

# Normativity and Reality: Thinking Politically about Politics

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Rainer Forst

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## 1. Plato's Paradox

Political science is an unusual kind of science. It has one of the longest traditions of all sciences, but it constantly struggles with that tradition. One of the reasons for this is that we have become suspicious of the ethnocentrism of that tradition. But another reason is that the oldest and still most important work in Western political thought, Plato's *Republic*, contains a paradox that still haunts us. Plato argues that the central question of those who seek the truth about politics is the nature of the just political order, and he believes that there is only one right answer to that question, an answer based on a metaphysical idea of the good. However, that idea of the good, although it is generally valid, is not accessible to everyone.

As Plato explains in the parable of the cave, those who have left the realm of the shadows that are falsely regarded as reality – fake reality, we might say – and have ascended the path leading to recognition of the true reality of the good will never be able to return to the cave to explain what they saw, since no one would be able to believe them. Instead, those who had grasped the reality of the good would be killed by those who remain in the cave. Thus the paradox is that the *real* truth about politics is politically uncommunicable given the *realities* of social life.

So Plato – and the tradition of political thought founded by him – leaves us with a complicated heritage, a confusion as to what kind of reality our science is going to explore: the reality of the cave and its infinite power struggles or the real truth of the ideal political order that we should strive for? This tradition leads to a lot of conceptual problems and rifts, if one thinks, for example, of the ways in which the term “realism” is understood. While for some, it refers to the cave reality of self-interested rivalry and the normative arbitrariness of social

life, for others (philosophers mainly) it refers to the view that certain values, including those guiding political life, are true and real.

## 2. The Loss of a Common Language in Political Science

In my view, the Platonic paradox of the political incommunicability of political truth – or, in other words, the incompatibility of two kinds of reality as the object of political science – creates a severe methodological problem within our discipline. The problem goes very deep and ultimately it raises the question of whether political science is a normative or an empirical enterprise. What is our question – to understand and analyze the political orders we live in or to search for the good or just political order? You may of course say that it is both and try and muddle through somehow. Many of our colleagues say that the scientific part is the domain of social and political analysis – of political behavior and institutional mechanisms – and claim, following Weber and others, that the normative part is not really a scientific one. Others call that position positivism and emphasize the importance and independence of normative political philosophy, staying away from the cave, though few among the latter group are comfortable with the term “science,” thus showing that they accept a narrow understanding of the term.

As a result, political science is a discipline that allows itself the luxury of a subdiscipline called political theory (or political philosophy) that used to define the enterprise of political science but in the meantime has given way to a new understanding of what science is. The question of the right or just political order is translated into an empirical program of what certain collectives actually recognize as a legitimate order (following Weber), while the original question is seen as being only of historical interest and a matter of (possibly postcolonial-genealogical) critique or one for Platonic idealists. As a consequence, political theory and the other areas of political science have lost touch with each other and developed languages of their own.

This is regrettable, especially at a time of normative crisis when we are concerned about the future of democracy, the rule of law or multilateral systems of international cooperation, not to speak of social justice – and when we are in need of appropriate conceptual and normative tools to determine,

for example, at which point populism transforms democracy into its opposite, into authoritarianism. Can our voices as political scientists still carry weight in the upheavals of our time if empirical and normative analysis rarely meet? Isn't this a time when there is an urgent need to combine the two perspectives and when we have to resist the arbitrariness of definitions of democracy, justice or the rule of law that use the term democracy for exclusionary and oppressive forms of politics?

### 3. Justification as a Mediating Term

In my following remarks, I take up this challenge and make a suggestion as to how to bridge the seeming abyss between the language of normative political theory and the language of empirical analysis. What is missing, in my view, are *mediating terms* that enable us both to analyze political orders and their dynamics descriptively and to develop normative reflections along the same conceptual lines of analysis as the descriptive work. The mediating term I have in mind is the concept of *justification*.

