Realism and Real Politics.

The gap between promise and practice in Bernard Williams' realism

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Abstract

This paper seeks to show that Bernard Williams' approach to legitimacy falls short of its aspirations in ways that cast doubt on its fitness for guiding the practice of future realist political theory. More precisely, the paper focuses on the shortcomings of Williams' realism in establishing a connection to (the practices of) politics, and on how to redeem those shortcomings in a way that would render them suitable for guiding future realist political theory. The first substantive section of the paper considers how compatible Williams' commitments to diagnosis and interpretation are, with how he spells out his realist thought. The second section argues that making good on Williams' commitments requires realist political theorists to rethink the sources of their insights and the basis of their claims, and sketches pragmatist and ethnographic approaches as promising examples of how realists could match theoretical commitments in practice.

Introduction

Bernard Williams' posthumously published political-theoretical writings have been a major source of inspiration for 'doing realism', inspiring both liberal and more radical forms of realism, and are relatable to prescriptive and interpretive understandings of realism (see e.g. Freeden, 2012; Horton, 2017).¹ One important aspect of these writings that has thus far received sparse attention is that Williams seeks to develop his distinctively political thought through connecting political theory closely to the practices of politics in two key ways. First, he uses a diagnosis of the conditions of legitimation in current politics to situate his approach, which he boils down to the slogan 'LEG + Modernity = Liberalism' (Williams, 2005, p. 10). Second, he emphasizes the importance of interpretation for political theory, e.g. by portraying the intelligibility of legitimation stories as a matter of contextual sense-making. These commitments are important for the development of realism because they could establish the hitherto often missing link to concrete political phenomena.

This paper will seek to contribute to debates about the future of realist political theory by engaging these two commitments of Williams in two ways, one critical and one constructive. The critical contribution of the paper consists of showing how Williams' realist thought falls short of its own commitment to connect to the practices of politics. Criticisms of the Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD) are far from new (e.g. Sleat, 2010; Bavister-Gould, 2013), and Ed Hall (2014) has provided

¹ Williams's realism is discussed in, amongst others, Flathman, 2010; Frazer, 2010; Bavister-Gould, 2013; Forrester, 2012; Sleat, 2010; 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Hall, 2014; Jubb, 2015; Sagar, 2016; Cozzaglio Greene &, 2019; Crowder, 2019.

an in-many-respects convincing defense of the BLD against a range of potentially damaging criticisms. However, this paper mounts a novel set of criticisms centered on whether Williams follows his own two key suggestions for connecting political theory (more) closely to the practices of politics. Thereby, the paper seeks to cast doubt on Williams' writings as a promising model for doing realism. The constructive contribution consists, first, of showing what change in methods and approaches would be needed to overcome Williams' shortcomings, and, second, of sketching examples of how the shortcomings could be addressed (which includes reflections on how these changes would affect the meaning of realist political theory). More substantively, rather than focus on the politics legitimization is supposed to found, one key remedy to the shortcomings of Williams' approach is a shift of attention to the politics of legitimization.

I will proceed as follows: After a brief introduction to Williams' thought on legitimacy and legitimization, the first main section will survey the two ways in which Williams seeks to connect political theory more closely to the practices of politics: diagnosis and interpretation. For each of these ways of connecting to politics, I will first show that Williams' realism, as presented in *In the Beginning was the Deed*, relies on them. Then I will demonstrate how Williams respectively falls short of his own aspirations for connecting his thought to the practices of politics. In the second main section, I will discuss how remedying these shortcomings leads to forms of theorizing more focused on the sources and status of its claims about reality, which takes us beyond Williams' theoretical and methodological framework, and toward opening realism to a focus on meaning-making as exemplified by ethnographic and pragmatist approaches.

1 Williams' commitment to connecting political theory to the practices of politics

To set the scene, a short sketch of Williams' account of legitimacy and legitimization is in order.² According to Bernard Williams, legitimacy depends on the substantive provision of order and safety by a state – which he calls answering the 'first political question' – and on successfully meeting what he calls the Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD). The first political question could not be answered by claimants to authority who fail to provide 'order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation' (Williams, 2005, p. 3). Williams excludes cases from consideration, in which 'the society is so disordered that it is not clear whether there is a state' (Williams, 2005, p. 4).³ The form the BLD takes is intertwined with the concept of politics: 'a demand for justification of coercive power, if such a demand genuinely exists, is implicit in the very idea of a legitimate state, and so is inherent in any politics.' (Williams, 2005, p. 8) Without attempts for legitimization from the claimant to authority addressed to all potential subjects, which establish a political relationship, there is no politics, just warfare or domination. Williams argues that when a claimant to authority maintains that the coerced would be wrong to resist or rebel, s/he makes a claim to transcend the conditions of warfare which 'gives rise to a demand for justification' (Williams, 2005, p. 6). However, as Williams cautions, an explicit demand is not the best guide for such a demand:

'We cannot say that it is either a necessary or a sufficient condition of there being a (genuine) demand for justification, that someone demands one. It is not sufficient, because anyone who feels he has a grievance can raise a demand, and there is always

² However, I will not go into detail, as the paper brackets the evaluation of other aspects of Williams' realist thought to concentrate on how it seeks to connect to practices of politics.

