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Article:

Verovsek, P.J. (2019) Impure theorizing in an imperfect world: Politics, utopophobia and critical theory in Geuss's realism. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 45 (3). pp. 265-283.

ISSN: 0191-4537

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453718794745>

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Impure Theorizing in an Imperfect World: Politics, Utopophobia and Critical Theory in Geuss's Realism¹

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ABSTRACT An “impure” realism that draws extensively on non-philosophical sources has challenged mainstream political theory in recent years. These “new realists” reject the “political moralism” of “ethics-first” approaches, holding that theory should start from disagreement and conflict. My basic thesis is that its focus on “the political” and its utopophobia prevent realism from developing normative foundations that can ground social criticism. Many realists, including one of its primary progenitors, Raymond Geuss, recognize this problem. Interestingly, Geuss turns to critical theory to address this concern. While I welcome realism’s desire to make political theory more relevant to politics, I argue that Geuss’s attempt to address the status quo bias by importing ideology critique from the Frankfurt School is ultimately unsuccessful. In my reading the critical theory of the Frankfurt School thus emerges as a more plausible approach to grounding critique of the pathologies of the present.

KEYWORDS Realism, Raymond Geuss, Critical Theory, Social Criticism, Utopian Thinking

Published in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*

Final version available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453718794745>

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Matt Sleat, Edward Hall, Amy Allen, Bill Scheuerman, Jensen Sass, David Froomkin, David Benjamin, Janosch Prinz, Michael Frazer, Samuel Bagg, Christopher Meckstroth, Thomas Fossen, Miriam Ronzoni, Liam Shields, Richard Child, James Pattison, the anonymous reviewer from this journal and the editor, David Rasmussen, for their helpful comments on this essay. In 2017 I presented versions of this argument at the New England Political Science Association’s Annual Meeting (Providence, RI), the Philosophy and Social Science conference in Prague, and the Realist and Pragmatist Approaches to Legitimacy conference at the University of East Anglia. I also presented this paper at the Mancept Seminar Series at the University of Manchester in 2018. I would like to thank the participants at all of these gatherings for their thoughtful engagement with my work.

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Introduction

Although political philosophy can often seem esoteric in its pursuit of the supposedly timeless questions of the just, the right and the good, theory inevitably responds to its social and political environment. Even the creation of a canon of Western political thought, which legitimized political theory as an area of study in the mid-nineteenth century, was not a disinterested intellectual endeavor. On the contrary, it “served to provide an ancestry and provenance both for [Western] democratic political institutions and for the discipline of political science.”¹ Political theory has thus reflected broader trends outside the ivory tower ever since its creation.

With this historicist perspective in mind, it is hardly surprising that debates about distributive justice dominated the discipline with the creation of the welfare state in the postwar period.² The unprecedented growth in income taxes necessary to finance these new redistributive expenditures required a philosophical legitimization of taxation on wages that showed that this obligation was not “on a par with forced labor.” Similarly, liberalism became the dominant theoretical paradigm after the fall of communism, when the victory of democratic capitalism seemingly foretold the “end of history.”³

Since the turn of the second millennium the liberal consensus has increasingly come under attack. Recent events have demonstrated that the optimism that accompanied the end of the Cold War masked important countervailing trends. For political theory, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror” demonstrated the need to pay attention to “radical political disagreement and conflict.” In addition to zeroing in on “the political” as an independent, autonomous sphere of human activity, the so-called “new realists” have responded to these developments by pushing political philosophy away from the construction of abstract, utopian frameworks towards a focus on “real politics.”⁴

In rejecting “political moralism” and the model of “political philosophy [as] applied ethics,” political realism is “impure” in the sense that “materials from non-philosophical sources – an involvement with history or the social sciences, for instance – are likely to play a more than illustrative part in the argument.”⁵

Political realism has successfully captured the desire of the intellectual *Zeitgeist* at the beginning of the twentieth century in establishing a more grounded, less abstract form of political theory. However, focusing so much on the political and rejecting utopian thinking risks undermining realism’s ability to develop an account of normativity that can support meaningful critiques of the pathologies of the present. Many thinkers affiliated with this paradigm recognize that the “status quo bias is a major obstacle in realism’s path” and that the “development of a critical perspective appropriate to realism is in part inhibited by [its] typically anti-utopian orientation.”⁶

One of the most interesting thinkers seeking to address this issue is the Cambridge-based philosopher Raymond Geuss. As one of the most prominent progenitors of the new realism, Guess has sought to address the “status quo bias” by turning to Theodor Adorno and the early Frankfurt School for inspiration.⁷ While I agree that critical theory contains important resources for social criticism, I argue that Geuss’s attempt to construct a “critical realist theory” by incorporating the “ideology critique” (*Ideologiekritik*) of the early Frankfurt School into contemporary realism is ultimately unsuccessful.⁸ Instead of seeking to blend critical theory with realism, my basic thesis is that the Frankfurt School’s critical theory of society – which “seeks to reflect society in its totality” and allows for an explicitly utopian focus on “man’s emancipation from slavery” – can better address the social pathologies of the present in all of their complexity than Geuss’s blend

of realism and critical theory.⁹

The argument proceeds in three basic steps. The first provides a brief exegesis of the basic contours of political realism as a movement within contemporary political philosophy. In the second section I outline Guess's distinctive approach to realism and its fundamental assumptions about politics as a separate, autonomous domain of life and the need to abandon utopian thinking within political theory. I then proceed to examine Geuss's attempt to address realism's inadequate normative foundations by importing ideology critique from the early Frankfurt School. Although I argue that this effort is ultimately unconvincing, it points in the right direction: towards an understanding of social criticism that moves beyond the political and allows for the development of utopian evaluative criteria against which to evaluate the present. In the conclusion I argue that proponents of an impure approach to political philosophy that draws on empirical research from the other social sciences would do better to return to the older tradition of the Frankfurt School's critical theory of society.