You might think that this is a typical move by a political philosopher bewitched by Plato, because the realm of justification is basically the realm of values, norms and principles that might be required for normative reflection but is of little use when it comes to understanding real cave life political dynamics of interests, power struggles, institutional mechanisms, path-dependencies, and so on. But this fear is unfounded, for I want to argue for a particular way of understanding the reality of interests, of power and of historical situatedness. In my view, the *real reality* of politics, of the cave as well as of a perspective free (or better: partially free) from the cave, is a *reality of justifications*. We learn to think politically and socially by understanding and using justifications about the foundations and the frameworks of our common life, accepting (often unreflexively), criticizing and occasionally rejecting them, including some rather large and comprehensive narratives. There is no politics outside the realm of justifications. Every single political thought rests on assumptions about how our collective life is and ought to be ordered, and when we think about the "is" – as democratic, productive, one-sided and dysfunctional, or what have you – we use and reproduce justifications.

But note that to speak in this way does not mean that I am speaking of *good* justifications from a reflexive or even a Platonic viewpoint; rather, by justifications in an empirical and descriptive sense I understand what makes people *effectively* think in certain ways and view reality in a certain light. My thesis, in short, is that we do not understand political reality if we do not have access to and the conceptual tools to analyze the multiple – and often contradictory – justifications that constitute political reality as a reality of thought and action. We also do not understand how power works. Let me explain.

#### 4. The Power of Justifications

I will begin with a brief reflection on the concept of power, truly an essential concept for political science, for without power there is no collective normative order.

Let us start with a sober definition of power, close to that of Robert Dahl, who suggested that “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (“The Concept of Power”, 1957). Note that B here is an agent who “does” something that A wants him to do – B is not a mere object, like a stone I kick away, but is still an agent with some freedom of action. So the exercise of power over B requires A to steer B’s actions in such a way that they are still the actions of B, but that they now follow the lines intended by A. If B is an agent, the secret of power is to affect his or her agency internally. In other words, A has to “give” B a motivating reason to act in a particular way.

We can express this by reformulating Dahl's definition of power just a little to say that *power is the capacity of A to motivate B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done*. Power on this definition is normatively neutral, for we need not take a stance (as many do) at this definitional level on whether what A motivates B to think or do is in B’s interest or not – or whether it is justified or not. This is why (contrary to Lukes, for example) I do not think that the concept of power is “essentially contested.”

Note that our definition points to the fact that the real site of the resources for and the exercise of power is the cognitive realm, that is, the realm of

justifications, since A needs to be able to affect and change the realm of motivational reasons for B. Thus we define power such that to have and exercise power means being able to influence, use, determine, occupy or even seal off the space of reasons for others. Power in this sense comes in degrees and can be analyzed along a spectrum of intensities.

Our analysis is still normatively neutral, because the means that A uses to influence or colonize the realm of reasons or justifications for B can be a good speech, a sermon, an ideological world description, a lie, a threat, an order or an act of seduction. Those who convince us as teachers or experts exercise power over us, and those who deceive us or who threaten us (credibly) do so, too. But all power is, as I put it, *noumenal* in nature – that is, it takes place in the realm of reasons and justifications. A credible threat (say, with a gun) “gives” you a reason to act in a certain way, as does an ideology. To be the subject of power means that the justifications that make you think or act in a certain way are determined in relevant ways by others – if the determining in question is unintentional, I call that an effect of power, if it is intentional, then it is an exercise of power.

In this context, I use the terms “reason” or “justification” in a purely descriptive sense. Later, I will say something about good justifications and how they can be produced; but here it is important that we remain at a descriptive level. We fail to understand how power is exercised, either individually, collectively or within structures, if we do not understand the justifications that guide people’s actions, as those who have and those who are subject to power. We also do not understand power shifts, or what it means to lose or acquire more power, if we do not understand the justificatory dynamics in the noumenal realm of reasons. To be sure, these reasons are for the most part not reflected upon or critically tested, but they are nevertheless effective reasons, reasons that “work.”

Based on such an analysis, we can distinguish more concrete forms of power:

*Rule (Herrschaft)* is a form of the exercise of power within structured relations based on certain understandings of legitimacy that support such structures – whatever they may be based on.

*Domination (Beherrschung)* exists where asymmetrical social and political relations backed by hegemonic justifications prevail that limit the space of justification either through ideological force or threats of violence. Political domination exists in two dimensions: that of being ruled by unjustifiable norms and (as a higher-order form of domination) that of the lack of spheres and institutions of justification to discursively question dominant norms and construct new ones.

