy itself (2017, 376). As Michael Freeden notes, meanwhile, the grounds are equally slim for reducing politics to the state—a choice that obscures "the horizontal and substate political practices in any society" (2018, 357). Indeed, Sabl denies the very existence of "the State *qua* unified entity embodying society's political identity and normative position" (2017, 371). And just as there is no good excuse for regarding state coercion as singularly dangerous, finally, there are persuasive reasons to doubt that individual agency—its inverse—is a singularly valuable source of justification or legitimacy (Bagg 2018a; Coole 2005; Meehan 2017).

It is beyond the scope of this article to outline my objections to these assumptions in full. Rather, my point is simply that many realists retain key assumptions from the ideal theories of justice they have sought to transcend—and by showing that we have reason to question those assumptions, I have sought to clear the way for an alternative model of political realism.

*§4.3. Realism against legitimacy: an orientation towards judgment and action*

What is this alternative? As I have suggested, the key to escaping persistent tradeoffs between realism and ambition lies in an orientation towards the judgments and actions of particular agents, rather than the justification of entire social systems or political regimes. This need not prevent us from talking about such systems, or the ideals of justice and legitimacy typically used to assess them.[7] I simply insist that we center the instrumental *function* such ideals will play—for particular agents facing particular choices—and formulate them with that function clearly in mind.

Different ideals, after all, are useful in different contexts. The standard of legitimacy we use to evaluate the wisdom of engaging in nonviolent protest, for instance, will differ substantially from the one we should use in deciding whether to begin an armed rebellion (see Bagg and Knight 2014; Buchanan 2018). Similarly, different ideals will be useful to different agents. A community leader responding to police violence, for instance, will need different criteria than a candidate choosing how to campaign, or a military leader deciding whether to intervene to prevent an authoritarian party from taking power. In addition to serving as *private* heuristics to guide individual decision-making, finally, principles of legitimacy may also serve as *public* commitments to which political actors may be held accountable, or *legal* rules to be interpreted juridically—such as a condition of entry to the EU, or a UN ruling on permissible humanitarian intervention.

The contingency and context-dependence demanded by this approach chafes against a deep-seated philosophical inclination to get to the *bottom* of things: to uncover a universal standard for assessing the legitimacy of regimes, for instance, from which we may derive guidance about protest, rebellion, and international rules. Nevertheless, the widespread call for more realistic and practically useful approaches to political theory suggests that there is already significant frustration

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[7] This distinguishes my approach from extreme forms of "anti-theory" that totally reject the use of general principles (see Hämäläinen 2009). Hämäläinen's own preferred "instrumental" attitude toward theories is similar to mine.

with this abstracting, universalizing approach. Though I cannot make a decisive argument against that inclination, therefore, this section explores what happens if we decline to follow it. What does political theory look like if we orient it directly to the judgments political actors must make?

This suggestion is hardly unprecedented. Classical realists like Machiavelli have long sought to articulate useful heuristics rather than ideal states of affairs. Meanwhile, pragmatists like Dewey have approached normative theorizing in very similar terms (Anderson 2014). Most recently, self-proclaimed realists who object to Williams' focus on maintaining legitimate *order* have sought to emphasize future-oriented *action* instead (Phulwani 2016, 2019; Sabl 2001). Some have even seen a more radical, action-oriented model in the work of Geuss (Philp 2010; Prinz 2016; Thaler 2018). Though his perspective is often assimilated to that of Williams—and there are certainly parallels— Geuss (2008) doubts the usefulness of legitimacy as a central normative category, observing that beliefs about legitimacy "are often as confused, potentially contradictory, incomplete, and pliable as anything else" (36). Instead, "political philosophy must recognise that politics is in the first instance about action and the contexts of action, not about mere beliefs or propositions" (11).