Defining Political Realism

As is the case with most intellectual movements, political realism subsumes a number of different positions and thinkers. In addition to Guess and his colleague Bernard Williams – the other major progenitor of this movement – other variants of realism exist within political theory as well. These include Jeremy Waldron's more Kantian “*political* political theory,” Karuna Mantena's Gandhian approach and a host of realisms inspired by John Dewey and American pragmatism.¹⁰ Despite their differences, however, this rather “ragtag band” is “united by their antipathy toward ‘the high liberalism’ of Rawls [and] Dworkin,” who they accuse of ignoring politics in their

attempts to theorize ideas of justice that rely on overly optimistic assumptions about human psychology and social compliance.¹¹

Although realism has become the rallying cry for opponents of an abstract, consensual liberalism, it does not need to be defined only in terms of what it is against. To start with, most representatives of political realism agree on a set of core thinkers that form their intellectual ancestry.¹² These include Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche. Many also add Max Weber and Carl Schmitt to the list as twentieth century exponents of realism. This set of canonical thinkers already reveals some important contours of political realism. Most notably, many of these figures – especially Machiavelli, Hobbes, Nietzsche and Schmitt – are critics of consensus-based approaches. Based on this ancestry, this movement is “realistic” in that it takes disagreement as given and holds that “political difference is of the essence of politics.” In emphasizing the inevitability of conflict (at worst) and compromise (at best), it seeks to diminish unwarranted political optimism.¹³

Despite its attempts to link itself to the canon of Western political thought, a self-consciously realist position only emerged around the turn of the second millennium. Geuss and Williams introduced this term in order to denote an approach “in which political theory would begin from an understanding of the existing conditions and constraints of political life.” As a result of this orientation, political realism has devoted its energies to a “methodological dispute” with those who see political theory as a subfield of moral philosophy.¹⁴ In contrast to this approach, realists seek to carve out a space for political philosophy in its own right. While some realists are happy to remain on the epistemological plane of greater understanding (in the tradition of Weberian

Verstehen), many are also on the lookout “for principles that which are likely to be effective in the here and now.”¹⁵

In considering this movement’s attempt to develop “a form of normativity inherent to politics,” I associate two substantive commitments with the new realism. The first regards its understanding of “the political.” Realism not only rejects consensus-based approaches for displaying “a desire to evade, displace, or escape from politics”; it also argues that “politics [is] a distinct sphere of human activity.” Thus, realists hold that an appreciation of political order is “the *sine qua non* for every other political good.”¹⁶

This call for a focus on the political also grounds realism’s “impure” desire to learn from the past by engaging with historical research. Despite their internal differences, realists mostly agree on the importance of specific, contingent historical circumstances to political life. They argue that it is pointless to search for general laws of politics, since “what is possible at one time would not have been possible at an earlier time.” In this sense, Duncan Bell notes that realism encourages a “focus on the most salient dimensions of a given situation, whether or not they conform to our preferences or desires.”¹⁷

In addition to its isolation of the political, the second major characteristic of the new realism is its anti-utopian sensibility. As part of its emphasis on descriptive accuracy, realism rejects what Geuss refers to as “wishful thinking” (*Wunschdenken*), which occurs whenever “when my own drives, desires, goals, tendencies, or preferences overwhelmingly, unduly, or in an inappropriate way influence the processes through which I develop my ideas about the character of the world around me.”¹⁸ Matt Sleat therefore notes that realists insist that political theory must “be grounded in as descriptively and explanatory accurate a vision of politics as we can muster.” As a result,

realists are more likely to seek to conserve existing political arrangements, since the “provision of order and stability is always, according to realism, a magnificent achievement.”¹⁹

My brief reconstruction of realism shows that its emphasis on politics and broadly “utopophobic” sensibility are closely tied together by its focus on conflict and disagreement.²⁰ Although most realists treat this anti-utopian focus on politics as obvious and self-explanatory, in reality these presuppositions ground a thick account of politics and the nature of reality that contains many unwarranted (or at least undertheorized) assumptions. This causes a number of theoretical and methodological problems, including the issue of a *status quo* bias. In the next section I show how Guess has tried to address these issues by developing his own somewhat heterodox approach to realism. I then proceed to argue that neither these changes nor his importation of ideology critique from the Frankfurt School successfully address these issues.

Geuss’s Position within Realism

Although he is one of the progenitors of the new realism, Geuss has always fit somewhat uncomfortably within this movement, at one point even noting that “I never should have used the term realism.”²¹ On one level, he shares realism’s critique of “high liberalism” and of the mainstream political theory philosophers like Rawls, Dworkin and Habermas – in fact, he is probably the most polemical critic of these approaches among the realists. However, in other important ways Guess does not fit well within realism. In large part, his somewhat orthogonal position has to do with issues of methodology. Although realism is primarily a movement within analytic Anglo-Saxon philosophy,

Geuss is much more continental in his approach, both in terms of the authors he cites and in his argumentative style, which often focuses more on problematizing issues than on resolving problems using clear terminology and conceptual logic.²²

