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Taking political normativity seriously: legitimacy and political realism

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ABSTRACT
The article challenges the notion that political realism necessarily requires a distinctively political normativity. Drawing on the works of Weber and Nietzsche, it offers an alternative reading of political realism. The article uncovers in Williams' scholarship a dual-layered legitimacy framework, displaying three inherent demands (namely, discursive, intelligibility, and reflective vindication demand) in his idea of legitimacy. In so doing, the article demonstrates how political realism employs its own prescriptive resources to critically scrutinize politics, while highlighting the crucial distinction between political realism and applied ethics. The article finally contends that political realism can, through immanent critique, maintain its evaluative standards and critical potency without necessarily engaging with political normativity.

Since political realists reject unabashedly 'political moralism' (Williams 2008, 2) and 'ethics-first' approach to politics (Geuss 2008, 8), the critics believe – or believe political realists believe – that political realism must resort to a distinctively political normativity (Erman and Möller 2015; Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018; Thomas 2017; Wendt 2016). They maintain, for instance, that 'a slew of recent theorists contending that political normativity is its own distinctive kind of normativity, independent of moral normativity', and immediately add that 'a key source for this view is found in the political writings of Bernard Williams, subsequently developed by several others' (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 757).[1] In

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[1]The following literature is often included as representing realists' endeavour to develop such a distinctively political normativity: (Sangiovanni 2008; Hall 2015; Rossi and Sleat 2014; Newey 2010; Newey 2001; Hall 2017; Horton 2010; Philp 2010; Sleat 2010; Jubb and Rossi 2015a; Jubb and Rossi 2015b; Jubb 2019; Geuss 2005; 2008; 2010; Bourke 2009; Galston 2010).

the absence of such a political normativity, these critics further believe that political realism will be guilty of being purely descriptive and short of evaluative resources for social critique (Estlund 2014, 123; Erman and Möller 2018), or guilty of being inconsistent in relying on a moral source of normative judgments that political realism outright rejects (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 784; cf. Burelli and Chiara 2022, 398). The only way out of this predicament, according to this line of reasoning, is for political realists to prove the existence of a distinctively political normativity that is of a different, nonmoral kind. Since it is a form of political *normativity,* political realism can cease to be purely descriptive, and since it is a form of *political* normativity, it can stop being inconsistent (as it now departs from *moral* normativity).[2]

The article argues that neither of the aforementioned problems needs to be true, and political realism does not necessarily require a distinctively political normativity.[3] It does so by focusing on Bernard Williams' notion of legitimacy and the 'critical theory test' developed in *Truth and Truthfulness*. The article contends that the notion of legitimacy contains three demands – namely, discursive demand, intelligibility demand, and reflective vindication demand – that carries its own prescriptive weight, thereby demonstrating that realism is far from being purely descriptive and inconsistent. According to this analysis, the three demands are inherent in the concept of legitimacy, just as there are 'moral, social, interpretive' dimensions of politics (Williams 2008, 11). Any attempt to strip legitimacy of these demands reduces politics to a point beyond recognition.[4]

Seeing legitimacy in this way can help us clarify the intricate relationship between politics and morality in political realism. It drives home the point that political realism always draws on local, essentially contingent moral ideas to comprehend and examine the exercise of political authority, while maintaining its principled objection to the priority of morality (Sleat 2007). Williams makes it clear that political realism 'does not deny

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[2]This does not necessarily mean however that a distinctively political normativity cannot be identified in political realism; for such a position, see Aytac and Enzo (2023); Burelli and Chiara (2022); Burelli (2022); Rossi (2019), and for a defense of this position against its moralist critics, see Cross (2024). It is the aim of this article to argue that even if there does not exist a distinctively political normativity this does not affect political realism. It offers an alternative reading of political realism – we may call it 'critical theory political realism' – that does not rest on the existence of a distinctively political normativity.

[3]In this regard, I concur with Edward Hall and Matt Sleat that political realism is driven by 'a set of philosophical concerns about *the nature of ethics* and *the place of ethical thinking in our lives*' (Hall and Sleat 2017, 276; emphasis added), and with Matt Sleat that Williams 'was not at all interested in strongly demarcating between political and moral normativities' (2022, 473).

[4]For elaborations related to this point, see Kreutz (2023); Sleat (2010).

that there can be local applications of moral ideas in politics' (Williams 2008, 8). Hence, one of the main misunderstandings by critics of political realism lies here. It is believed that in order to maintain its identity political realism must remove morality and depend on a distinctively political normativity. What these critics overlook is that legitimacy is closely connected to the local applications of moral ideas, and a state's authority over its citizens can only *make sense* and be *justified* through these applications. This then demonstrates that the notion of sense-making is an integral part of legitimacy, which itself is essentially 'a structure of authority which we think we *should* accept' (Williams 2008, 11, emphasis added). Without moral ideas, broadly understood, there would be no basis for making sense of such a structure for accepting it – it would never be something 'we think we *should* accept'. By foregrounding Williams' notion of legitimacy, I shall demonstrate how political realism truthfully makes sense of politics, maintains its evaluative standard, and retains its critical force without necessarily resorting to a distinctively moral normativity.

Politics goes beyond assertion of power

According to Williams, political realism identifies the first political question as the 'securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation'. It forms 'a necessary condition of legitimacy (LEG)', as the failure to address this question would result in a perpetual war of all against all. Here Williams follows the footsteps of Hobbes; however, unlike Hobbes, he does not consider this a sufficient condition for LEG. Williams argues that the state, which itself is a solution to the problem of the chaotic state of nature, 'should not become part of the problem'. He maintains that this is where Hobbes's solution falls short – the Leviathan becomes a problem that calls for further political solutions. To address this, the Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD) is introduced: meeting the BLD requires an 'acceptable' solution to the first political question (2008, 3–4). The BLD emphasizes that the state must provide a 'justifying explanation' of its power to the citizens over whom political authority is exercised (2008, 5).