My own proposal is in this spirit, merging realist and pragmatist concerns (see Bagg 2016). Instead of working backwards from a hypothetical state of full justice or legitimacy to derive an appropriate response to the non-ideal circumstances we actually face, I suggest that we might generate more reliable practical guidance by working forwards from those circumstances. Simply put, we ask: which of our available options seems like the best bet, all things considered? Focusing on a particular political agent, more specifically—whether it is an individual, a pressure group, a political party, or a state—we try to sketch out the most relevant choices and constraints it faces. We then predict the likely consequences of each choice, accounting for genuine uncertainty as best we can, and assess the overall relative desirability of these possible future pathways.

Crucially, this comparison is made *directly* and *holistically*, in view of our overall normative sensibilities, and not as the application of a higher-order principle.[8] These holistic judgments are meant to incorporate all of the normative concerns we accept as relevant within the situation at hand—whether conceived as "internal" or "external" reasons. And they form the basic data for an inductive process of theory construction, the results of which are normative heuristics that may also be conceived in either subjectivist or objectivist terms. Drawing on our experience of how our prior judgments have turned out, as well as any insights we may glean from history and social science, we generalize from our particular judgments to construct broader heuristics that are relevant across many circumstances. Political actors often face dilemmas with certain recurring features, and thus find themselves in need of reliable criteria for navigating those difficult choices. On my account, that is where theory steps in. In short, an action-oriented political realism articulates heuristics for action that might help various actors make recurring political choices.

In some cases, these heuristics may have a fairly narrow scope, applying only to a specific set of circumstances. If so, they may generate relatively precise rules for judgment. A community leader might create a decision-tree for responding to incidents of police violence, for instance, grounded in the experiences of those in similar contexts (see, e.g., Stout 2012). And if following these rules reliably helps her achieve her normative aims—i.e., if the guidance they generate generally accords with her overall normative sensibility—they serve as an action-oriented theory.[9]

Perhaps of greater interest to most political theorists, however, are heuristics with a broader scope. For example, a theory of campaign ethics might provide guidelines for how to engage competitively in the rough-and-tumble world of electoral politics, without undermining the very

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[8] The idea that comparative judgments do not require direction from higher-order ideals is familiar from Sen (2009). Though my approach is also comparative, it differs in comparing *actions* rather than *states of affairs*.

[9] Again: by normative aims, I mean any of the normative reasons we perceive ourselves to have. Insofar as we aim to fulfil our (political) duties and/or serve the interests of others, action-oriented theories help us do so effectively.

democratic values that justify the practice of elections in the first place (Bagg and Tranvik 2019). Similarly, a theory of militant democracy might provide guidelines for how state actors can prevent internal threats to democratic stability—and how to respond when they materialize—in ways that do not themselves threaten democratic stability (Kirshner 2014; Schedler 2020). Such mid-range theories will still have little to say about many political questions, such as the proper tax rate or healthcare system, but they do provide relatively clear guidance to those facing certain important and recurring dilemmas. And though this guidance will rarely be as simple or precise as a decision tree, mid-range theories can still highlight specific problems and recommend particular solutions.

Finally, we can also develop action-oriented theories at even higher levels of generality. For instance, an action-oriented realist might aim to outline a set of goals to guide the development of state policy within 21$^{st}$ century capitalist democracies (Bagg Forthcoming). Given its extraordinary breadth of scope, of course, any heuristics generated by such a theory must remain quite general, leaving a great deal of room for further empirical inquiry, contextual judgment, and revision. Rather than claiming to compel acceptance by laws of deductive inference, action-oriented theories function as hypotheses. If they employ accurate empirical premises, plausible normative intuitions, and sound arguments, they will prove useful to people who seek reliable guidance in making difficult political judgments. If not, they will not. And though they refrain from providing strict or precise rules, out of respect for the vast uncertainty of social life, such highly general heuristics can still serve to focus our ameliorative attention and shape our judgment in significant ways.