³ We may wonder whether legitimacy applies only to states or to any form of order in which claims are made that rebellion would be wrong? Williams only considers states (Williams, 2005, p. 4). Raekstad (2018) presents a compelling argument for worrying about Williams' state-centrism.

some place for grievance. It is also not a necessary condition, because people can be drilled by coercive power itself into accepting its exercise.’ (Williams, 2005, p. 6)

The conceptual stipulation is separable from the content of particular answers to the legitimization demand. What content is deemed to be an acceptable answer to the BLD is contextually specific and historically contingent (Williams, 2005, p. 8). A necessary condition for an acceptable answer is that it must be different from the problem, which means that the power of the claimant to authority cannot be the exclusive reason for accepting a legitimization story (see Williams 2002; Prinz and Rossi, 2017; Aytac, 2020). In short, normative legitimacy then has three conditions for Williams: the establishment of order, the establishment of a political relationship between claimant to authority and its addressees, and the successful meeting of the BLD. In theorizing these elements, Williams seeks to connect to the practices of politics through what I will call diagnosis and interpretation.

1.1 *Diagnosis*

In an essay on toleration, Williams claims that ‘instead of trying to reach the politics of liberalism from a moral assumption [...], we should consider first the politics of liberalism’ (Williams, 2005, p. 135). In Hall’s words, Williams’ political theorizing starts from ‘looking at the existent character of political rule’ (Hall, 2015, pp. 268-269). I take these quotations to express Williams’ commitment to diagnosis.⁴ By diagnosis in the field of political theory, I mean a (process of) assessment that is concerned with contextual and historically-formed judgements of the present.⁵ One of Williams’ guiding diagnoses of liberal political rule is captured in the formula of ‘LEG + Modernity = Liberalism’ (Williams, 2005, p. 10). Another diagnosis is that ‘now and around here’ legitimization stories, e.g. those based on racism, are no longer successful (Williams, 2005, p. 7). This short overview shall suffice to demonstrate that the diagnosis of the modern, liberal politics ‘now and around here’ – arguably a loose phrase which could be taken to refer to his focus on post-industrialist and post-imperial liberal-democratic states – arguably plays an important role in Williams’ late writings.⁶

However, how plausible is the claim that Williams indeed starts from ‘looking at the existent character of political rule’ (Hall, 2015, pp. 268-269)? The ‘existent character’ is only very cursorily described – ‘LEG + Modernity = Liberalism’ (Williams, 2005, p. 10) – which could be supplemented with Williams’ earlier description of liberal societies as those that seek ‘to combine the rule of law with a liberty more extensive than in most earlier societies, a disposition to toleration, and a commitment to some kinds of equality’ (Williams, 2002, p. 264). Either account may not be wrong as such, but underspecified and selective, as the politics of contemporary liberal rule – one could e.g. think of rampant inequality and precarity, which have led to questions about legitimacy and the limitations of liberty and toleration in the context of the so-called war on terrorism – receive no attention (for contributions to the recent relationship between liberal philosophy and liberal politics, see e.g. Duff, 2017; L. Finlayson, 2015; Freedman, 1996; Losurdo, 2010; Hindess, 2008). If the commitment to starting from the politics of liberalism was supposed to contribute to

⁴ Whilst this interpretation might be surprising for an eminent 20th century moral philosopher, it is arguably fitting for what would have become a more developed political philosophy, if judged based on his posthumously published writing (see also the discussions of Williams’ intellectual trajectory listed in FN1 above).

⁵ My understanding of diagnosis draws on Hans Sluga’s (2014) more elaborate characterization of what good diagnosis would consist of (2014, 25).

⁶ Interpretation, which I will discuss separately below, is one of the main ways for Williams to come to such diagnostic insights (Williams, 2005, p. 11; also see below).

distinguishing Williams' approach from moralism (Williams, 2005, pp. 1-2), then his cursory diagnostic remarks do not carry very far. Even a commentator sympathetic to Williams thinks that Rawls – often invoked as an opponent of realism – 'is in fact clearer than Williams is about the relatively restricted scope of the interpretation of the political situation on which his principles rely' (Jubb, 2017, p. 121).⁷