However, if more than sheer coercive power or outright domination is necessary, does this suggest that the BLD is a moral principle? After all, isn't it true that only by appealing to moral principles can one argue that politics is distinct from the mere assertion of coercive power? Williams briefly responds to this question by stating, 'If it [BLD] is, it does

not represent a morality which is prior to politics. It is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics' (2008). But how exactly should we make of this response? Why does the BLD not represent a morality prior to politics, a position that political realism is so critical of? And in exactly what sense is the BLD *inherent* in politics? Williams does not provide extensive explanations on these matters, offering only two illuminating yet concise claims. Critics like Leader Maynard and Worsnip are unconvinced by Williams response. They write,

> [f]rom the premise that minimal satisfaction of the BLD is inherent in the very definition of politics and political relationships, Williams concludes that the BLD is a demand from within politics itself and thus represents a distinctively political normativity, rather than a moral requirement that can be conceived of as 'external' or 'prior' to politics. This argument, we contend, does not succeed. (2018, 782)

It is, therefore, worthwhile to examine Williams' claims, with a view to directly addressing concerns raised by such critics as Leader Maynard and Worsnip.

In establishing the foundations of political realism, Williams makes the first claim that pure domination alone cannot provide an acceptable solution to the first political question, so much so that politics must look beyond sheer coercive power at the state's justifying explanations for wielding such power. In his own words, it reads:

> If the power of one lot of people over another is to represent a solution to the first political question, and not itself be part of the problem, *something* has to be said to explain (to the less empowered, to concerned bystanders, to children being educated in this structure, etc.) what the difference is between the solution and the problem, and that cannot simply be an account of successful domination. (Williams 2008, 5)

In this context, Williams argues that 'the situation of one lot people terrorizing another lot of people is not per se a political situation' (Williams 2008, 5). This reflects a Weberian understanding of state, which posits that the state cannot be equated with coercive power, as it does not rely solely on violence. Weber emphatically asserts, for instance, that 'So far as [obedience] is not derived merely from fear or from motives of expediency, a *willingness* to submit to an order imposed by one man or a small group, always implies a *belief* in the legitimate authority' (Weber 1978, 37, emphasis added).[5] The legitimacy of a state stems

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[5]For in-depth discussions on Weber's concept of state and legitimation, see Cozzaglio and Greene (2019); Wolin (1981).

from willingness and belief, rather than fear and expediency. Leader Maynard and Worsnip raise objections to this perspective, viewing it as 'a very restrictive conception of politics' (2018, 782). By 'restrictive' they mean that Williams builds the satisfaction of the BLD, essentially a provider of willingness and belief emphasized by Weber, into the definition of politics. According to Leader Maynard and Worsnip, this wrongly implies that a situation can only be considered political when the requirements of the BLD are met. Hence, their dissatisfaction lies in Williams' adoption of Weber's conception of the state and his categorical differentiation between politics and sheer coercive power:

> If it is constitutive of politics that it involves claims of authority, legitimating justifications, and an absence of brute coercion, then it would seem that 'political terror' and many (though not all) forms of 'political violence' are misnomers, that war is rarely if ever political, and that swathes of international politics – occurring between states which are sovereign equals and without formal claims of authority over each other – are not correctly described as politics at all. (2018, 782)

To be fair, in making these points Leader Maynard and Worsnip raise a valid concern. Violence, conflicts of various kinds, and wars do occur within the realm typically associated with politics. Therefore, is Williams correct in excluding these situations as non-political? Or does Williams really exclude these situations as non-political? As we have seen, Williams argues that politics must go beyond Hobbes' concerns by providing 'justifying explanation or legitimation' (2008, 5) for the state's use of coercive power, which uphold a political order of authority. According to Williams, the acceptability of a solution depends on whether a state can offer such justifying explanations or legitimation, and it is in this sense that politics sets itself apart from sheer power. Williams contends that a situation where *de facto* authority relies solely on sheer coercive power is not a political situation. However, since the purpose of politics is to *provide a justifying explanation for the use of coercive power*, the actual utilization of that power is part of politics. The use of coercive power is therefore not excluded from politics; rather, what is excluded is the situation in which coercive power alone is used. By presenting a restrictive conception of politics, Williams underscores the requirement of 'answering a demand for justification of coercive power' (2008, 8) as complementary to politics, in addition to the possession of coercive power.

This difference between Williams' conception of politics and that of Leader Maynard and Worsnip carries significant implications, to say the

least. It leads to fundamentally divergent understandings of politics. Williams views the BLD as an internal political requirement rather than an external moral one. According to his perspective, if a state fails to justify its use of coercive power or if such justification is inadequate, the solution provided by the state becomes unacceptable and cease to be political. This is not due to external moral reasons but is inherent to the functioning of politics itself. For politics to be exist, compliance and willingness to submit to the authority's order must be present. This constitutes an essential requirement for 'there being a first political situation' (Williams 2008, 5). Politics must provide a justifying explanation for the exercise of coercive power, and it is the primary and sole source capable of eliciting acceptance of such power. In unpacking Williams' political realism, Mark Philp once writes that politics 'involves at least some claim to authority … [while] brute force determines outcomes but it does so coercively, not authoritatively', and 'it is therefore integral to political rule to invoke at least some claim to authority and thereby to legitimacy … which implies some recognition of this on the part of citizens' (2007, 55–56). The recognition of the 'authority' and 'legitimacy' cannot stem from sheer coercive power (or 'brute force', in Philp's term); it can only arise through a justifying explanation. Politics derives its 'authoritative' nature not from brute force, but from claims to authority.[6] Holding this position, however, does not deny that violence, conflict, and war are part of politics. They certainly are. It would be indeed strange if Williams claimed that violence is not a component of politics. But they only belong to the *coercive part* of politics and so it is only when violence stands alone that it ceases to be political. According to Williams, whenever politics is present, it transcends sheer coercive power and always manifests itself as a *justifying explanation* for the exercise of that power. This constitutes the *explanation part* of politics, which coexists with the coercive part of politics (this is not to suggest that explanation cannot fail; it is only when it fails that politics reveals its coercive part, as Williams would argue). Therefore, it is inaccurate to claim, as Leader Maynard and Worsnip do, that 'an absence of brute coercion' is constitutive of politics; in fact, the opposite is true.