*Violence (Gewalt)* is an extreme form of the denial of justificatory standing to others, who are thereby reduced to mere physical objects to be moved or destroyed. Such acts often are meant to have noumenal effects of intimidation or deterrence. But with respect to those who are its direct objects, the use of violence may be a reflection of A having lost social power over them, because A no longer tries to move them internally as agents. Think of the kidnapper who kills his victim because the latter is not willing to comply or those who were supposed to pay the ransom refused to do so – which means that the kidnapper's power, as originally intended, fades away, and violence is a reflection of that loss of power. In more political terms, think of the moments at which the tanks in the street lose their power because people overcome their fear or are willing to take the risk of opposing them. Their physical power of destruction is the same as before, but because of a shift in the realm of justifications, their social power has been reduced.

## 5. Narratives, Structures and Reality

Thinking politically about politics requires that we as political scientists find ways to analyze and understand the justificatory dynamics that give rise to normative orders and that stabilize or destabilize them. I speak of normative orders as orders of justification, since they are based on, produce and reproduce justifications for social and political structures and relations. Normative orders in modern societies rest on complex narratives of justification that support existing power structures and enable individuals or groups to exercise power within such structures, that is, to use their noumenal capital as a power resource. My analysis of power does not suggest that those who hold power can autonomously create a comprehensive social space of reasons for others; rather, they are able to use it in a particular way. Narratives

of justification develop historically over long periods of time and form a space of social reasons that provides the justificatory resources for sustaining, changing or rejecting particular normative orders.

Power struggles are struggles to position oneself and one's group within such a social realm in a particular way – and to influence the space of reasons for others. This is true for the nationalist who constructs a xenophobic narrative and for the revolutionary who rejects a dominant ideology. If we want to understand power dynamics within certain normative orders, we need to understand the narratives of justification that dominant groups use and weave together – think of the many strands of discourse within a Trumpian universe, ranging from a Protestant work ethic to racial and racist discourses about who rightly owns a country, giving the term "democracy" an exclusionary meaning. Populists can only be successful if they manage to craft such narratives, combining different normative and historically situated sources and stories into a powerful way of looking at the world, what is wrong with it and how to fix it.

Such narratives of justification, combining national history, often religious ideas, economic reflections, social structure, and so on, create social and political reality. Occasionally, this looks like a dark cave reality, as when a certain ideology restricts the realm of justifications; but such realities can also be opened up, as occurs in a liberation struggle. Understanding political reality requires us to find ways to reconstruct dominant social narratives and their rivals. Only then can we understand why, for example, the concept of democracy, when placed in the justificatory realm of different societies, sometimes has the ring of liberation and sometimes that of colonization.

Can such narratives be reduced to social interests? I don't think so, for if we look at how interests get formed and defined, we eventually find – justifications. We can understand neither individual nor collective interests if we do not understand the strong evaluations (Ch. Taylor) that lie at their basis – some possibly of religious origin, some guided by beliefs in security, material welfare, success and so on. There is no basic raw empirical fact that determines what interests people have and pursue. We are justificatory beings all the way down and our interests depend on what we consider important and justified. True, we often "rationalize" and fabricate such justifications; but this is not because we do not see a justification for what we want but because we see

that it is weak from a public perspective and try to bolster it. If we stick to narrow definitions of self-interest as determining people's behavior, we will never understand, for example, religious motives or the reasons why certain people support certain parties even to the detriment of their “self-interest.”

## 6. A Realistic Normative View

If a realistic conception of political life needs to be sensitive to and analyze the justificatory resources that ground political reality, we can also develop a realistic *normative* perspective from within the cave – and go beyond it.

As I said, no normative order could exist if it was not supported by certain justifications. These have to be structurally reflected and reproduced, regardless of whether the order is a theocracy or a democracy. Following Bernard Williams, we can say that the first political question, that of securing a political order of security, stability and cooperation, is a question of justification, such that there is a “basic legitimation demand” that requires the political order to “offer a justification of its power *to each subject*” (Williams, *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, 4). Williams draws some weak conclusions from this, namely, that basic political justification entails that those who are subject to rule must be offered good reasons why that is not a form of pure domination. But he also draws stronger normative conclusions when he argues that a purely self-serving justification cannot count as a justification: “power itself does not justify” (5). That is a normative, not a descriptive statement, since power, of course, does justify itself (all the time), though often in ideological ways. What Williams does is turn the notion of justification into a *normative* notion, adding criteria for a good political justification. And that leads him to a version of what he calls “the critical theory principle” (6), modelled after Habermas’s discourse theory, which states that “the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified.”