The general concern about the quality of Williams' diagnosis extends to how he construes the BLD. For one, making the founding of a political relationship central to the account of legitimation is, in a world in which few do not find themselves under the authority of a government throughout their lives, rather reminiscent of approaches to political theory which Williams criticizes for 'addressing a set of founding fathers, "just off the boat"' (Williams, 2005, p. 58). Such approaches could (to varying degrees of plausibility) proceed as if political relations first needed to be created.⁸ The problem with the focus on the foundation of the political relationship is that it takes attention away from the contemporary equivalent, in which nearly everyone is, from birth, confronted with the results of the (unquestioned) assumption that such a relationship exists. A further indicator of this diagnostic shortcoming is that one of the main illustrations of his approach is drawn from antiquity (the Helots' position in Sparta, see Williams, 2005, pp. 5-6, 24, 95). Whilst this illustration is in keeping with his emphasis on the physically coercive aspect of authority – Williams seems to be mainly concerned with when rebellion is (un)justified (Williams, 2005, p. 6) – the question arises of whether this focus corresponds to the kind of coercion legitimation is supposed to authorize 'now and around here'. Arguably, in contemporary societies legitimation is not just about authorization of coercion as protection from arbitrary rule or the war of all against all, but also about the provision of various goods, services, and identification, which are not entirely under the control of the state, e.g. the availability of goods or healthcare service, or group identity narratives. Current legitimation crises across the (Western) world could be understood to follow this more capacious understanding of legitimation, as these crises seem to involve people unwilling to reproduce that order because they think it has failed to legitimate itself by not delivering e.g. existential stability, growth, or progress (think e.g. of Brexit). Legitimations limited to aiming at the acceptance of state rule are no longer sufficient, because the maintenance of order depends not only on the acceptance of state authority but also on the motivation to actively contribute to the wider reproduction of the social order. In short, Williams' diagnostic efforts fall short of connecting to the practices of politics now and around here, because it does not accommodate important dimensions of legitimation practices.

1.2 Interpretation

Williams' theory of legitimacy relies on, and emphasizes the importance of, interpretation: he stipulates that legitimation stories offered by claimants to authority need to 'make sense' to their addressees as 'an example of authoritative order' to be effective (Williams, 2005, p. 11). Judging whether or not something 'makes sense' in such a way, which Williams calls 'a category of historical understanding' or 'a hermeneutical category' (Williams, 2005, p. 11), is an act of interpretation in

⁷ Arguably, Rawls' account of his context 'as pluralistic in outlook, modern political institutions as constitutional democracies, and modern people as preoccupied with issues of freedom and equality' could still be viewed as a 'woefully selective [...] picture of the world that an eighteenth-century savant might have recognized. The cultural, social and political transformations of more recent times seem to have left few imprints on it.' (Sluga, 2014, p. 24)

⁸ Making the founding of a political relationship central when it is not in practice, might be viewed then as the kind of "founding father"-mentality-based abstraction, for which Williams criticizes e.g. Rousseau, Plato, Rawls, Dworkin (2005, 12, 57-58).

as far as it is focused on deciphering the social making of meaning (Williams, 2005, pp. 11-13; see also Jubb, 2017, pp. 116-119). Meaning-making is especially important when it has a normative dimension, as when people are interpreting their own political and social order (Williams, 2005, p. 11). This view is in line with Williams' previous writings, as e.g. the argument that for thick ethical concepts, meanings shape evaluative practices (Williams, 1985, pp. 140-142). Williams' proposal that 'liberal political theory should shape its account of itself more realistically on what is plausibly politics' (Williams, 2005, p. 13), which follows his insight that '[w]hat people actually want or value under the name of some given position may be indeterminate and various', further reinforces the importance of interpretation.⁹

I will now explore how Williams practices his commitment to interpretation with respect to constructing the BLD. I will argue that Williams' interpretations of the establishment of a political relationship and of the demand for legitimation fall short of considering the complexity of this relationship, and remain too reliant on an abstract and formal account of legitimation and politics.

Interpreting the claim-making involved in the BLD

As outlined above, Williams regards the attempt by a claimant to authority to offer a legitimation as the initial and necessary step for establishing a political relationship to the addressees (Williams, 2005, pp. 3-8). However, the idea that the establishment of a political relationship is (at least initially) exclusively up to the claimant to authority seems hardly compatible with the modern imaginary of democratic politics. Imagine a case in which a claimant to authority may not wish to extend a political relationship to portions of the people over whom they exercise power. These groups, who are being denied a political relationship and do not have a prospect of establishing such a relationship elsewhere, then decide to contest the regime rather than engage in warfare (see Tilly & Tarrow, 2006). Even though the claimant to authority has not offered a political relationship, a demand for legitimation has emerged. On Williams' account, this situation might not count as a form of politics. One might counter this thought by suggesting that without having established a political relationship, the contestation of legitimacy makes little sense, because the addressees of the contestation would not be concerned with it, unless they were seeking to successfully legitimate their rule. Against this view, I would submit that under the modern democracy imaginary, the response by those who are being *affected* by the claimant to authority also matters. Williams' prioritization of the claimant to authority conveys an interpretive lack, as it does not view the interpretation of the establishment of a political relationship as such a two-way street.