What is also untrue is Leader Maynard and Worsnip's assertion that 'the swaths of international politics' – by which they mean conflicts of interest, the resulting wars between different nations, and other sorts of such

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[6]However, we still need to explore how such claims can confer authority upon politics, a concept tied to what I call the 'intelligibility demand'. Critics disagree and argue that authority and legitimacy can only stem from morality. I shall analyze this moralistic perspective below

things – already constitute proper politics. They are mistaken, if international politics are understood as concerning merely conflicts and wars between nations, because these situations only *become* political when nation-states were established and declared obsolete the 'formal claims of authority' (and started to assume equal sovereign rights), when different nations see each other as such, and when nations, before they wage wars, provide explanations (or 'excuses' if one prefers) for doing so within a moral and cultural framework according to which those reasons can be assessed and so on. In other words, international politics only becomes political when justifying explanations are available to nations, who see themselves as equals and possess at least the principle of equal status among a community of nations that is initially created. It is within this wider cultural, moral, and political context that coercive power is exercised and wars are waged. Nations would without exception recognize and demand that power be justified and made sense, regardless of whether they are on the receiving or the giving end of power. If this context were absent, international politics as we know it would cease to be international *politics*, and indeed we would be at a loss to comprehend inter-*national* politics to begin with.

This, therefore, is Williams' first claim: pure domination does not provide an acceptable solution to the first political question, necessitating politics to transcend mere assertion of coercive power. This claim is further reinforced by his understanding of human capacity. Politics, we are informed, is primarily concerned with the 'order of authority' and it is a universal fact about politics that 'some people coerce or try to coerce others' (Williams 2008, 10). Consequently, politics needs to take human capacity into account, which alone can explain why only a few orders of authority are 'intelligible and acceptable' (Williams 2008). Note that, at this juncture, Williams uses the two terms interchangeably, for reasons we shall shortly explore. For now, it suffices to say that the very need to render orders of authority intelligible and acceptable bespeaks a defining feature of humans. That is, humans possess a 'capacity to live under an *intelligible* order of authority' (Williams 2008, 10, emphasis added). It is such a capacity humans possess that demands the structure of an order of authority to make sense to us (Williams 2008) and be intelligible and acceptable. Strictly speaking, there are two forms of demands: (1) an order of authority must say something pertaining to the legitimacy of its authority, regardless of its actual intelligibility or acceptability – pure domination through coercive power already fails to satisfy this first demand; and (2) something said by the order of

authority must be intelligible or can make sense to those who subject to the order; that is to say, something said must be able to make them be able to willingly, to use Weber's word, believe in it and not merely coerced to pretend that they do. With nothing said and nothing to justify the order of authority, politics cannot get off the ground. For to coerce one lot of people without making its order of authority intelligible, even as a solution to the first political question, is to go against the very grain of human capacity as Williams sees it. No politics lacks this discretion, except for the conception of non-restrictive politics that perceives politics solely as the exercise of sheer coercive power. When Leader Maynard and Worsnip argue for a non-restrictive or less restrictive conception of politics, the burden lies on them to explain how this conception helps to make sense politics in normal social and cultural circumstances and addresses the undeniable human capacity that exists.

The historicity of MS and ethnographic stance

The second claim made by Williams is that the resources available for 'MS' and intelligibility are historically and culturally conditioned. This claim is continuous with not only Williams' idea that 'there can [only] be local applications of moral ideas in politics', but also that 'What we acknowledge as LEG, here and now, is what, here and now, MS as a legitimation of power as authority' (2008, 11). Williams rejects the idea that objective and context-independent morality exists and resists the tendency embedded in the Kantian ethics to 'rush to move 'beyond'. These have resulted in his stringent critique of the 'morality system' (cf. Louden 2007, 110–111; Chappell and Smyth 2018; Queloz 2022b, 182–209; Owen 2017, 83).[7] According to him, various attempts in history to search for an 'Archimedean Point' in the moral world have failed (be it Aristotelian or Kantian) (2006, 29, 52, 67, 152). We are living in a disenchanted world, in Max Weber's specific sense, where only local and essentially contingent morality can be resorted to when making sense of the political world. Insofar as legitimacy is concerned, 'the character of the solution is affected by historical circumstances' (2008, 62), according to Williams. To the extent that we see politics as concerning the question of

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[7]Ben Cross has argued that because Williams rejects the 'morality system', the approach (what he labels the 'concessive approach' exemplified by such scholars as Robert Jubb, Matt Sleat, and Edward Hall) which holds that there are 'norms, ultimately grounded in morality, internal to politics' is problematic (Cross 2021, 453–457). Without directly defending the position, I argue in the following that it cannot be inferred from Williams' rejection of the 'morality system' that all norms in politics can only be nonmoral.

whether an order of authority makes sense to us as 'an example of author- itative order', it requires, first, that there is a legitimation story offered and, second, that 'we can recognize such a thing because in the light of *the historical and cultural circumstances*, and so forth, it MS to us as a legitima- tion' (2008, 11, emphases added).