Perhaps more importantly, Geuss also has his own unique, somewhat idiosyncratic interpretations of realism's dual commitment to politics as an autonomous domain of social life and this movement's typically utopophobic sensibility. As regards the former, Geuss has attempted to walk back some of realism's focus on the political by noting that "politics is historically located." In addition to taking "specific cultural and historical circumstances into consideration," in some of his more programmatic statements he argues that political philosophy must proceed by "unceasingly reflecting on the relations one's claims have with history, sociology, ethnology, psychology, and economics."²³

This move makes sense on a certain level. However, if thinking politically requires such "unceasing reflection" on other areas of social life, it is unclear in what sense realism focuses on politics at all and why it should deal with the political more extensively than on these other domains. Even more problematically perhaps, while Geuss talks about realism as an approach to "political philosophy," it seems like he is actually constructing a broader approach to social theory that is supposed to be realist in the sense that it focuses on the "*real motivation*" of individuals, not on the construction of ideal types.²⁴ While Geuss's adaptation of realism is logical in many ways, I worry that moving in this direction sacrifices realism's distinctiveness vis-à-vis other forms of social and political theory.

In addition to this problem, Geuss's modifications of the assumption about the political also raise questions about the kinds of conclusions he can draw. Most notably, it

undermines realism's ability to answer "questions that have the form 'What is to be done?'" which Geuss himself argues is one of the key tasks of political theory. While some of Geuss's defenders have noted that his philosophy actually seeks "to operate criticism in political theory at a higher level of self-reflection" that is not supposed to be action-oriented and -orienting, I think that we should take Geuss at his word when he says that it is "entirely justified to expect help from political philosophy with practical questions."²⁵

This brings me to the second key characteristic of the new political realism: its rejection of utopianism. Unlike Rawlsian liberalism, where "realistic utopias" are meant to demonstrate "how reasonable citizens and peoples might live peacefully in a just world," Geuss agrees with the other realists in arguing that the search for peace based on assumptions about the reasonability of citizens and peoples is unwarranted given the experience of total war and industrialized atrocity in the twentieth century. His point is not only that utopian or moralistic thinking based on overly optimistic assumptions is wrong-headed, but that it is also dangerous. This presumably is the message of the holiday card Geuss sent out in 2004, which featured images of Kant and Rawls juxtaposed with pictures of President George W. Bush and the abuse of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.²⁶

To a certain extent, Geuss's anti-utopian stance is understandable. An orientation towards what Judith Shklar calls the *summum malum* – as opposed to the Kantian *summum bonum* – makes sense in light of Auschwitz, the gulags and the atomic bomb.²⁷ However, while realist warnings about the dangers of unrestrained utopianism are well taken, going to the opposite extreme carries its own risks. In particular, abandoning

idealism can lead individuals into a “straitjacketed realm of possibility” that makes it impossible to “imagine a novel institutional order [that] recasts social, political and economic relations.”²⁸ Dwelling on the atrocities of the last hundred years can thus easily turn the paradigmatic realist question *Was soll ich fürchten?* (What should I fear?) into a self-fulfilling prophesy. Benjamin McKean points out that “an insistence on seeing things as they are can easily curdle into an insistence that things are as they must be, especially because new political possibilities are both risky and difficult to perceive.”²⁹

Many realists – including some interpreters of Geuss – recognize this danger. Janosch Prinz and Enzo Rossi therefore note that “as long as realists engage their moralist (liberal or not) opponents in discussions about the *nature of the political* and especially if their characterisations are based on assertions, e.g. of the conflictuality of politics, the limitation of the political imagination is a plausible impression.” Indeed, utopian thinking is necessary to combat complacency and acceptance of pathological social conditions by showing that the world *might* be different. Without engaging some possibilities for imaginative new thinking, “the model neglects the circumstances under which politics, institution and agency may change.”³⁰

In order to address these problems, Geuss has sought to push back against the anti-utopianism of more analytic approaches to realism expounded by adopting the slogan of the 1968 student protests in Paris: “*Soyez réaliste; demandez l’impossible* [Be realistic; demand the impossible].” Given that the “distinction between what is possible and what is impossible is itself in most political contexts to some extent a social construct,” Geuss urges realists to refuse this bifurcation. He therefore argues that “realism properly understood is opposed to ideological, not to utopian, thinking.” For him, “The point is not

to confuse ['utopian' wishes] with reality and not to be confused about their epistemic standing.”³¹ For example, although universal health care may be impossible given the constraints of the existing political system in the United States of America, he argues that realists can still demand health care for all if they judge it “on balance and in the situation which now exists, *more* important than the maintenance of the social institutions which now make its universal provision impossible.”³²

This is an interesting argument. However, this move raises multiple problems. To start with, there seems to be quite a lot of slippage between the different terms (ideological, utopian, moralistic, etc.) Geuss deploys to differentiate realism from mainstream political theory. In addition to this terminological inconsistency, I once again fear that this move robs realism of its distinctiveness as an approach to political philosophy. After all, Kantians and thinkers from other traditions would argue that they are also not confused by the difference between utopian wishes and reality or by the respective epistemic positions of these claims.

Geuss pushes back against this accusation by arguing that “realism and a certain kind of utopianism are in principle compatible.” In order to distinguish realism from the “high liberalism” of mainstream approaches, he notes, “‘Realism’ is not, I wish to claim, best understood in contrast to ‘utopianism’...but in contrast to what I shall call ‘moralism.’”³³ Note that whereas Geuss had previously argued that the key distinction between realism and other mainstream approaches was between utopian and ideological thinking, he has now shifted the debate to a second distinction between utopianism and moralism.