This interpretive lack is not a one-off problem. Other key aspects of Williams' BLD offer this one-way street in reversed order: whilst the claimant to authority establishes a political relationship by offering a legitimation story to every claimed subject, the *demand* for legitimation originates from the subjects. The focus on the subjects as origin of the demand for legitimation seems to be too clear-cut. In addition to the idea of subjects demanding legitimation individually from the authorities, we could understand the actions of the claimant to authority as a demand to be legitimated (Barker, 2000). At the same time, we could view any demand by the subjects for legitimation as a representative claim to be recognized as a people (Saward, 2006). This would seem to be especially pertinent to Williams' chosen context of contemporary politics, which have seen increasing self-reflexive concern from the authorities for the power of norms of legitimacy

⁹ Hall's (2015, p. 476) claim that for Williams, 'judgments about what makes sense [...] must be sensitive to the exigencies of real-world politics', suggests that interpretation and diagnosis are closely connected commitments.

(Thornhill, 2011). On this view, it would be plausible to extend Williams' interpretation of legitimations by reading them as self-legitimizations of the rulers and as legitimations of the people, i.e. a recognition of them as the source of power and the appropriate addressee of state power (Barker, 2000). In short, Williams' interpretation of the claim-making involved in the BLD does not capture its (full) complexity. I will now turn to the tension between Williams' commitment to interpretation with his understanding of legitimation and politics.

The tension between a formal understanding of legitimation and politics, and the commitment to interpretation

Michael Freeden argues that 'the assumption that the BLD can be formulated by constructing effective and generally understood regulative moral principles [...] by which a state is made legitimate in a world of linguistic and conceptual pluralism and indeterminacy' is an indication for 'the spectre of ideal theory' haunting Williams' approach (Freeden, 2017, p. 356). The evaluation of legitimation based on regulative moral principles would supposedly allow assessing whether a legitimation has been offered (and whether it is successful) in ways which are not susceptible to deep interpretive disagreement. Williams' commitment to interpretation would seem to be in tension with his understanding of the evaluation of legitimations. An account of legitimation driven by interpretation would arguably need to leave room for a more substantive and contestable view of what (successful) legitimation means. (This point connects back to the need for diagnosis that could investigate in more detail e.g. what is perceived as a legitimation offer, and what is considered relevant for its evaluation.) On such a view, there is no abstract position available within the interpretation process to evaluate any legitimation offered by a claimant to authority (see Frazer, 2017, p. 334; A. Finlayson, 2015, 2017). Meeting the commitment to interpretation would mean that escaping deep (interpretive) disagreement does not seem possible when it comes to (concepts of) legitimation. In short, there could not be one fixed BLD structure that is filled with contextual meaning, but rather the structure of the BLD itself would be up to interpretive disagreement as well.

The BLD, in turn, relies on the conceptual derivation of politics, which exhibits a similar tension between the limitation of interpretative disagreement qua formalization and the commitment to interpretation. Williams claims that there is no politics without an attempt to legitimate rule. When he writes about the BLD that '[i]t is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics' (Williams, 2005, p. 5), he implies an understanding of politics as distinguished from unaccounted-for power. It is against this background that Williams claims that the situation of one lot of people terrorizing another is 'not *per se* a political situation' (Williams, 2005, p. 5). If Williams sees politics as the tool to alleviate or replace the terrorization of some by others, then politics is primarily defined by its normative function rather than by mechanisms or modes of exercising power – e.g. a normative function of limiting a regime so that it does not leave its subjects 'radically disadvantaged' (Williams, 2005, pp. 4-5).¹⁰ Scholars of politics committed to interpretation may worry that there is no perspective available to look at politics *per se* for those living in the society in question. Put differently, Williams retains the external position of a normative-prescriptive theorist who can abstractly identify *the* problem (a lack of order or an order in which one lot of people terrorizes another) and *the* solution (politics *per se*). The conceptual derivation of politics ties legitimation to politics and politics to the solution of the problem (i.e. of the terrorization of one

¹⁰ Or at least lets them be justifiably at war with the authorities.

lot of people by another). This framework takes precedence over the communications of claimants to authority locally read as legitimations and accepted as such. Williams mentions such 'local legitimations', but deems them subordinate to the categories of the abstract framework, as he asks of any 'local legitimation': 'But is it LEG? Is the BLD satisfied?' (Williams, 2005, p. 5). In any concrete case, interpretation might well reveal conflicting claims, e.g. about what 'terrorizing' means and about who terrorizes whom.

These arguments lead us to the need to distinguish between the substantive political aspects of legitimation, as opposed to the politics it is thought to found or make possible.¹¹ Interpretation-dependent approaches like Williams' which focus on the origin of the political relationship are vulnerable to the charge of contradiction, when they claim that what counts as a rationale for legitimation depends on whether it makes sense to the addressees. In Williams' case, the contradiction is that the BLD is supposed to help us detect the establishment of a political relationship, and be a criterion for seeing whether this political relationship is endorsed by its addressees as one of authority. However, the reliance on what makes sense to the addressees presupposes collective interpretive frames being in place before order is established by the new claimant to authority.