This means that a specific legitimation story makes sense to us not because of external moral reasons but rather, because as historically and culturally conditioned actors, we perceive the legitimation story as intelligible and acceptable, according to *their* moral and ethical concep- tual framework shaped by *their* historical and cultural circumstances. This is a form of legitimacy featured by what Williams calls 'the ethno- graphic stance', which is a stance he believes philosophy should adopt. From an ethnographic stance, according to Williams, one 'understands from the *inside* a conceptual system in which ethical concepts are inte- grally related to modes of explanation and description' (Williams 1986, 204; emphasis added). This implies that saying an order of authority makes sense to us and hence is LEG is not making a straightforward nor- mative judgment because it is only by adopting the ethnographic stance that an order of authority is deemed intelligible. It does not necessarily mean that we, too, will deem it intelligible when we do not take the eth- nographic stance. That is, it only makes sense to *us* who already are or have put ourselves in *their* historical and cultural circumstances, while it could well be the case that it does not make sense to those of us who do not share or are not conditioned by *the same* historical and cultural cir- cumstances. This leads to Williams' claim, the one without much of an explanation, that 'What [MS] certainly is not, is *normative*: we do not think, typically, that these considerations should guide our behaviour' (2008, 11). In adopting an ethnographic stance, we position ourselves differently as *insiders* of a society, immersed in *its* social, ethical, cultural, and political environment, and try, as a competent ethnographer does, to think within its conceptual system and perceive the world as its members do. Because it is the judgment we hold only *after* we adopt the ethno- graphic stand, it does not carry normative weight to *us*, and it should not guide *our* behaviour. This is because the ethnographic stance requires immersing oneself as an insider, which entails suspending one's own nor- mative criteria to understand how others make sense of their political life. But since this ethnographic stance is the reason why we pass the judg- ment that a state is LEG, the judgment itself does not carry any normative weight for us.

It is to capture this insider point of view in the form of legitimacy that we may follow Raymond Geuss and call it 'descriptively *de jure* legitimacy'. To claim that an order of authority is LEG in this sense is to believe that it has 'a warrant that is sociologically "in order" … regardless of what *we* may think about whether the warrant ought to carry weight' (Geuss 2001, 41–42). As far as Williams' political realism is concerned, descriptively *de jure* legitimacy requires a state to say 'something', present a 'narrative' (Williams 2002, 233), or to tell a 'legitimation story' to those subject to its power (Williams 2008, 5). Since sociologically (or ethnographically) speaking moral and ethical concepts are 'integrally related to [our] modes of explanation and description', determining whether a legitimation makes sense to us is a socially and culturally conditioned judgment. It differs from the 'fully normative *de jure* legitimacy' that introduces the 'critical theory test', whose purpose is to scrutinize the legitimation story or the modes of sense-making. However, even in descriptive *de jure* legitimacy, as we shall see later, political realism carries the prescriptive weight – rendering LEG an order of authority through sense-making and power-justifying mechanisms – and moral and ethical ideas are integrated in politics (otherwise 'MS' and intelligibility make no sense). It is worth emphasizing that Williams does not consider the above task to be easy. Rendering a state LEG in this sense already requires adequately addressing the human capacity and aligning the legitimation story with the historical and cultural circumstances under question.

Since descriptively *de jure* legitimacy does not demand an outsider perspective, nor does it permit external morality, perceiving a legitimation story as intelligible is equivalent to seeing it as acceptable. Acceptability encompasses no more than what is required for intelligibility. Therefore, as long as one adopts the ethnographic stance, one is free to use the two terms interchangeably. It is noteworthy, and this is in line with the spirit of descriptive *de jure* legitimacy, that people in different societies, just like we in ours, often take for granted the legitimacy of their own state, except in dire conditions where the legitimation story evidently fails or people's means of life are severely threatened. 'Much of the time, in ordinary life, we do not discuss whether our concepts MS, though, of particular ones, we may. Mostly, the fact that we use these concepts is what shows us that they MS', as Williams puts it (Williams 2008, 11). So when we engage, if we do, in the discussions about whether a justifying legitimation story makes sense to us, they are usually 'engaged, first-order discussions' in nature, using as we do their our political, moral, social, interpretive, and other concepts that already exist in the society they

live. It is only when we move to the higher level of legitimacy, namely fully normative *de jure* legitimacy, that we shift from this engaged, first-order discussion to the somewhat disengaged, second-order discussions. Even then, however, there is no escaping the fact that we are still conditioned by our historical and cultural circumstances – hence being entirely *dis*engaged is never achievable nor desirable.[8]

Discursive demand and intelligibility demand

From the above discussions, we can conclude that first form of Williams' notion of legitimacy is composed of two elements. Firstly, it views legitimacy as the most important problem a state needs to address. Being a state requires providing a legitimation story regarding its exercise of coercive power, and failing to do so would result in a state being trapped in a perpetual internal conflict. However, according to Williams, this requirement is insufficient, as any solution to the problem can become a problem itself. Therefore, secondly, a state must offer an acceptable and intelligible legitimation story that makes sense to its people, prompting them to voluntarily ascribe warrant to legitimacy. It is upon these two conditions that any meaningful political order is established and sustained.

It is also worth reiterating that neither of these conditions is normative or purely descriptive. It is not normative because legitimacy is viewed from an ethnographic or sociological stance, which necessitates the suspension of our own perspectives and normative preferences. As Williams makes it clear, whether a state's legitimacy makes sense to us is not only a matter of its being true or false but of its being able to 'ring true' to those who live within specific social and cultural circumstances, with their own distinct concerns. For Williams, saying a state is LEG from the perspective of an ethnographer does not imply that our actions should be guided by such an evaluation, no matter how true it rings. And it is not purely descriptive since legitimacy inherently requires that politics to say something about its order of authority; remaining silent about it would endanger the political order itself. Legitimacy demands that the state's legitimation story be intelligent and acceptable to *those* who are subject to its order of authority (rather than us).

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[8]For this point, see Williams's debate with Nagel (Williams 2005). In Williams (2008), he explicitly rejects Nagel's view that if certain values exist 'they have always existed, and if societies in the past did not recognise them, then that is because either those in charge were wicked, or the society did not, for some reason, understand the existence of these rights' (2008, 65).