In this way, an action-oriented approach manages to avoid persistent tradeoffs between realism and ambition. On the one hand, theories oriented towards distant states of affairs will have trouble giving reliable guidance. If they are presumed to apply directly to practice, such theories will often generate guidance that is obviously harmful or counterproductive. If not, however, they simply

generate no guidance at all. Either way, ambition comes at the cost of realism. On the other hand, less ambitious theories of legitimacy can claim to escape this fate only by orienting practical guidance towards states of affairs that are very nearby, thus sacrificing ambition. So long as they aim at the justification of entire social systems or regimes, political theories must accept one (or both) of these shortcomings, and will therefore fail to provide reliable guidance.

By starting from where we are rather than where we want to end up, by contrast, an action-oriented approach enables us to be realistic without sacrificing ambition. To be clear, it does not achieve this feat by escaping or ignoring the vast uncertainty involved in predicting complex social dynamics. In focusing squarely on the concrete choices that are actually available to specific political agents, rather, the action-oriented approach addresses that uncertainty head-on. More specifically, it minimizes the obstacles that uncertainty poses for the project of general theorizing, by making use of an obvious epistemic asymmetry. Though our empirical knowledge and predictive accuracy are never perfect, in short, the epistemic challenges we face grow ever larger as our time horizon extends further into the future (Barrett 2020).

In light of this, we may compare the two processes for generating practical guidance more directly. When using conventional ideals of justice and legitimacy, we evaluate potential choices with reference to the likelihood that they will help to bring about a particular set of institutional arrangements or coordinated behaviors. Generating reliable guidance thus depends on our ability not only to assess the desirability of that distant state of affairs, but also to identify the transitional path most likely to realize it. Both elements of the theory must be developed with a relatively high degree of specificity, and if either is mistaken, the practical guidance it generates is likely to be wrong. Given that our predictive accuracy decreases as we move further into the future—and as the effects of predictive errors multiply—this does not bode well for the reliability of that guidance.

On an action-oriented approach, by contrast, we need not develop an ideal state of affairs in any detail, nor make any tenuous predictions about which course of action will get us there. Rather than choosing the option that seems most likely to bring about a distant state of affairs, we choose the one whose foreseeable consequences appear best, on the whole, relative to the other available options. We do have to make predictions about the likely outcomes of the salient choices we face, therefore, but we are able to internalize the uncertainty involved in these predictions, making it a central part of the process of judgment. In evaluating the relative desirability of the options we have, in other words, we may place greater weight on outcomes we have greater certainty about, while discounting our more speculative projections about the distant future. In response to the vast uncertainty of social life, we ground our judgments in our areas of greatest *relative* certainty.

This is not possible on an approach that is oriented towards a state of ideal justice or sufficient legitimacy, which necessarily anchors our reflections about particular judgments in a relatively precise set of conditions or requirements that must be achieved or approximated. By unmooring ourselves from this fixed endpoint and anchoring ourselves instead in the possibilities of the present, we minimize the uncertainty we must face, and maximize the reliability of our guidance.

As noted, a full elaboration, defense, and application of this model must await future work. In this preliminary sketch, however, I hope to have sharpened my critique of realist arguments for prioritizing legitimacy by establishing the viability of an alternative realist methodology. Because it speaks directly to practice—evaluating the concrete options of particular agents—this model promises more reliable guidance than is possible with a focus on the legitimacy of a social system or political regime as a whole. At the same time, it is perfectly friendly to traditional "realist" goals like maintaining order, peace, and procedural legitimacy. Since their collapse threatens such disastrous consequences, protecting these achievements will often be the wisest course of action.

As I argue in the final section, however, there may also be contexts in which our best option, all things considered, is to agitate for radical transformations of the status quo—including, at the limit, by making strategic sacrifices of basic liberal-democratic legitimacy. Despite its clear importance, that is, we need not understand legitimate order as any more *political* or *practically necessary* than other demands, nor grant it normative priority as a matter of principle. On the contrary, I claim, radical goals like unconditional basic income or prison abolition can also be "realist" demands—just so long as we clearly connect them to concrete situations in which they could plausibly (and non-counterproductively) inform our action (see McKean 2016; Thaler 2018).