In Geuss's technical terminology, moralism is defined as a paradigm focused on “*individual* decision-making” that cannot be applied to politics and international relations “given that these are collective phenomena [pursued] in sometimes highly institutional settings.” Although Geuss argues that much of contemporary “ethics-first” political philosophy suffers from this mismatched attempt to apply the criteria of individual morality to complex social interactions, he notes, “This general framework finds what is perhaps its clearest and most coherent articulation in the works of Kant.”³⁴ In Guess’s reading of Kant,

the political actor is the individual anxiety-ridden Christian citizen whose conscience is burdened by the terrible weight of what Kant calls “the categorical imperative.” In politics, this requires him to act with absolute consistency and in the spirit of a kind of universal republicanism, treating all others as autonomous potential citizens of the same cosmopolitan structure. If he fails to act as that imperative demands, he shows himself not merely to have fallen short of what is best in a regrettable way, but to be “evil.”³⁵

I agree with Geuss that such an ideological, moralized analysis of politics in terms of pseudo-Christian ideas of good and evil would be highly problematic, especially in the modern, secularized world. However, it is unclear to me that the above quotation is a faithful reconstruction of Kant, much less of mainstream liberalism. In particular, Geuss’s argument that Kant’s political and legal thought is based on an application of the categorical imperative is mistaken. Whereas Kant’s moral philosophy addresses the justice of the actions undertaken by isolated individuals, his *Rechtslehre* (Philosophy of Right) seeks to provide for the legitimacy of the coercive institutions necessary for individuals to live “side by side,” where the “freedom on choice of each can coexist with everyone’s freedom” (the Universal Principle of Right). Marcus Willaschek argues that for Kant’s legal and political philosophy “involves the idea of a social interaction, and

requires a kind of coordination, that is not provided for by the ... Categorical Imperative.”³⁶

I cannot go into the details of Kant’s practical philosophy here. For my purposes, it suffices to note that his political and legal philosophy “explains the need for public authority or a state that puts everyone under reciprocal coercion and obligation” through “a clear distinction between the meaning of personal ethics and political Right.”³⁷ Most of the Kantian political philosophers Geuss tars with the label of “high liberalism” would agree with both of these points.³⁸

With this perspective in mind, Geuss’s critique of Kant’s moralism is polemical at best, mistaken at worst. In contradistinction to claim that the Kantian approach seeks to construct “an ideal theory of how we should act...[and then] apply that ideal theory to the action of political agents,” in reality Kant’s *Rechtslehre* merely seeks to think through a social condition where coercion is necessary – and can, at least in principle, be legitimate – because individuals cannot be counted on to act morally.³⁹ This stands in stark contrast to Kant’s understanding of morality, where coercion would be misplaced as moral action is defined precisely by the fact that it is entered into freely out of a sense of duty and an understanding of the moral law.

Geuss’s (mis)reading of Kant has important implications for his understanding of utopianism. He distinguishes a “form-based” usage of this concept, which is based on the construction of blueprints “of a final state to be attained *without* giving an account of how we are to get there,” from a “content-based” utopianism that “facilitates the coherent articulation of demands for radical transformation.” As my all-too-brief reconstruction of the *Rechtslehre* makes clear, Kant’s political and legal philosophy is not blueprint or

form-based. On the contrary, far from providing a positive outline of a moralist utopia, where everyone suddenly comes to obey the categorical imperative, Kant shares Geuss's interest in analyzing how "human needs and desires that cannot be satisfied in the basic structure of society" could be realized under an alternative relation. Properly understood, therefore, Kant's Universal Principle of Right can be used to "illuminate nontransparent combinations of claims to power and knowledge as well as legitimacy."⁴⁰

Insofar as Geuss's understanding of realism backs away from the anti-utopianism of analytic realism, it is unclear that it differs fundamentally from Kantian and other mainstream approaches to political philosophy. Additionally, despite realist claims to the contrary, utopian thinking need not imply that politics must become the mechanical implementation of radical social blueprints without regard for their feasibility. It also does not mean that political theory needs to become the toothless consideration of overly idealistic schemes that could never be applied in practice. Insofar as it grounds political normativity by providing goals and grounds for critique, "one can see utopian thinking making effective interventions by disrupting entrenched forms of legitimization, fostering new forms of identity, and revealing new potentials within existing institutional forms."⁴¹

While I recognize the dangers of both overly utopian and moralistic thinking, I am more concerned that political realism undermines the force of its claims by confusing idealism with abstract normative reasoning that can still relate to concrete issues of politics.⁴² It also risks confusing a possibly welcome pessimism that "brings us to curb our political hopes and ambitions" with a conservative focus on "what is (allegedly) fixed rather than on what is changeable."⁴³ The problem of realism's anti-utopianism – along with its *a priori* assumptions about the autonomy and conflictuality of politics – make it

difficult for this movement to convincingly critique the pathologies of the existing social and political order.