To summarize, the success of legitimacy depends on the following conditions. First, the state relies on local, essentially contingent morality rather than coercive power for legitimacy. Second, the state's legitimacy story, based on the local, essentially contingent morality, must be rendered intelligible to a sufficiently large number of people. According to Williams, the ability to provide justifying explanations to legitimacy, regardless of their contents or intelligibility, already distinguishes a state from the exercise of sheer coercive power, whereas its ability to make sense to us and being indeed intelligible and acceptable sets LEG apart from ILLEG states. Thus, in descriptive *de jure* legitimacy we encounter these two demands:

> *Discursive Demand*: The state must say something, provide a justifying explanation, or narrate a legitimation story concerning its order of authority that exercises power over its citizens.

> *Intelligibility Demand*: Something said, the justifying explanation provided, or legitimation story narrated by the state must make sense to a sufficiently large number of people; in other words, it must be rendered intelligible to them, enabling them to believe in what make sense and ascribe credibility to the state that embodies such intelligibility, thereby considering it LEG.

To these two demands, it may be added that intelligibility is not merely a cognitive matter but also experiential, encompassing as it does concrete lived experiences we encounter. For a legitimation story to be intelligible, it certainly needs to be *consistent*, for logical fallacies not only undermine the cognitive nature of the story but also its intelligibility. Truthfulness – a virtue Williams consistently emphasizes – can eventually expose any inconsistencies in a legitimation story over a long enough duration of time. Consistency, therefore, is a necessary, cognitive condition for intelligibility. It is not sufficient, however, as the story must also be compatible with, or at least not violate, the tangible everyday *experiences* we have. Since these experiences are influenced by a combination of economic, cultural, political, and other forces, they possess their own independent existence that cannot be interpreted at will. For this reason, an authoritarian state cannot make its legitimation story of democracy intelligible and acceptable, nor can it establish its legitimacy on the discourse of democracy, no matter how logically consistent such a story may sound. This is because even though those who hear the story might *cognitively* make sense of it, they are unable to *experientially* render it intelligible due to the authoritarian experiences that contradict the legitimation story of democracy presented by the authoritarian state as a cognitive invention.

In such cases, they will not believe in the legitimacy of their state based on such a democratic legitimacy, despite the story's perfect consistency. Living experiences establish the parameters within which the story can effectively operate, limiting how far the legitimation story can resonate. Therefore, for a legitimacy story to be intelligible, it must not only be cognitively consistent but also resonate with the facts on the ground and align with tangible experiences of those it seeks to influence.

This should address Leader Maynard and Worsnip's concerns regarding whether differentiating the political from the moral political realism deprives itself of evaluative standards and critical force. As they state,

> We believe that there are deeper reasons to worry about any effort to isolate political normativity from morality. Most importantly, such an effort can serve to insulate political decision-making or political theory from distinctively moral criticism – taking it out of the space of moral justification. (2018, 786)

However, as clarified earlier, political realism does not necessarily advocate for a distinctively political normativity, and therefore, it does not need to 'isolate political normativity from morality' or insulate political theory from distinctively moral criticism. In defining legitimacy, Williams makes it clear that local application of moral ideas is part and parcel of politics, without which there will be no way to make sense of politics or establish a state as LEG – an essential task that no state can evade. Leader Maynard and Worsnip argue that without the introduction of morality from an external source, political realism lacks the necessary resources for political examination or criticism. They contend that the only source for political examination and criticism must come from morality – a position typically held by moralists. What Williams has demonstrated thus far is that perceiving politics solely as applied ethics is problematic, for politics possesses its own evaluative and prescriptive resources as evidenced by the *Discursive Demand* and *Intelligibility Demand*. Neither of these demands can be reduced to morality. The discursive demand asserts that for politics to function properly, a justifying explanation must accompany coercive power. Both Weber and Williams consider this demand to be constitutive of politics. The intelligibility demand requires that the justifying explanation must make sense to those it seeks to influence. To achieve this, the explanation must be cognitively consistent, resonate with the facts on the ground, and aglign with tangible experiences of the people involved. Neither of these demands can be reduced to morality. Seeing it this way, politics not only has prescriptive resources but also its own agenda to pursue, namely, the

establishment and continuous maintenance of an order of authority through mechanisms of power-keeping and sense-making. This agenda is driven by the need to legitimize power, ensuring that authority is not just imposed but is also understood and accepted by those subjected to it. In this light, the effectiveness of political authority depends as much on its ability to maintain power as on its capacity to make sense of that power in ways that are intelligible and acceptable to its people. It is in the pursuit of this agenda that politics fundamentally differs from morality. Although Williams argues for 'a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought' (Williams 2008, 3), it remains somewhat unclear how far he intends to extend this conception of politics.[9] We are yet to see this by exploring the other form of legitimacy within political realism, which presents a more stringent demand and provide more resources for political examination and criticism, specifically focused on the political rather than the moral.

Reflective vindication demand

Given that sheer coercive power is not an acceptable solution to the first political question, a state must come up with some justifying explanations to meet the BLD. This is encompassed within descriptive *de jure* legitimacy. Now, it is obvious that not all justifying explanations can provide acceptable solutions, which raises the question of 'what counts as "acceptable"'. Williams suggests that the 'critical theory principle' is necessary to address the question, asserting that 'the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified' (2008, 6). If a justification is accepted for reasons that require justification themselves, then legitimacy can become a product of coercive power. When this is the case, legitimacy rests on something deeply problematic.