## §5. The moderation account: legitimacy as a pragmatic necessity

To illustrate this point, I turn to a third realist argument for the priority of legitimacy, which I call the "moderation" account. On this account, "prioritizing legitimacy" is a practical heuristic that opposes any challenge to status-quo liberal-democratic norms and institutions—at least under certain widespread conditions—even when the risks appear minor. The reasoning for this can be understood in terms of two key premises: (a) avoiding the collapse of liberal democracy is more important than any other goals we have; and (b) opposing challenges to status-quo liberal-democratic norms and institutions is the best way to preserve the stability of liberal democracy.

Since these arguments are pragmatic and aimed at specific contexts of judgment, they can be understood to employ something like the action-oriented method I have outlined. Examining the moderation account thus enables me to further elaborate that method. In positing an association between realist methods and the priority of basic legitimacy over radical demands, meanwhile, this account poses an important objection to my substantive claim that this association is illusory. As such, my discussion of moderation realists also allows me to refute this objection, and thereby to defend the possibility of radical forms of realism. Indeed, the substantive and methodological aims

of this section are intimately related. In short, I argue, moderation realists give unreliable practical guidance because they ignore important features of the context of action they consider, and thus fail to comprehensively realize the demands of the action-oriented model. I do not conclude from this that realists *must* be radicals, but I do aim to establish that they *can* be.[10]

The basic claim of moderation realists is that averting dangerous cycles of polarization and backlash requires subordinating radical aims to the protection of status-quo liberal-democratic norms and institutions—even if the status quo is significantly unjust (Galston 2018; Mounk 2018). Given the dangers of authoritarianism on both political extremes, it is claimed, responsible political actors of any persuasion must throw their weight behind centrists and moderates, at least until the "immediate" threats to democratic stability are defeated (Frum 2019). Failure to compromise will only fan the flames of polarization, making it harder to oppose authoritarian backsliding (Graham and Svolik 2020). Often, suppression of radical goals is seen as especially urgent on issues of identity and migration. David Miller (2016b) and William Galston (2018), for instance, argue that cultural elites must scale back cosmopolitan ambitions in recognition of the limited capacity of "ordinary" people to accept rapid changes to their national identity.[11]

In broad strokes, these arguments appear to follow the method outlined above: instead of articulating requirements for full justice or legitimacy, they begin with a concrete situation of judgment facing political leaders, and proceed by comparing the likely outcomes of alternative actions. Moreover, their key predictions are compelling. History and social science provide ample evidence that polarization and ethnocentric nationalism can facilitate democratic breakdown

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[10] As noted, this reinforces arguments made by other "radical" realists (Finlayson 2017; Mantena 2012; Phulwani 2016; Prinz 2016; Raekstad 2018). However, many liberal realists also reject the association between a realistic methodology and substantively minimal demands (Levy 2016, 330–32; Sabl 2017).

[11] In Miller's case, this fits naturally with the more general principled claim (examined above) that schemes of justice must be constrained by what democratic citizens can plausibly accept (see also Miller 2013) For Galston, the argument is more thoroughly pragmatic: averting democratic breakdown requires compromise with attitudes disdained by elites as "bigoted" or "intolerant."

(Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Thus, there is clearly something valuable—and distinctively "realist"—about these warnings. All things equal, polarization and hyper-partisanship do threaten democratic stability, and the dangers of popular backlash are all too real.