Overall, Williams' account of the process of legitimation (and the initiation of politics) fails to make good on his commitment to contextual interpretation. The BLD turns out to share at least some aspects with a regulatory principle, which only allows for interpretive contextual variation with respect to parts of the content, but not with respect to how the BLD itself is set up. In this sense, it is reminiscent of aspects of the ideal theorizing he seeks to replace. More specifically, his approach is reductive about the possibilities of how a political relationship may be initiated, what interest the claimant to authority may have in legitimation, and about the connection between legitimation and the beginning of politics. How Williams uses interpretation is then not a helpful example for doing realism, because it remains at a relatively superficial level, which avoids the difficulties of substantive interpretive disagreement.

2 Re-connecting realism to the practices of politics through methodological innovation

The criticisms above show that Williams' approach does not make good on his own commitments to diagnosis and interpretation and that, at least in respect to its connection to the practices of politics, it is not a promising guide for doing realism. To recapitulate, the shortcomings of Williams' connection to the practices of politics fall into two main blocks: firstly, a lack of consideration of the contextual specificities and complexities of practices of legitimation and of liberal rule more generally; secondly, an overly formal understanding of legitimation, legitimacy, and politics, which limits the scope of interpretation in his theorizing, tilts it toward prescription, and leads – despite his aspiration – to an absence of the plausibly political.

These shortcomings do not show that Williams' ambition to distinguish politics from war or mere domination is futile or impossible. They are compatible with granting that Williams is right that the distinctiveness of politics may have something to do with claims to, and demands for, legitimation.¹² Rather, they focus on how Williams' specifications of e.g. what constitutes a claim to legitimacy or demand for legitimation relate to his realist commitments and ambitions. Williams'

¹¹ Thanks to Alan Finlayson for suggesting this phrasing.

¹² Thanks to Bernardo Zacka for raising this point.

tying of the distinctiveness of politics to claims to, and demands for, legitimation may be compatible with his realist commitments, but - contrary to his commitments – Williams does not engage in a careful reconstruction of the ways in which such claims and/or demands are made. He does not investigate how the evaluative frameworks, to which people ‘now and around here’ take recourse, are constituted, beyond his vague reference to liberalism, which seems to assume that its contextual meaning would not require complex interpretation.

Williams’ shortcomings may turn out to be productive: they could serve as a useful critical foil for thinking about how to practice realist political theory, because they could be viewed as closely connected to two more general problems that political realism is facing, namely the tension between shallow and deep understandings of reality (Edyvane, 2020; Frazer, 2017) and the dichotomy between interpretive and prescriptive forms of realism (Freedden, 2012). The challenge the first problem presents to practicing realism is that identifying exclusively with either the shallow or deep understanding would make it impossible for realism to connect to as comprehensive as possible a spectrum of manifestations of political thought and action. The second problem presents the challenge of retaining the distinctiveness of the normativity of realist theorizing, which involves generating normative orientation from interpretation. For both problems, a way forward would be to enable the fruitful combination of both sides that strengthens the distinctiveness of realism as a normatively-orienting perspective of theorizing, which is built on its connection to contextual practices of politics.

I will briefly outline the problems in turn. Derek Edyvane (2020) has recently argued that there is a tension, if not contradiction between two understandings of reality that realists in political theory are claiming to investigate. On one hand, there is the interest in the surface phenomena of everyday talk, the fleeting platitudes of politics, or the measurable preferences and motivations for action (the “shallow” understanding). Theorizing reality on this view starts by taking seriously, and engaging with, what is readily out there. On the other hand, there is concern with focusing on the underlying structures and subtler forms of power. Reality, on the latter view, needs to be accessed through critique (the “deep” understanding). Above, we witnessed Williams’ aspiration to the combination of these two understandings, which, however, falls short with respect to the surface phenomena. The other problem is the dichotomy between interpretive and prescriptive approaches to realism. A potent line of criticism developed by Michael Freedden (2012) and John Horton (2017) contends that realists do not depart significantly from their opponents, because in their focus on the prescription of norms or principles, realists ignore everyday political expressions just as much as idealists or moralists. Interpretive realism, in contrast, is mainly driven by the aim of understanding not just ‘the fundamental concepts of political discourse and argument and at elucidating the structures of different ways of thinking about politics’ (Horton, 2017, 499), but also ‘the place of leadership, the role of contingency, the idea of political judgement and the meaning of political possibility’ (Horton, 2017, 499). We have seen above that Williams, though committed to their combination, tends to default to the prescriptive approach.