Critical Theory and Ideology Critique

In the previous section I some problem's with Geuss's interpretation of realism's focus on politics as a unique and autonomous domain of social life, as well as his interpretation of this movement's antiutopianism. Echoing these concerns, Karuna Mantena worries that “tether[ing] political possibilities too closely to the given coordinates of political life...tends toward a naturally conservative, even pessimistic, outlook.” She also points out that “if politics is understood as determining, partly or wholly, its own internal standards of evaluation, it opens the door to harder edged realisms that dispense with the category of morality altogether.”⁴⁴

This worry is shared by many realists as well. As Prinz and Rossi observe, “Even theorists who are friendly to the realist enterprise express worries as to the approach’s ability to radically *criticise* the reality to which, in some important sense, any realism worth its name must be tied.”⁴⁵ In addition to trying to redefine what anti-utopianism means – unsuccessfully, in my view – Guess addresses this concern by drawing on the method of ideology critique. This move can be traced back to *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (1981), where Geuss contends that Adorno and the early Frankfurt School provide a good model for contemporary political theory.⁴⁶ In rejecting the kind of moralism that starts with an abstract ideal and then uses it to evaluate the legitimacy of existing arrangements, he argues that political philosophy should focus on “undertak[ing] a diagnosis of the times [*Zeitdiagnostik treiben*].”⁴⁷

Given that he does not want to apply externally derived standards to the present, Geuss has to generate his evaluative standards immanently from within the existing political context. He does so using the Weberian concept of *Herrschaft*, usually rendered in English as “domination” or “rule” (or even “imperative coordination” in the influential translation of Talcott Parsons). For Weber, *Herrschaft* describes the ability of an agent to exercise repression in the service of a claim to legitimacy. It is thus closely connected to the concept of ideology as “a ‘world-picture’ which stabilizes or legitimizes domination or hegemony.”⁴⁸ The goal of critiquing ideology is to take the scales off of the eyes of individuals living in a state of false consciousness: “Idelogiekritik is supposed to enlighten agents about their true interests by freeing them from errors and delusions about their real situation in the world.” However, for this model to work it must be able to produce an account that can “separate” the underlying genuine human wants, values, needs, and aspirations from their ideological mode of expression.⁴⁹ Geuss argues that doing this requires an “impure” approach to political philosophy that draws extensively on history to suss out the real motivations of individuals at any given time.

In making this move, Geuss draws explicitly on the writings of the early Frankfurt School. However, much like his relationship to realism, his reading of critical theory is also rather unorthodox. For example, within the critical theory tradition, this “separation” between real and ideological needs is achieved through attempts to “save the utopian content” of the present by drawing on what Herbert Marcuse calls “the cognitive content of the imagination [*Phantasie*].” Utopian thinking about how things *could* be helps individuals living under regimes of *Herrschaft* – or even outright domination (*Beherrschung*, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s terms) – to consider what their basic

interests really are. Although Geuss rejects the need for “wishful thinking” (*Wunschdenken*), he agrees on the importance of the imagination, noting that “the fantasy of [the world’s] plasticity” helps individuals “to derive consolation from the fact that no matter how difficult things seem now to be, they can imagine that things will get better.”⁵⁰

The thinkers of the Frankfurt School invite the theorist to draw on two sets of resources to spur *Phantasie*. The first is the forward-looking utopia of “an association of free men in which each has the same possibility of self-development.” The second are the backward-looking “subversive contents of memory,” which “may give rise to dangerous insights.” Both of these resources allow critical theory to function as “a mode of ‘mediation’ which breaks, for short moments, the omnipresent power of the given facts,” allowing the true interests of human beings to shine through.⁵¹

Geuss follows the Frankfurt School in acknowledging the importance of history and memory. He argues that reflecting on the past can help to “change the structure of argument by directing attention to a new set of relevant questions that need to be asked,” thus “allow[ing] us to reflect critically on [the political and moral concepts we have] rather than simply taking them for granted.” This commitment to historical research defines the sense in which his realism is “impure.” He is therefore fully committed to backward-looking principles as part of what Seyla Benhabib refers to as critical theory’s first “explanatory-diagnostic” task.⁵²

However, Geuss expresses major reservations regarding the Frankfurt School’s second “anticipatory-utopian” stage of social criticism. He argues that a “realistic” analysis must remain rooted solely in the backward-looking “memory of previous utopian

moments [that] can help to keep our human aspirations alive.”⁵³ His concern with drawing on forward-looking utopias is rooted in his belief that “political theory should focus on the actual, but should view it through the orientation toward the possible in order to connect to the possibility of thinking and acting differently.”⁵⁴

Although I appreciate Geuss’s concerns, I worry that this focus on “the possible” is yet another attempt to narrow political theory’s scope definitionally, prejudicing the critic towards the substantive commitments of realism to conflict and disagreement as the fundamental “facts” of social and political life. While it is certainly possible to object to certain utopian blueprints based on the criterion of possibility, I see no reason why political theory needs to exclude “constructive” or “anticipatory-utopian” criticism *ex ante* in favor of a more negative, backwards-looking model. I therefore share McKean’s worry that realism’s “constrained sense of how ideals can be used in politics...needlessly cuts off consideration of some genuine political possibilities, inadvertently supporting the status quo despite their professedly liberatory intent.”⁵⁵

Geuss is right to question the kinds of normative criticism that require a fully worked out ideal in order to critique existing social arrangements. I agree that this kind of utopianism is problematic for all of the reasons Geuss identifies. However, in his understanding of anti-utopianism and his opposition to forward-looking thinking, Geuss actually goes much further in the sense that he actually opposes even the development of evaluative criteria against which to judge the present. The problem, at least from a theoretical or methodological perspective, is that Geuss’s rejection of non-political normative principles risks cutting the ground out from under his proposals for real political change, such as his suggestion that realism supports calls for “further European

integration,” as it is unclear what evaluative criteria Geuss is using to make this judgment.⁵⁶

In order to clarify this point, I need to introduce the distinction between *categorical* and *normative* forms of immanent critique. The former confronts society with the internal implications of its own categories in certain specific domains of life – such as economics or politics – thus revealing the inconsistency of existing forms of thought. This is what Geuss has in mind in his reconstruction of ideology critique.⁵⁷ However, while this form of categorical social criticism can elucidate the internal contradictions within existing forms of legitimization, it has little to say about the shape of potential future changes; that is, it is a purely negative form of social criticism that cannot undergird positive political conclusions or judgments.