All things are never equal, however, and the concerns of moderation realists cannot be treated as decisive. In order to generate reliable guidance, rather, we must weigh them against others. Once again, then, the "basic legitimacy" proffered by those who claim to represent the "realist" view fails to merit the absolute priority they grant it. For one, there may be good reasons to doubt premise (a) of the moderation realists' argument: i.e., that preserving the stability of liberal democracy is weightier than other goals. Here, however, I accept premise (a) and focus instead on objections to premise (b): i.e., that refusing to challenge status-quo liberal-democratic norms and institutions is the best way to preserve the overall, long-term stability of liberal democracy.

Consider, to begin with, that limited popular patience for mass immigration is hardly the only relevant constraint facing those making border policy. As David Watkins (2018) points out, for instance, global economic forces reliably create intense pressures for cross-border migration, and in many cases, political leaders have strong incentives to allow it—to satisfy business or diplomatic interests, perhaps—even if it means ignoring majority opinion and/or turning a blind eye to illicit migration flows (Bacon 2008; Piketty 2020, 1022–23). This constraint is no less real or significant, but it is typically ignored by moderation realists. As Watkins observes, indeed, even many advocates of open borders simply accept that realism implies limits on migration flows, and thus defend their commitments on explicitly "idealist" or "utopian" grounds instead.

A more comprehensive employment of the action-oriented approach, however, could lead us to embrace such radical goals on perfectly "realist" grounds. Domestic opposition to immigration may be strong, but is it really a more permanent condition than war, climate change, creative

destruction, and other drivers of migration? If not, persuading citizens of wealthy nations to accept more migrants may actually be the *most realistic* way of resolving these persistent tensions. This becomes even clearer if we reject the implicit focus of much political philosophy on the choices facing statesmen, and instead consider those facing activists and organizers (Phulwani 2016, 2019). After all, persuading ordinary citizens is the primary vector of change available to such non-state actors. If we truly account for all relevant constraints and potential actors, it seems, radical solutions may appear as the most realistic answers to the knot of issues we face.

A similar argument applies to the broader claim that compromise is necessary to prevent polarization and democratic backsliding. Again, these dangers are distressingly real, and we must account for them in any comprehensive judgment. Yet here too, moderation realists lead us astray in emphasizing it to the exclusion of others. Once we have a more complete picture of the context of action we face, we may find that compromise is not a particularly realistic response after all.

When faced with opponents who will degrade democracy regardless of one's own actions, for one, unilateral disarmament will only yield further deterioration of liberal-democratic norms and institutions (Bagg and Tranvik 2019; Schedler 2020). Think of Frederick Douglass' (2016, 207) call for "the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake" in facing the intransigence of the American slave power—rather than the "gentle shower" of "convincing argument"—or Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1993, 842) denunciation of "white moderates" a century later. Douglass and King were non-state actors, of course, but the political leaders most influenced by their appeals—Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson, respectively—also realized eventually that advancing democracy required the abandonment of compromise in favor of active polarization. In the face of intransigent anti-democratic opponents, it seems, polarizing tactics may actually *promote* the long-term stability of liberal democracy (for contemporary arguments, see Faris 2018; Keck 2020).

Even if one's opponents are not so intransigent, moreover, action-oriented realists may still view compromise as inadequate. In particular, if preserving the status quo will only intensify the tensions we seek to address—as with global migration flows—then doing so is not a particularly realistic strategy. For instance, many believe that maintaining trends such as deepening inequality, declining unions, and growing oligarchic power will only strengthen the appeal of authoritarian populism (e.g., Rodrik 2018). If we accept this diagnosis, moderation and compromise—even if possible—would at best only postpone more serious crises (Streeck 2014). Truly weakening the forces contributing to crisis, by contrast, will require a more radical response (Purdy 2018).