I will seek to demonstrate below how methodological innovations in realism-adjacent political theory provide realists with tools not only to redeem Williams’ shortcomings, but also to address the two more general problems to practicing realism sketched just above, by providing a closer interplay between lived experience and theorizing. I will first look at the examples of Thomas

Fossen's pragmatist approach to legitimacy and then at the uses of ethnography for political theory.¹³ These examples are modular; they do not need to be, but could potentially be, combined.¹⁴

Thomas Fossen's pragmatism-inspired approach to legitimacy (2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2019; for critical discussion, see Erman & Möller, 2015, 2017, 2018, Prinz, 2020b) strikes me as an apt source of inspiration for developing an interpretative realist perspective on legitimacy and legitimation.¹⁵ Fossen views legitimacy not as a question of moral knowledge, but of practical judgment (Fossen, 2020/forthcoming), the interpretation of which requires a close connection to the practices of legitimation. Building on Robert Brandom's philosophy of language, Fossen's approach centres on the practices of stance-taking, understood broadly as people's positioning in response to being governed through words and actions. The practices of stance-taking highlight the performative dimension of politics, not in terms of the performances of elected officials but of citizens and denizens. The interpretation of stance-taking is based on the representations people give of the authorities, by which they are ruled, their own identities, and on their accounts of the events, against the background of which they are engaging the authorities (Fossen, 2013).¹⁶ It thereby engages with their first-person accounts ('I' or 'we') of being governed. This echoes Michael Saward's argument that the process of claim-making so central to legitimation moves the 'focus further on the constitution of subjects, the making of identities, and the partiality of each of these processes' (2006, p. 312).

A pragmatism-inspired approach to legitimacy has the potential to make good on several of the limitations diagnosed in Williams' approach above, because it starts from interpreting the concrete stance-taking practices of people, and gives more sustained attention to how these practices produce normative positions and expectations, thereby opening up the inquiry to the relationship between the self-understandings of people and the regime, and how each relate to collective imaginaries. It has a strong diagnostic component, in as far as it pays close attention to the representations people give of the authorities by which they are ruled, their own identities, and their accounts of the events. Fossen's approach further provides theoretical attention to, and analysis of, de-legitimation and contestation, thus offering a way to extend the limited-range politics at play in Williams' account of legitimation (Fossen, 2019). To return to the example of really-existing liberal democracy mentioned above, pragmatist approaches would seek to analyse practices of stance-taking contained in contemporary protests against austerity, racism, as well as in surging conspiratorial movements in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. These analyses would focus

¹³ Despite the oft-repeated criticism that realism is stuck in debates about methodology (see Rossi, 2016Sl for an overview), it is surprising that comparatively little has been written on how realist research designs and methods differ or how they gain insights other than through philosophical stipulation (for an exception, see Zacka and Herzog, 2019; for the problems with remaining exclusively reliant on philosophical stipulation, see McNay, 2014). If the practical question of doing realist political theory turns out to be one that is directly connected to questions of methods and meta-theory (see L. Finlayson, 2015; Sluga, 2014, p. 7), this somewhat mitigates the worry that realists spend too much time on such questions.

¹⁴ There are other promising candidates for consideration, including Alan Finlayson's version of rhetorical political analysis as following political theory 'as it appears in the wild' Finlayson (2012), or Hans Sluga's (2014) diagnostic approach which offers novel insights on sources and the status of political judgement knowledge for political philosophers. I have incorporated some of their key theoretical innovations above. I decided to focus on pragmatist and ethnographic examples, because they are more closely related to the topic of legitimation.

¹⁵ On the affinities between realism and pragmatism, see Festenstein, 2016; Forstenzer, 2019.

¹⁶ Whilst theories of legitimacy often separate the discussion of the norms and the discussion of the motivations for abiding by said norms, Fossen's approach concentrates on the pragmatics of judgment which combine the explication of norms and motivations (Fossen, 2020/forthcoming).

on how regimes are portrayed in these practices of stance taking, and how those involved sketch their (collective) identity, and on how they connect their stance taking to accounts of (key) events. These analyses would provide a basis for developing a broader understanding of what factors into evaluations of legitimacy, as well as sketch a range of existing evaluative frameworks.

Recent ethnographically-inspired work in political theory (see e.g. Zacka, 2017; Longo & Zacka, 2020; Prinz, 2020a; for a background on political ethnography, Schatz, 2009) is another fruitful source for redeeming the shortcomings of Williams' approach. Ethnographic inquiry focuses on 'understanding the meanings with which people make sense of their reality' (Longo and Zacka, 2019, 1069). It heavily draws on interpretation and is often guided by a general commitment to interpretivism.¹⁷ The openness of ethnographers to the multiplicity of meanings and ambiguity (Schatz, 2017, p. 136), which is often coupled with an understanding of 'political phenomena as constantly evolving' (Simmons and Rush Smith, 2017, p. 128), supports complex interpretation.