To avoid this issue, descriptive *de jure* legitimacy is insufficient, and legitimacy must be vindicated more than once. It needs first to be vindicated through first-order, engaged discussions, where legitimacy is

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[9]If the conception is extended far enough, then the establishment and continuous maintenance of an order of authority becomes the sole purpose of politics. In that case, no political order could be considered truly legitimate, for all politics would inherently involve surplus domination. Raymond Geuss seems to gesture toward this when he crtiques that '[Williams'] writings on politics … generally still breathe the air of the usual liberal platitudes (Geuss 2014, 187). While this interpretation of Williams' political thought is certainly open to debate, the underlying issue remains: how far should the autonomy of politics extend if politics is primarily understood as the establishment and continuous maintenance of an order of authority? Commentators of Williams appear to have different views on this matter (Burelli 2022; Cross 2021; Erman and Möller 2015; Hall and Sleat 2017; Sleat 2007).

accepted as descriptively *de jure* legitimacy, requiring that its legitimation story must make sense or be intelligible and acceptable. However, it must also undergo *reflective* vindication to ensure that the first-order vindication is not 'produced by' coercive power in the relevant sense. To express his worries about imparting legitimacy to a state for the wrong reasons, Williams even employs a Marxist expression 'false consciousness' (2008, 6). In this context, false consciousness means that people's acceptance of a state as LEG goes against their own interest, with the emphases falling on such an acceptance being at once voluntary and hurting the interest of those who accept it. It is for this false consciousness to be avoided that the 'critical theory principle' is introduced. The introduction of the principle aims to prevent false consciousness. Its purpose is to subject the legitimation story that *already* made sense to its subjects to further critical scrutiny. Only when the situation in which a legitimation story is accepted for wrong reasons is avoided can legitimacy be considered fully normative *de jure* legitimacy. Thus, descriptively *de jure* legitimacy and fully normative *de jure* legitimacy represent the two end results of philosophical vindications. The purpose of fully normative *de jure* legitimacy, along with the embedded critical theory principle, is to safeguard against the potential susceptibility of legitimacy to the detrimental impacts of false consciousness.

We need to be more careful with our choice of words, though. It is important to note that false consciousness cannot be solely produced by sheer coercive power. Coercive power can, at best, result in forced compliance or silenced submission, and at worst, resistance or protest. The reason for this is simply: coercive power does not have the ability to influence human mind and, therefore, cannot generate false *consciousness*. This is why Williams emphasizes that 'the power to justify may itself be a power, but it is not merely *that* power' (2008, 8) If politics involves an art of justification, then the secret of this art lies in something beyond *that* power. Combining this understanding with another claim made by Williams, namely, that 'some methods of belief-formation are simply coercive' (2002, 221), we arrive at a further claim regarding the relationship between coercive power and false consciousness. We can put it as follows: 'The coercive power that generates false consciousness – essentially a particular form of belief-formation – may itself be a coercive power, but it is not merely *that* coercive power'. It is not *that* coercive power because *the* form of coercive power capable of manipulating belief-formation is distinct and different from sheer coercive power. It is this specific form of power that can influence the human mind.

To distinguish these two forms of coercive power – the power exerted on the human body and the power that operates on the human mind – we require a term for the latter. Given Williams' deep admiration for Nietzsche, it is reasonable to assume that the coercive power he has in mind, which affects the human mind, is related to the power of the 'slaves revolt in morality' in shaping the conception of the life for the 'masters' or the power of the 'priests' exercised over their congregation and the souls of the 'masters'. This is the form of power intensively discussed by Nietzsche and elucidated in great detail in his *Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1989). For brevity's sake, we can, adopting Martin Saar's terminology, call this form of coercive power 'symbolic power'. According to Saar, symbolic power in Nietzsche is distinct from 'real power' which corresponds to sheer coercive power. It lacks the subtlety required to shape inner beliefs or perceptions. This form of power may result in obedience, but it rarely leads to genuine acceptance or internalization of ideas. Symbolic power, in contrast, arises from the creation of meaning to such an extent that possessing and using this kind of power means 'to be able to influence experiences and perceptions through patterns of meaning and signification that are unconscious to the subjects themselves and that establish and stabilize one specific world-view and make it the dominant one' (Saar 2008, 458). It is then characteristic of symbolic power that once established it can structure reality in a way that it is only natural for subjects to 'follow exactly these and only these norms and to view social reality exactly with these eyes' (Saar 2008, 461). Symbolic power is a more sophisticated form of coercive power that influences belief-formation and gives rise to false consciousness. It can subtly steer individuals away from the understanding of reality that align with their interests and towards a distorted reality that serves the interests of those in power. It is a power that operates at the level of meaning-making, manipulating the very conditions under which beliefs are formed. This power can create a false consciousness by distorting reality in such a way that individuals come to accept and even defend ideas that are contrary to their own interests.

To the extent that symbolic power possesses this capability, it should come as no surprise that the BLD can be fully satisfied and the legitimation story readily made intelligent and acceptable, *even though* there are good reasons for them not to be.[10] Worse still, the situation can be

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[10]This certainly leaves enough room for the development of the ideology critique approach to political realism (see Rossi 2019; Aytac and Enzo 2023), even though they are not fully satisfied with Williams' approach and resort to epistemic resources.

compounded by the fact, as Williams states, that 'it is obvious that in many states most of the time the question of legitimate authority can be sufficiently taken for granted for people to get on with other kinds of political agenda'. (Williams 2008, 62) It is not only that the belief in legitimate authority can be strongly influenced by socialization processes, but also that, in many states, the question of legitimate authority is often assumed without question. While this allows people to focus on other aspects of life, it introduces an undesirable possibility where the existence of a ruling authority is rarely challenged or scrutinized, leading to widespread acceptance or acquiescence to the exercise of power. This demonstrates the effectiveness of symbolic power in concealing itself. This then calls for a critical examination of the sources and methods of belief-formation in a political system. It invites us to question whether the beliefs we hold are truly our own, or whether they have been subtly shaped by a coercive power that seeks to maintain its dominance.[11] Recognizing this dynamic is the first step towards reclaiming the autonomy of our own consciousness and resisting the forms of power that seek to distort our understanding of reality. This should provide us with further reasons to vindicate the state's exercise of power again, this time with the aim of preventing manipulated belief-formation and false consciousness from arising. The result of this vindication is the fully normative *de jure* legitimacy, whose defining feature is that legitimation stories now 'stand up to whatever normative scrutiny we wish to subject such things to' (Geuss 2001, 42).