Of course, not everyone will accept this diagnosis. My arguments might therefore appear to hang precariously on controversial empirical claims. Yet I see this as an unavoidable consequence of the aspiration for reliable practical guidance. On an action-oriented approach, indeed, evaluating rival social theories—and synthesizing their insights—would become a major part of the job description of realist political theory (Bagg 2016, 239–40). Clearly, I have not actually done this work here: demonstrating that any particular radical strategy is the most promising response to global challenge would require far more extensive empirical and predictive inquiry than I have been able to pursue here. That, however, was never my aim in this section. Rather, my goal was simply to defend the *possibility* of radical realism against the claims of moderation realists. Fortunately, the success of this argument does not depend on the truth of any given social theory.[12]

The social theories employed by moderation realists are plausible, and so the dangers they cite must be accounted for. Yet if the social theories I have offered are *also* plausible, moderation realists cannot infer a robust prohibition on challenges to liberal-democratic norms and institutions

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[12] Indeed, my general *methodological* approach is compatible with a wide range of social theories—even those whose *substantive* implications are diametrically opposed to those I suggest. For instance, Hayekian radicals argue against "moderation" on the grounds that it would lead inevitably to "serfdom" (Hayek 1984). My objection to this approach lies with the substantive plausibility of the social theory they rely upon, rather than their methodology.

from worries about polarization and backlash. Even if we accept that preserving liberal democracy must be our top priority, it is simply false that challenging status quo norms and institutions *always* threatens that end. In order to establish that any particular radical stratagem actually endangers the overall, long-term stability of liberal democracy, therefore, moderation realists would *also* need to do far more comprehensive empirical and predictive work than they have done. In the end, that is all an action-oriented realism demands. The idea is simply to present plausible hypotheses and support them as well as we can—remembering always that prediction is hard, and that our substantive conclusions must therefore remain explicitly provisional.

What we can conclude more securely from my arguments in this section, meanwhile, is that in doing this context-dependent work, we are unlikely to reach the sort of categorical conclusions many political realists have drawn about the priority of legitimacy. Action-oriented realists might have many reasons to challenge status-quo norms and institutions and embrace radical goals— indeed, they might even do so in the name of preserving liberal democracy over the long run. As such, there is no general connection between methodological realism and substantive moderation.

## §6. Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to demonstrate that all of the major "realist" arguments for the priority of basic order and legitimacy employ a limited vision of what counts as properly political or realistic. For that reason, they actually foreclose a more fully realistic process of practical political judgment. As I showed in §2, there is no basis for metanormative claims that the demands of basic order and legitimacy are *more political* than other, more ambitious demands. As I argued in §3, we should also reject proceduralist arguments that certain basic procedures provide a *less controversial* basis for resolving other, more substantive disagreements. And as I demonstrated in §5, we have ample reason to doubt the claims of moderation realists that the preservation of status-

quo norms and institutions is always better for the stability of liberal democracy than the pursuit

of other, more radical alternatives. In §4, of course, I also began to suggest an alternative, "action-

oriented" approach to political realism. Yet this is only a preliminary sketch, and its function here

is primarily to bolster my critique of realists' obsession with legitimacy—which, as I have shown,

wrongly displaces more radical and ambitious substantive demands.

At the broadest level, then, the spirit of my argument can be encapsulated by a common refrain

of activists and organizers: "no justice, no peace." William Clare Roberts (2018) explains:

> To more conservative auditors, it is a threat. To more sympathetic ears, it is a social
> scientific hypothesis: "Without justice, … peace will be an elusive goal." I have
> always heard it as an expression of hope: We hope that, if justice is not done, people
> will continue to fight… to turn the non-peace of being subject to the unconstrained
> power of another into the open struggle that might bring justice and, with it, peace.
> What if the protesters are right? What if peace is not a precondition of the pursuit
> of justice, but something made possible, hopefully, by justice's achievement? What
> if the salient barrier to peace is not war but domination? Would that change the
> "realistic" assessment?

My contention has been that it would—not in every case, perhaps, but often enough that it is

requires a reconsideration of the common association between methodological realism and a

substantive priority for the more "basic" demands of legitimate order. If we want our theories to

provide useful guidance to real political actors, we may conclude, realists ought to take a firm and

confident stand *against* the priority of legitimacy.


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