Bernardo Zacka's (2017) inquiry into how the use of discretion by entry-level bureaucrats, who are the face of the state, affects the values that public service instantiates, serves as a good example for how to harness many of the potentials of ethnographic methods specifically for realist political theory. Zacka uses an ethnographic sensibility, based on, but not limited to, participant observation, to guide his normative inquiry (see also Zacka et al. 2020). Such a sensibility is driven by a commitment to the view that in order to make sense of the meaning that fills social life, attention to everyday actions, language, and objects is crucial (Yanow, 2009, 33). By participant-observing everyday actions and utterances in the context of an outsourced poverty reduction centre, Zacka connected to the platitudinously political and followed the construction of concerns of collective action and value. Zacka (2017, p. 258) concludes from his inquiry that we, as political and moral philosophers, may 'open ourselves up to the possibility that we may have something to learn from, not simply about, how [ordinary people] answer [normative] questions', such as 'what we have reason to value, what we owe to each other, and what kind of persons we should aspire to be'.¹⁸ Questions remain about whom exactly to listen to and whether all answers could be learned from.¹⁹ Whilst this question cannot be exhaustively addressed here, I would like to offer two preliminary considerations. First, this question is especially relevant as ethnographic inquiries do not usually start from a closely specified problem. The choice of the communities of practice which are going to be engaged by the ethnographic political theorist would ideally over time include as broad a range of lived experiences in a social order as possible. Second, there would be few limits to what answers could be useful for connecting theory to practice, because there is both diagnostic and a normative interest in them. Even normatively incoherent or repulsive answers could have a diagnostic use. To return again to Zacka's case of the discretion of low-level bureaucrats – an example with high relevance to the challenges of really-existing liberal democracies – ethnographic methods are used to bring to the fore how the evaluations of important exercises of state power do not match the criteria that dominate political philosophy, but rather allow grappling with the complexity and variety of evaluations emerging from the community of practice and its public-

¹⁷ Due to commitments to constructivism, the entanglement of knowledge in power relationships, and the focus on collective meaning-making, interpretivism is useful to overcome the shortcomings of Williams (see Wedeen, 2009, p. 80-81).

¹⁸ Ethnographic sensibility thus connects to the view that ethnography is a method for providing as much authority as possible to the research subjects over the framework through which they are interpreted (Englund and Leech, 2000).

¹⁹ Thanks to Manon Westphal and Ulrich Willems for raising this concern.

facing interactions. There is not just one ‘liberal’ justification, but rather there is a range of values bureaucrats in a liberal democracy could and do appeal to. Ethnographic methods make us sensitive not only to the complexity and variety but also to the boundaries of practices of justification, as values that fall outside the range recognized by the participants would count as brute power. To use a negative example, there are several ways in which to deem bureaucracies illegitimate – e.g. when they are dominating, inefficient, or unresponsive. To translate to Williams’ terms, we could say that ethnographic methods help see how and where participants in the practice of bureaucratic discretion (including clients) spot brute power and thereby illuminate the limits of politics.

Ethnographically-versed realist political theory could track the (de)politicization of topics, issues, or spheres of life, because its reliance on immersion allows delivering insights into the everyday construction of political reality, and thereby increases the diagnostic scope of political inquiry by rendering the familiar strange or the strange familiar (or what we treat as ‘non-diagnostic’) (Pader, 2006, p. 166). This skill is especially important for realist political theory against the background that ‘[i]n public political dispute political actors do not try to get an audience to agree to conclusions to a shared premise but to share a premise, to draw on a stock of common possible conceptions, elevate one above the others and on this basis ‘naturally’ conclude something’ (Finlayson, 2013, p. 318). These insights, in turn, would help specify the motivations behind people’s values and actions, and thereby help move beyond the dichotomy between moral and political normativity (see for the latter, Jubb, 2019; see Longo and Zacka, 2019). Ethnographically-versed realist political theory could thus help bring together ‘shallow’ and ‘deeper’ accounts of reality by reconstructing understandings of what people are doing and who they are, whilst at the same time interpreting the larger ideational and material power relations that affect people’s values and practices (Prinz, 2020a, p. 82). Ethnographic methods can also provide critical purchase for realist political theorists: they help identify naturalization, which in turn provides a starting point for denaturalizing forms of critique, which gain their critical purchase from within the context of action in question (see Rossi, 2019).²⁰

In terms of finding a realist way to carry out Williams’ normative project of distinguishing politics via interpreting demands for legitimation and/or claims of legitimacy, both Fossen’s pragmatist approach and Zacka’s political ethnography, firstly, reconstruct our practices of legitimation and subject them to a form of critique from within: the grounds on which we confer political authority, and the grounds to which those who want to rule us appeal in order to justify their rule. They are capable of elucidating the complex, varied, and potentially conflicting ways in which legitimacy is demanded and conferred by zooming in on the repertoires of values and their performance. Secondly, pragmatist and ethnographic approaches can also help us envision the conditions in which a social order could ‘exit’ politics – i.e. what kinds of legitimation demands or legitimacy claims are deemed insufficient or unpersuasive, or a mere disguise for the exercise of raw power. In other words, these approaches negatively approximate (threshold) conditions for legitimacy.