Like Williams, I believe that this is a sound principle, but would add that it is a principle of reason. Reason is the faculty of justification, and normative criteria of good justifications – whether in science, politics or art – are rational criteria. We find such criteria not in a Platonic superworld of “real” values, but by

reconstructing the criteria of validity immanent in the validity claims we make – and since the validity claim of a political norm is that it is generally and reciprocally valid, such norms must be justifiable in reciprocal and general terms.

## 7. A Strong Normative Program

This reflection on criteria of justification opens up the possibility of a strong normative program. I call this a strong program because it operates with heavy normative vocabulary which, however, is not grounded in a Platonic higher reality but – along Kantian lines – in a constructivist reflection on what it means to understand ourselves as normative justificatory beings. As such beings who use our faculty of reason to produce, test and accept or reject justifications, we face the task of constructing a common world of norms that are binding on and justifiable to all who are subjected to them. As agents of construction, we ought to regard ourselves as equal authorities of the norms that bind us all equally and, as such authorities, we respect each other's *right to justification*. The criteria of justification that hold between us as reasonable and responsible beings do not predetermine the content of our normative constructions, but they do determine the procedure of construction and thus also some content, given the respect we owe each other as constructive normative authorities. As such authorities, we are law-makers and law-takers at the same time, and thus the Kantian notion of *dignity* applies to us as subjects with rights and duties of justification.

Wait a minute, you might now object – how exactly did we get from the descriptive justificatory program to the strong normative one? What trick was used here? For surely we never “are” equal normative authorities in the normative orders to which we are subject, and we probably never will be. That may hold true, I would reply, but if you agree with me that it is a serious deficiency of a political order that it does not respect its members as normative authorities who co-determine that order, you will also agree with me that we have to regard ourselves as beings owed recognition of our status as normative agents and equals, thus affirming that, in a normative sense, this is what we are – and, I add, what we “really” are. So the thought of two realities comes back, but not, I think, in a paradoxical way – rather, in a dialectical fashion. Political

science is a methodologically grounded reflection on who and what we are as political, justificatory beings, and it reveals to us that we are always members of different worlds – the world of real and effective justifications, and the world of the possibility of better justifications produced by us. This is not the true world of the ideal good, but a world of a better social and political practice than the one we live in. No actuality can eliminate that possibility completely for us.

Based on the notions of normative authority and the right to justification, which says that no one must be subject to norms, whether of a moral or a political-legal kind, that cannot be properly justified to him or her, other normative notions fall into place. Those *liberties* are justified which reflect the kind of freedom we have as equal normative authorities in the political and legal realm, that is, those liberties that cannot be reciprocally and generally rejected among normative equals. *Equality* means that from a moral point of view we are equals and that we have a basic claim to have a secure and equal standing as non-dominated legal, political and social subjects. *Domination* means being subject to a normative order without proper justification and without procedures and institutions of justification being in place; thus, non-domination in a legal, political and social sense means having the *rights* that are required to be secure from such forms of domination and having opportunities to change the normative order one is subject to within adequate structures of collective justification.

*Democracy* thus does not simply represent one “value” among others. Rather, it appears as the political practice of *justice*, as the institutionalization of a form of non-arbitrary political rule that reflects our standing as equal normative authorities, both in our roles as law-makers and as subjects of the law. Such a normative notion of democracy is surely a regulative notion that can only be attained in piecemeal fashion, but it is not based on an ideal form of the perfect democracy; rather, democracy progresses practically by transforming relations of rule and/or domination into relations of justification, aiming to establish a basic structure of justification that secures our standing as non-dominated, politically autonomous equals. This can be a national or a transnational structure, depending on the type of relations that need to be justified; the most important point is that those subject to this order should become its normative authority by way of proper institutions of collective justification.

Such a notion of democracy as the practice of justice as justification enables us to avoid confusing democracy with the domination of minorities by majorities. There is no such thing as illiberal or authoritarian democracy, just as there is no such thing as a democracy that produces structural social injustice; for all of these defects point to and create structures of exclusion that are unjustifiable among normative equals. Such deficiencies transform rule into domination.