The narrower remit of categorical critique poses a problem for Guess. In order to shift from negative criticism to a more positive form of social critique that can reflect on the concrete shape of future transformations necessitates the shift to the second, normative stage. This dimension of immanent critique builds on the contradictions identified through categorical criticism, turning the attention of the theorist to the broader norms governing the system as a whole. Whereas *categorical critique* spotlights the internal problems generated by the concepts used to understand politics, *normative criticism* turns the focus onto the basic norms underpinning society understood as a totality, i.e. “a comprehensive system, or hierarchy, of all beings, including man and his aims.”⁵⁸ Doing so requires a broader, normative account of the goals or criteria that *should* or *would* govern a better world.

Geuss resists the move to this deeper normative plane of positive criticism due to his commitment to contextualism and his rejection of ethics-first approaches. Instead, he seeks to “distinguish the good and the better from the less good, the bad and the unbearable” by relying on a theory of contextual judgment that focuses on “the relationship between power and legitimation, and the ways in which one is brought to bear on the other.”⁵⁹ However, it is unclear that this is actually possible without importing (or smuggling in) certain values that reclaim the real world “and ensure that reality, or even produce it, through the very act of critique.” In other words, in order to make positive political judgments one must still have some guiding criteria or principles to ensure the semblance of consistency and prevent the analysis from being completely arbitrary (*willkürlich*). Without specifying some ideal, some goal or some criteria by which to judge the present political order, Geuss leaves himself without any standard by which to justify its own conclusions. Echoing the views of many philosophers, Benhabib points out that utopian thinking is necessary to fulfill political theory’s aim of “articulating the normative principles of democratic action and organization in the present.”⁶⁰

Geuss seems to be aware of this problem, but tries to skirt around it by narrowing the scope of his theory considerably. Speaking of realism as a “broad church,” he notes that this approach cannot “ensure that the political judgements any one person or group of people makes at any given time will be wise, humane and enlightened. Indeed, it will not even guarantee that judgement will be careful, informed and well grounded.” This statement makes it unclear what exactly realism *can* actually accomplish. In the end, all Geuss can do is to note that “judgement is a kind contextual activity for which any *such*

guarantees are lacking, and that nothing is gained by pretending they could exist when they patently do not.”⁶¹

While Geuss deserves credit for this strikingly frank admission, this very reduced form of realism does not seem to be able to provide any guidance at all for how our judgments should be formed (through thought, research, deliberation, communication, etc.) or informed (by principles, criteria, guidelines and so on).⁶² In his attempt to resist providing any prepolitical blueprints for society or principles about how it should work, Geuss has swung too far in the opposite direction. By denying the normative aspect of immanent critique, he has left realism without any grounding at all. Additionally, Christoph Menke notes that in making this point Geuss is breaking decisively from Adorno and the Frankfurt School, for whom “an entire historical moment is containted, with all its internal tensions and contradictions.” In this sense “the program of a ‘realist’ philosophy is the program of a critical theory that no longer unfolds in the medium of reading, the reading of philosophy and art.”⁶³

In large part, these problems with Geuss’s realism can be traced back to his misreading of Kant’s *Rechtslehre* as “assum[ing] that one can complete the work of ethics first, attaining an ideal theory of how we should act, and then in a second step, one can apply that ideal theory to the action of political agents.”⁶⁴ As I showed above, this is not what Kant actually seems to have in mind. On the contrary, he is seeking criteria, such as the Universal Principle of Right, to help ground their judgments about the legitimacy of the political world of power, coercion and authority. These principles are not offered as utopian blueprints, but as guides or criteria for judgment.

Even the discursive critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, which Geuss argues has abandoned the positive aspects of the early Frankfurt School and has become another version of “high liberalism,” is not about applying prepolitical principles to an ideal world, but about identifying principles (in particular that of open discourse) that can guide our reasoned judgments about the state of the world and how it can be improved. Although Geuss argues that he is following the early Frankfurt School in opposing the creation of a program of philosophical justification (*Begründungsprogramm*), it is unclear to me that this is actually the case. After all, both Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno note that “arguing means applying the rules of thinking to the matters under discussion” and that these arguments – as well as reality itself – need to “be measured against criteria.”⁶⁵ The point is not to deny the need for evaluative standards, but to identify the correct ideals to both judge (and hopefully resolve) the problems of the present.

This brings me back to the issue of the political. Like the rest of the new realists, Geuss pushes for a focus on “real politics.” This leads him to argue, “The experience of pain and frustration is what gives the agents addressed motivation to...change their social arrangements.”⁶⁶ However, this focus on the experience of pain and repression also has to rely on values that are not purely political. Although I do not deny that such everyday experiences of suffering are transposed into political terms through elections, protests and rioting, they also often have their ground in deeper cultural, economic or social problems, as the thinkers of the Frankfurt School recognize.⁶⁷

What is even more problematic given realism’s shared assumptions about “the autonomy, or at least the semi-autonomy, of the political” is that many of these problems

may not be resolvable at the level of politics, or at least not at the level of political alone.⁶⁸ For example, the inability of politics to address certain basic economic problems became clear over the course of the Great Recession and the crisis of the Eurozone, as governments in Europe found themselves unable to assert themselves and prevent the pain and suffering of their citizens in the face of the power of global financialized capitalism and international market forces. Interestingly, the solution – or at least the mitigation of the crisis in its most acute phase – has been achieved through technocratic interventions in the economic, financial and banking sectors by the European Central Bank.⁶⁹

In contrast to Geuss's isolation of the political as a separate and autonomous social domain with its own rules, concepts and forms of action – and of political philosophy as a separate and autonomous discipline – for the Frankfurt School politics has always been one part of a broader “critical theory of society.” Whereas Geuss and the other realists assume the centrality of the political, for critical theory the “primacy of the political” is a hypothesis, not an assumption. This is important, because this broader focus beyond politics allows critical theory to address problems rooted in other areas of social life – like those brought about by the Great Recession – in ways that realism cannot without violating its methodological presuppositions.