In terms of rethinking realism more radically, it is noteworthy that both approaches are forms of inquiry which rely on ‘recursive and reiterative process between theoretical and field encounters’ (Yanow, 2009, 35). This productive intermediation between surprise at lived experience and

²⁰ Drawing on the experience of ‘locat[ing] the ethnographer within networks of power’ (Pachirat, 2009, 144) could help rethink the status of the political theorist vis-à-vis political practice.

theoretical literature is characteristic of an abductive form of inquiry. An abductive form of inquiry is one that starts with a puzzle and draws on the tension between presuppositions and theoretical knowledge, *and* experience of empirical encounters (Yanow, 2009, 35-36). Adopting such an abductive form of inquiry would mean for realist political theory that diagnosis and interpretation of actions, speech, and objects are not (just) an application site for theoretical stipulations or principles, but rather a site of discovery. More specifically, they would be a site for finding and specifying the most pressing concerns in the language that is recognizable to those concerned. In this way, abductive ethnographic work could not only help make good on Williams' commitments to interpretation and diagnosis, but also push realists to reflect about the basis of their claims about reality and their routines of claim-making (What factors into these routines? How are their interpretations weighed against prior theoretical assumptions and knowledge? How are the two combined?). An abductive ethnographic approach would also be well-placed to build a bridge between shallow and deep views of reality. Starting from the interpretation of everyday actions, expressions or objects, it then connects to the background theories and assumptions, which leads to a new look at these actions, expressions, or objects, and might turn up more deep-seated layers of meaning or power relations. This iterative process of interpretation extends both horizontally and vertically, and thereby connects the supposed opposites of shallow and deep reality. Without a consideration of the platitudes, no understanding of the deeper forces at work in the construction of meaning is accessible.

Both pragmatist and ethnographic approaches also have the potential to overcome the dichotomy between prescriptive and interpretive understandings of realist political theory, as they start from the recognition that 'how we know reality and how we articulate that knowledge are themselves part of real historical phenomena and that they are, in any particular moment, one of the constituent elements of a community or a state. Philosophy is thus always a part of politics and of (real) political struggles' (A. Finlayson, 2015, p. 297; see also Sluga, 2014, pp. 6-7). The rethinking of realism inspired by the above examples would seek to provide ways to make the examination of this preformation part of the process of theorizing (see Prinz, 2016). That process would be neither a purely descriptive interpretation - e.g. the interpretation of rhetoric is not separable from the positioning toward politics - nor would the normative orientation emerging from it be primarily prescriptive.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how Williams falls short of his commitment to connecting realist political theory to the practices of politics through diagnosis and interpretation. His diagnosis is not specific to the intricacies of legitimation 'now and around here', even if broadly defined, and thus misses out on the expanding content of legitimation. His commitment to interpretation stops at the surface, being undermined by a formal account of legitimation and politics (and their primacy to the interpretation of local legitimations). Assumptions about the foundation of politics through the claimant to authority further contradict his commitment to interpretation, because they shut out the interpretation of its preconditions. In short, legitimation as the founding of politics rather than the politics of legitimation is the focal point of his approach. Whilst Williams' realist thought does not fulfil its potential for connecting realism to the practices of politics, and thus is not suited to guide future realist theorizing on this matter, it is still a useful 'critical foil': identifying Williams' shortcomings shows that connecting to the practices of politics would require realist political theorists to rethink the basis of their claims about, and their relationship to, politics. I suggested

above that adopting a range of more thoroughly interpretive methods, such as a pragmatist interpretation of stance-taking or ethnographic participant observation would enable the theorist to give a clearer account of how they base their claims on connecting to politics. Doing so would have the additional benefit of providing a way to overcome challenges to realism such as the tension between shallow and deep understandings of reality, and the dichotomy between interpretive and prescriptive perspectives. I have, however, only been able to provide an initial sketch of how these methodological innovations could remedy Williams' shortcomings, and thereby provide a more suitable model for connecting realist political theory to the practices of politics. Further work in this vein needs to link to endeavours of bringing together normative, empirical, and broadly cultural perspectives in other sub-fields of political theory.²¹

²¹ I would first like to thank Manon Westphal and also Ulrich Willems for their insightful comments and editorial guidance, and not least for organizing the workshop in Münster in July 2018 together with John Horton, for which the paper was originally written. I would also like to thank Zoltán Gabor Szűcs and Bernardo Zacka for comments which opened my eyes to where the argument was stuck. Special thanks go to Alan Finlayson and Thomas Fossen for sharing their insights about legitimacy, interpretation, and the politics of theory. The Leverhulme Trust supported work on this paper through an Early Career Fellowship (ECF-2016-227).

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