In fact, Williams realized in *Truth and Truthfulness* that false consciousness can be artificially created and therefore what makes sense to us as a legitimate state can fall short of being fully legitimate. In the book, for instance, William discussed the possibility of 'one party causes belief in another' and of the power of such pretense in shaping one's perception of the world (Williams 2002, 226). It is within this context that he discussed Geuss's work on the critical theory (i.e. *The Idea of Critical Theory*) and Habermas' solution to the problem of false consciousness. This demonstrates that even by that time Williams was already familiar with the concerns (voluntary servitude being a major one) of the critical theory, a theory put forth by a group of realistically oriented scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse.[12]

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[11]The author thanks one anonymour reviewer for pointing out this distinction.
[12]For intriguing introductions of the critical theory and Frankfurt school, see Geuss (2008); Jeffries (1994); Wiggershaus (1994).

Understanding this background can help us comprehend why Williams is so cautious about the causes of belief-formation, the role played by the coercive power in causing belief in others, and the possibility of endorsing a legitimation story by virtue of false consciousness.[13] It also explains why he devised the '*Critical Theory* Principle' in *In the Beginning was the Deed* and the '*Critical Theory* Test' in *Truth and Truthfulness* to prevent such occurrences. He drew upon the concerns of critical theory but rejected Habermas' solution centred on 'perfect information', considering it too idealistic and abstract. As an alternative to this solution, Williams advocated 'a less abstract approach' that calls for 'a critique that is "contextualist" or "immanent"' (Williams 2002, 226). The immanent critique, which is in keeping with his ethnographic stance, offers two advantages over Habermas' abstract solution.

First of all, the immanent critique can provide a *causal explanation* of how a belief 'comes to be held', and how it becomes subject to challenge. As Williams explains, a belief can be impugned by examining the conditions under which it arises and understanding the process by which it becomes the belief we hold. Secondly, the immanent critique can offer such a causal explanation without committing a 'genetic fallacy'. That is, the immanent critique discredits a belief not 'merely because it is caused by some' (2002, 226). Since the origin of a belief should not be a reason for its rejection (nor acceptance, for that matter), the *critical force* of immanent critique lies in its ability to provide a causal explanation while avoiding genetic fallacy. This is the gist of the 'critical theory test', which asks, 'If [people] were to understand properly how they came to hold this belief, would they give it up?' (2002, 227) If people cease to hold the belief for reasons that avoid genetic fallacy, then, according to Williams, that belief fails the critical theory test.

But what exactly are the characteristics of those reasons? Williams's response is hypothetical:

> If one comes to know that the sole reason one accepts some moral claim is that somebody's power has brought it about that one accepts it, when, further, it is in their interest that one should accept it, one will have no reason to go on accepting it. (2002, 227)

It is the second condition in this hypothetical scenario, namely, 'it is in their interest that one should accept it', that points in the direction of understanding the features of those reasons. This condition states that

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[13]For a discussion of voluntary servitude in Williams' moral philosophy, see Queloz (2022a, esp. 1598.) Cf. Boétie (2012); Thiriet and Godignon (1994).

the reasons for giving up a belief do not originate from genetic sources. Because it is somebody's power that causes one to accept a belief (a causal explanation) *plus* that one's accepting that belief works only for the interest of the powerful (a functional explanation) that constitutes reasons for one not to go on accepting the belief. It is the *functional* explanation, then, that ensures that the genetic fallacy is avoided. This functional dimension gives us a reason to question the belief because it reveals that the belief's continued acceptance might be detrimental to the believer's own interests, rather than evaluating the belief based on its origins. By shifting the focus from the belief's origins to its functional implications, Williams's approach ensures that the critique is based on the practical consequences of holding the belief rather than on how the belief came to be. This method avoids the genetic fallacy because it does not assume that the belief is false or unjustified simply because of its origin; instead, it evaluates the belief based on its function, namely, whether or not it merely serves the interest of the powerful.

Given this emphasis on the functional dimension, one might ask whether the functional explanation alone is sufficient in impugning a belief and providing reasons for abandoning it. If a belief's continued acceptance is detrimental to the believer's well-being, that functional outcome is a strong reason to give up the belief, independent of its origins. The causal explanation might provide additional context or understanding of how the belief was formed, but it is not strictly necessary for the critical assessment of the belief. What matters most is whether the belief, in its current form, aligns with or undermines the believer's interests. This line of thought naturally leads to other important questions: Why do people accept beliefs that do not serve their own interests? What motivates individuals to internalize and uphold beliefs that primarily benefit the powerful? For Williams-style political realism, addressing these factors is crucial. It requires not only a critique of the beliefs that sustain power structures but also an exploration of the mechanisms that lead individuals to accept and maintain those beliefs.

It is noteworthy that Williams only states that 'one will have no reason' to continue accepting the belief, not that 'one will not'. This is because even after the immanent critique reveals the origin and function of a belief, it cannot guarantee that they *will* give it up. According to Williams, whether they relinquish the belief is beyond the control of immanent critics. All immanent critique can do is to show that they *have no reason* to go on accepting it. Just as one cannot convince immoralists to be moral when there is no longer an Archimedean Point, there is no

certainty that those who accept the belief will cease to do so after the underlying reasons of the belief are revealed through causal and functional explanations.