For much of its history the Frankfurt School actually placed more emphasis on economics than politics. During the Great Depression, Horkheimer argued, “The economy is the first cause of wretchedness, and critique, theoretical and practical, must address itself *primarily* to it.”⁷⁰ However, over the course of the 1930s, he and his colleagues at the Institute observed how Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and New Deal

America had begun to replace market forces with state planning and the “whip of unemployment” with political terror. By 1941 Friedrich Pollock felt confident in his diagnosis that a new form of “state capitalism” had replaced the liberal, market capitalism of the nineteenth century. Disavowing Marx’s focus on the means of production, he argued that these developments meant that “[t]he genuine problem...does not lie in the economic but in the political sphere.”⁷¹

This conclusion represents a break in the thinking of the Frankfurt School. However, it is important to notice that it is not based on *a priori* assumptions; on the contrary, it is the product of an “explanatory-diagnostic” examination of the pathologies evident in the “[s]ocial and economic developments in Europe since the end of the first world war.”⁷² In other words, Pollock’s thesis of the “primacy of the political” is limited to a specific historical context. Even if Pollock’s contention was accurate when he was writing in 1941, critical theory makes no assumptions that the same will be true today. After all, such a presupposition would run counter to “a theory which attributes a temporal core to truth,” i.e. to critical theory’s own commitment to contextualism.⁷³

By contrast, the fact that Guess posits a version of “the primacy of the political” as a methodological *a priori* is surprising precisely because it claims to advocate “a greater appreciation of the historical contexts in which political decision-making and action takes place.” Politics may indeed be predominant in “specific cultural and historical circumstances.” However, there is no reason to assume ahead of time that this will always be the case, or that all problems that appear within politics are best addressed (or even *can be addressed*) exclusively or even primarily through political means.⁷⁴

Although realism's turn to critical theory to rescue itself from the *status quo* bias has real potential, I argue that Geuss's attempt to do so is ultimately unsuccessful because of his overly narrow focus on the political and his rejection of utopian thinking. Although Geuss has sought to walk back these assumptions, this response threatens to undermine the distinctiveness of realism as an approach to political philosophy. In this sense, Geuss and the other political realists finds themselves in the horns of a dilemma. They must either embrace realism's status as a Burkean intervention that stresses the magnificence of political order as an extraordinary achievement, or they must sacrifice its claims to novelty and its challenge to the "high liberalism" of mainstream political theory.

Concluding Thoughts

Over the course of this essay, I have argued that while political realism's engagement with the problems and pathologies of the present is a welcome development, its narrow focus on the political and its rejection of utopian thinking are highly problematic. Although Geuss has sought to combat accusations of a *status quo* bias by grounding their approaches in immanent critique that does not require the use of positive normative principles, I agree with Benhabib that "it is questionable whether realists can do so without invoking some normative concepts." Putting this into the terms I have introduced in this argument, while categorical immanent critique is certainly useful, at some point a truly critical form of political philosophy will have to develop a normative dimension as well. Doing so requires forward-looking utopian thinking and a willingness to move outside the narrow confines of "the political," whatever that signifier is taken to mean. As Teresa Scavenius points out, "[I]f we do not allow for strict normative

standards with which contemporary failures of political action can be scrutinised, the discussions become redundant or incomplete.”⁷⁵

In making this argument, I have focused on Geuss’s somewhat unorthodox form of realism. Reflecting on the *status quo* bias in his work – and his turn to critical theory in order to resolve this problem – my basic thesis has been that his attempts to integrate critical theory into realism’s basic theoretical framework is ultimately unconvincing. Although Geuss sees himself as rehabilitating the project of the early Frankfurt School that was perverted by Kantians like Habermas, who he accuses of sharing the “high liberalism” of mainstream political philosophy, I argue that there is not as much of a break between Habermas and the critical theory of the early 1930s as Geuss seems to believe, at least not on the issue of blueprints and the role of utopian thinking.⁷⁶

My suggestion that critical theory is a better model for “impure” theory that can meaningfully address the pathologies of the present by engaging with resources outside political philosophy does not necessarily mean that realism is not useful or that it does not have a role to play within contemporary political philosophy. In fact, a cogent division of theoretical labor might exist between political realism and critical theory. Given its focus on the fundamental importance of providing political order, it may be that realism is most applicable to problems dealing with the lack of such order, such as civil war and terrorism. Zeroing in on cases where breakdown of politics has forced individuals to recreate institutions and regimes for the peaceful resolution of conflict fulfills political realism’s methodological presuppositions. It may therefore make sense to think in realist terms when it comes to certain “[e]vents at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in particular the terrorist atrocities in New York, Madrid, and London.”⁷⁷

By contrast, as a result of its interdisciplinary focus and its utopian attempts to reflect on how the pathologies of the present might be overcome, the remit of critical theory may be somewhat different. At a time when global politics has been roiled by the greatest economic collapse since the Great Depression, it may be that we once again have to address the problems of society as a totality, not merely by looking at politics, economics, culture or psychology in isolation.⁷⁸ As a result of its openness to “new” thinking about contemporary social problems without regard for clear disciplinary boundaries, critical theory is better positioned to diagnose whether the crisis of the present is indeed the result of social pathologies that cut across politics, economics, culture and psychology, and to consider possible “anticipatory-utopian” responses to these issues.