## 8. Critical Theory

I apologize for the brevity of this introduction of the strong normative program. Here I could only outline the conceptual map of normative terms and how they fall into place. I have developed the corresponding program elsewhere and will not dwell on it further here. What I hope to have shown is how the choice of a useful mediating term like justification might help to overcome the alienation between the empirical and the normative aspects of our discipline. For if we find ways to analyze the political world of justifications – and especially of rivalling justifications – then we will also find ways to understand the power struggles that mark our present.

At the same time, we ought to shift our self-understanding in such a way that we recognize that we cannot simply observe the justificatory games we (or others) are part of from a view from nowhere. We cannot describe them without some participation, as description requires understanding. But in addition, we have to take a reflexive stance, and that stance is one of evaluation and critical distance. Then we not only ask what the dominant narratives of justification are to which we are subject and how they are reproduced; we also ask whether they are *really* justified, knowing that in any enterprise of justification we are finite, fallible beings who can go wrong, both factually and normatively. But the faculty we call reason is the (finite) faculty to always ask for better justifications. Science is based on us using that faculty in the right way.

The synthesis of an empirical and a normative perspective on ourselves as justificatory beings and as members of normative orders that I have in mind is a program of critical theory – if you will forgive a Frankfurter for ending on that

note. Such a theory I call a *critique of relations of justification*, and it involves a number of aspects:

First, it calls for a scientific analysis of social and political relations of rule and/or domination that inquires into the structures of justification that reproduce such normative orders. How are justifications produced in such an order, and what are the main sources of justificatory power, ranging from institutions of the public sphere (media, churches, etc.), to economic and cultural power complexes, to institutionalized forms of decision-making and agenda-setting?

Second, it calls for a discourse-theoretical and genealogical reconstruction of the justification narratives that dominate a given space of reasons. How did these narratives come about and what are their – possibly ideological – functions?

Third, we need methodological tools to criticize existing justifications of social and political relations. Are they based on proper empirical grounds and what are their normative premises, implications and potential exclusions?

Fourth, given that a basic structure of justification is a demand of fundamental justice, such a theory must inquire into the possibilities and forces of establishing such a structure, given certain path-dependencies and the reality of rule and/or domination exercised, both within and beyond states.

Fifth, such a theory must be able to account for its own normativity in a self-reflexive, critical way. Ideally, it uses the principle of rational critique as the basis for its own constructive arguments. Thus, for example, it does not use a reified or ethnocentric notion of “false consciousness” or “true interests” when it comes to defining ideology; rather, it calls those justifications ideological that lend reciprocally and generally unjustifiable social relations the appearance of being justified.

## 9. Conclusion

I do not want to say that every serious social science should aim at such a synthesis of empirical and normative research in a critical spirit – an endeavor that also calls for a great deal of combined expertise. I proposed it as an

example for the productive work that a mediating term like justification can perform in combining the two perspectives. Then they no longer look like the view of the cave versus that of the moral good; rather, using that mediating term enables us to see how the empirical and the normative are conceptually connected. By using the principle and the right of justification as normative foundations that are both *immanent* to practice and *transcend* them, we can avoid stale distinctions between ideal and realistic theory, while nevertheless gaining the critical distance towards social and political reality that every scientific enterprise requires. Science enables us to model reality in such a way that we can rationally understand it and orient ourselves within it. That is as true of social science as it is of natural science; all that we need are the right methodological tools. Understanding and evaluating our political world as one of justifications is a way to make good on that promise.

Politics is a power struggle – and also a struggle for justification: a struggle for the dominance of some justifications, and a struggle against them becoming dominant. In these power dynamics, the question of justification is often used strategically and ideologically to construct a false reality, a reality of caves. In such a rage against reality, real news gets called fake news, indigent migrants become enemies of the people, economic exploitation becomes invisible, and so on. This leads to what I call *crises of justification*, meaning not only that we are in danger of losing sight of the criteria for proper justifications, but also that institutions for reflecting on and producing legitimate collective justifications are in danger of becoming eroded and disappearing once people forget what their purpose and ground was.

In such times of crisis, we do not need Platonic sages. But we do need critical theories that uphold the one quest that in social and political life must never rest: the quest for better, real, reciprocal and general justifications. That we have the right to demand such justifications is as important an insight as are the many ways of uncovering how that right is constantly denied through the fabrication of false realities. The critique of such false realities is as much a task of social science today as it was in Socrates' time – perhaps even more so. So Plato was right: Do not cling to your caves.