What becomes clear at this point is that in fully normative *de jure* legitimacy intelligibility is no longer synonymous with acceptability, because unlike descriptive *de jure* legitimacy, where a legitimation story is only subject to the BLD, fully normative *de jure* legitimacy requires that what already make sense to us undergo further critical scrutiny. In the realm of descriptive *de jure* legitimacy, a legitimation story is considered sufficient if it is intelligible – meaning it is consistent and makes sense within the existing cultural, social framework and experiences that people encounter daily. It does not require deeper scrutiny beyond whether the legitimation story meets the discursive and intelligibility demands. In contrast, fully normative *de jure* legitimacy requires more than that. It demands that the legitimation story undergo the critical theory test to ensure that it is not merely a reflection of existing power structures or entrenched beliefs. This involves a form of immanent critique, where acceptability is not automatically granted based on intelligibility alone. An intelligible legitimation story can be deemed *acceptable* only if it successfully undergoes reflective vindication. Acceptability now requires that the legitimation story be subjected to a deeper level of scrutiny. This leads us to another demand – we may call it reflective vindication demand – which is inherent in Williams' concept of legitimacy:

> *Reflective Vindication Demand*: Legitimacy must undergo the 'critical theory test' to ensure that the apparent acceptance is not a product of false consciousness and that beliefs supporting legitimacy do not only serve the interests of the powerful.[14]

Once this demand is recognized, we can address the remaining concern raised by Leader Maynard and Worsnip about the potential inconsistency in political realism when it resists relying on moral normativity or prepolitical reasons. As they put it, 'Once one's concept of politics becomes relatively thick, it can no longer just be taken as given that one must engage in such politics rather than something else, independently of any prepolitical reasons to do so' (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 784). By politics becoming 'relatively thick', they mean that politics is understood not merely as a domain of power and domination but as a realm concerned

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[14]It is possible to link this demand with Williams' genealogical critique (or destructive genealogy, distinct from vindicatory genealogy). For an elaboration of this method in Williams, see Russell (2018), and for vindicatory genealogy, see Queloz (2021, 155–192).

with the idea of consent or acceptability of a legitimation story. Specifically, they ask, 'Why should we … engage in relationships of authority justified by a legitimating story that meets the critical theory principle?' They suggest that such engagement must be grounded in 'prepolitical reasons' (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018). However, this critique may miss the mark in the context of political realism. As Williams contends, the issue is not why people engage in relationships of authority – they are already embedded in politics. The real question is what they can do once they are within this political framework. The role of immanent critique in this framework is crucial. It exposes the underlying reasons for the acceptance of authority and reveals how legitimacy is maintained. In doing so, it demonstrates that political realism has its own evaluative standards, independent of a need for distinctively political normativity. According to Williams, politics operates by using symbolic power to 'cause belief in others' in order to promote and solidify the order of authority, leading them (including 'less empowered' or 'radically disadvantaged', Williams 2008, 5) to accept an order that only benefits the powerful. It is for this purpose that Williams proposes the critical theory principle, whose purpose it is to examine and reveal the power relations typically concealed by symbolic power and the workings of politics. This approach allows political realism to be consistent without relying on external moral norms. Instead, it provides an internal critique of political practices, showing that the legitimacy of authority must be justified within the context of existing power relations and symbolic structures, rather than through an appeal to prepolitical moral reasons. His approach highlights that the legitimacy of political authority must be continually justified and re-examined through immanent critique, ensuring that it serves more than just the interests of the powerful.

Conclusion

The article emphasizes three demands in Williams' political realism. It argues that on strength of these demands, Williams' political realism possesses its own prescriptive criteria and critical force. It does not necessarily requires a distinctively political normativity. Similar to Weber, Williams stresses that a state must attend to its legitimation story if it aims to maintain political order and foster seemingly voluntary compliance rather than compliance that relies on violence. This belief is rooted in Williams' repeated reference to the notion that 'power cannot be self-legitimating'. While acknowledging that situations where violence prevails do exist,

Williams contends that they do not constitute politics as they do not reflect the functioning of politics in normal social and cultural circumstances. This is because such situations undermine compliance and run counter to the human capacity to live under an intelligible order of authority. Consequently, politics is inherently concerned with justifying explanations, legitimation stories, 'MS', BLD, and legitimacy – all of them essentially referring to different dimensions of the same concept from this perspective.

These concerns, namely capturing the functioning of politics in normal social and political circumstances, distinguishing politics from sheer coercive power, and emphasizing politics' defining feature that caters to human capacity, give rise to the *Discursive Demand* and *Intelligibility Demand*. Both demands are inherent in what Williams perceives as a political situation. According to Williams, a political situation necessitates the satisfaction of both discursive and intelligibility demands. However, just as securing stability, safety, peace, and the conditions of cooperation is an insufficient condition of the descriptive *de jure* legitimacy, satisfying the BLD is also insufficient for fully normative *de jure* legitimacy. Symbolic power can influence belief-formation and lead us to accept a state as LEG, even if it only works for the interest of the powerful. Therefore, political realism contends that legitimacy must be vindicated again through the 'Critical Theory Test' (*Reflective Vindication Demand*) to prevent the role of 'false consciousness' in generating legitimacy.

Williams recognizes that politics needs to achieve compliance in relation to the exercise of coercive power through justifying explanations. He also emphasizes that compliance can be driven by symbolic power for reasons that may not align with one's interests. If the former form of power, sheer coercive power (or real power), is constitutive of politics, the latter form of power (symbolic power) is equally significant. This reinforces Williams' claim that 'the situation of one lot of people terrorizing another lot of people is not per se a political situation'. Given that no state can afford to disregard political order and obedience to authority, both sheer coercive power and symbolic power will be employed. Therefore, it is the task of political philosophy to unveil the mechanisms of both – not only sheer coercive power – and determine appropriate responses by considering the social, economic, and political forces at play in the realm of politics. In doing precisely these, political realism is by no means purely descriptive and does not require any external moral resources to be evaluative and prescriptive. For political realism, legitimacy, BLD, coercive power, 'MS', false consciousness, and symbolic

power form an integral whole – none can be replaced by morality. Without grasping all of these elements, our understanding of politics remains incomplete.

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