Despite their differences, political realism and critical theory also have much in common. As two differing approaches to “impure,” empirically engaged political theory that look beyond philosophy for their inspiration and data, realism and critical theory can serve as models for renewed collaboration between theoretical and empirical approaches to politics. As can be seen in the predominance of departments of “political *science*,” positivist approaches dominate the discipline today. This fact has resulted in the marginalization of political theory, as most political scientists focus on quantitative cause-and-effect descriptions of political phenomena (the same can be said of the status of theory in other social scientific disciplines as well).⁷⁹

These ongoing trends signal a deep disagreement about the role that political theory should play in the empirical study of politics. In contrast to calls for political theory to become “a source of ontological illumination” that focuses on “what positive political

science complicatedly *is*,” both political realism and critical theory provide models of how empirical and normative research can be brought together to form productive synergies.⁸⁰ This is most clearly visible in the first stage of these two approaches to “impure” theorizing, where practitioners of both seek to gain an empirical understanding of the concrete problems at hand. Thus, instead of starting with abstract models or utopian assumptions regarding human cooperation, they start with events on the ground, often borrowing from the research of their empirical – often even quantitatively oriented – colleagues down the hall.

Despite their important methodological and canonical differences, both political realism and critical theory bridge the empirical/normative divide. For both of these movements, the relationship between political science and political theory should transcend this distinction by being ontological, descriptive and normative *at the same time*.⁸¹ As a result, political realism and critical theory can act as models for students of politics at a time when the divide between political theory and empirical political science has arguably never been greater or more damaging to our attempts to understand the crises and pathologies of the present.

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⁵ Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 16; Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A. W. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 155.

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⁷ Raymond Geuss, "Realism, Wishful Thinking, Utopia" in *Political Uses of Utopia* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 234, 246; Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a*

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¹⁰ Jeremy Waldron, *Political Political Theory: Essays on Institutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Karuna Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012); Samuel Bagg, "Between Critical and Normative Theory: Predictive Political Theory as a Deweyan Realism," *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2016).

¹¹ William A. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010), 386. This source also contains a list of individuals Galston counts as members of this "band." Seyla Benhabib, "The Multivariate Polity or Democratic Fragmentation," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 42, no. 7 (2016), 650.

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¹⁵ Laura Valentini, "Ideal Vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012), 660. Although methodological disputes within political theory are often spoken of within the framework of ideal and non-ideal theory, this debate regarding the feasibility constraints involved in normative theorizing does not fully capture the methodological specificities of political realism.

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¹⁷ Elizabeth Frazer, "What's Real in Political Philosophy?" *Contemporary Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010), 491; Duncan Bell, "Under an Empty Sky - Realism and Political Theory" in *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme*, ed. Daniel Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

¹⁸ Geuss, "Realism, Wishful Thinking, Utopia," 239. This is the English translation of Raymond Geuss, "Realismus, Wunschdenken, Utopie," *Deutsche Zeitschrift Für Philosophie* 58, no. 3 (2010).

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²³ Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 13, 15, 7.

²⁴ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 9.

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³⁷ Rostbøll, "Kant and the Critique of the Ethics-First Approach to Politics," 2, 8.

³⁸ For example, neither Rawls nor Habermas build their political philosophies on the parallel between individual ethics and political justice. Although they do draw on Kant's moral theory at times, they are much more influenced by Kant's *Rechtslehre* and his political writings, especially "Toward a Perpetual Peace" (1795) than by his moral philosophy. See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*; Rawls, *Law of Peoples*.

³⁹ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 8.

⁴⁰ Geuss, "Realism and the Relativity of Judgement," 18; Mathias Thaler, "Hope Abjuring Hope: On the Place of Utopia in Realist Political Theory," *Political Theory* (2017), 9; Geuss, "Realism, Wishful Thinking, Utopia," 238.

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⁴⁶ Additionally, much like realism, critical theory is a contested idea. In using this term and speaking of the Frankfurt School I am referring to the tradition of interdisciplinary social theory initially developed by the thinkers associated with the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) in the interwar years. Amy R. Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New

York: Columbia University Press, 2016), xi. I shall return to this point briefly in the conclusion.

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⁵⁸ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 4.

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⁶¹ Geuss, "Realism and the Relativity of Judgement," 19.

⁶² See Raymond Geuss, "Dystopia: The Elements" in *Reality and its Dreams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 1-24.

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⁶⁴ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 8.

⁶⁵ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2011), 73, 88. See also Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*. On critical theory and the necessity (or not) of a philosophical program of justification, see Fabian Freyenhagen, "Was ist orthodoxe Kritische Theorie?" *Deutsche Zeitschrift Für Philosophie* 65, no. 3 (2017).

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⁶⁹ See Michel Aglietta, "The European Vortex," *New Left Review* 75 (2012).

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⁷¹ Friedrich Pollock, "State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations" in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gerhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 81, 75.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 71-2.

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⁷⁴ Richard North, "Political Realism: Introduction," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010), 383; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 15.

⁷⁵ Benhabib, "The Multivariate Polity or Democratic Fragmentation," 650; Scavenius, "Fact-Sensitive Political Theory," 8.

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