Critical Exchange

Political Theory with an Ethnographic Sensibility

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Political theory is a field that finds nourishment in others. From economics, history, sociology, psychology, and political science, theorists have drawn a rich repertoire of schemas to parse the social world and make sense of it. With each of these

encounters, new subjects are brought into focus as others recede into the background, ushering a change not only in how questions are tackled but also in what questions are thought worth asking.

This Critical Exchange is devoted to a recent strand of political theory that has turned to ethnography for inspiration and grounding. On the surface, the resulting body of work may appear heterogeneous, with scholars tackling topics as diverse as border security (Longo, 2018), the frontline provision of public services (Zacka, 2017), the death fast struggle (Bargu, 2014), the political ethics of INGOs (Rubenstein, 2015), the world of wage labor (Herzog, 2018), the dynamics of interpersonal trust (Blajer de la Garza, 2019), the taking of political responsibility (Ackerly, 2018), or the ideology of Islamist parties (Iqtidar, 2011). Underpinning this diversity, however, is a twin commitment that lends these studies coherence and a distinctive place in the current landscape of the field. All of them anchor their theoretical reflection within closely textured, 'thick' descriptions of the social world of the kind that might be found in social anthropology – letting phenomena breathe on the page before putting order into them. They treat these descriptions, moreover, not just as illustrating theory, or as relevant for its application in the world, but as generative of theoretical insights.

In seeing political theorizing in its conceptual, normative, and critical variants as bound up with an effort to interpret the social world and our experiences in it, political theory with an ethnographic sensibility is indebted to a range of intellectual traditions including critical theory (e.g., Benjamin, 1986), feminist scholarship (e.g., Mansbridge, 1980), and postcolonial studies (e.g., Memmi, 1965). It also builds upon a recent wave of interest in ethnographic methods in political science (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006; Schatz, 2009; Schwartz-Shea and Majic, 2017). From there, it draws the idea of approaching ethnography less as a method (participant observation) than as a sensibility that can inform different research techniques. The aspiration is not to outdo anthropologists at their trade, but to produce political theory that uses fine-grained empirical research to learn not only about the social world but also from it.

Against this backdrop, a range of questions arise. If we are to think of ethnography as a sensibility rather than a method, how should we characterize it? What exactly can it contribute to political theory, and what are its limitations? Where, finally, should we situate ethnographically informed political theory within the current landscape of the field? The contributors to this Critical Exchange, proponents of the approach and more skeptical travel companions, have been invited to address these questions from within a range of intellectual traditions: analytic political philosophy, critical theory, comparative political theory, feminist studies, intellectual history, and political realism.

Jakob Elster opens the exchange by asking whether ethnographically informed political theory might be guilty of a naturalistic fallacy, going from descriptions of the social world to normative conclusions. His answer hinges on the nature of the

contribution that ethnography purports to make: while an ethnographic sensibility can be valuable for the discovery of normative insights, he finds its purchase more tenuous when it comes to the justification of those insights. Responding to Elster's constructive challenge, Matthew Longo and Bernardo Zacka clarify how they understand the term 'ethnographic sensibility,' and articulate its purchase for political theory. On their account, such a sensibility is valuable in part because it blurs the distinction between context of discovery and context of justification, and because it draws our attention to important normative questions that do not fit neatly under either of these rubrics.

Humeira Iqtidar and Brooke Ackerly focus their contributions on the epistemic value of an ethnographic sensibility. Iqtidar asks why political theory took so much longer to grapple with its complicity with empire than other disciplines, such as anthropology. She suggests that the answer may be methodological: while anthropologists develop their concepts and theories in dialogue with people, political theorists tend to privilege texts, which do not talk back. This suggests the need for greater methodological openness and sustained connection with the real world of the kind an ethnographic sensibility can provide. While sympathetic to this methodological broadening, Ackerly argues that the problem lies less with the failures of political theory generally and more with the inattention of some political theory to the work of feminist, race, indigenous, and decolonial scholars who have been challenging the epistemic politics of the field itself. To right the track, she suggests that an ethnographic sensibility must be coupled with feminist methods of recursive reflection, skeptical scrutiny, and an ongoing commitment to ever broadening the range of sources that inform normative theorizing.

Signy Allen joins the conversation as an intellectual historian influenced by the 'Cambridge School.' What this form of intellectual history has in common with ethnography is that both take context very seriously. What are the implications of doing so? We know that contextualism can debunk claims to universality, but can it also contribute to generating insights that have an aspiration to being universal? Allen answers in the affirmative but sounds a note of caution: as in intellectual history, relevance across contexts cannot be presumed, but must be demonstrated by tracing transmission or relevant similarity. Paul Sagar closes the exchange by exploring the affinity of ethnographically informed political theory with political realism. Sagar sees ethnography as an avenue for realists to step beyond methodological quandaries and live up to their promise to take on board the substance of politics. Just as realists have approached history as a force constitutive of our identities and commitments, so too can they turn to ethnography to shed light on how our lived experiences in the present participate in shaping our moral and political values.

Bernardo Zacka

A naturalistic fallacy? The value of an ethnographic sensibility for normative theory

In the last few years, a new player has entered the already richly varied field of methods in normative political theory. 'Political theory with an ethnographic sensibility,' an approach advocated notably by Bernardo Zacka, in collaboration with colleagues like Lisa Herzog and Matthew Longo, promises to provide correctives, new material and insights to mainstream normative political theory (See, in particular, Zacka, 2017, pp. 250–259; Herzog and Zacka, 2019; Longo and Zacka, 2019). In this article, I build on the description of doing political theory with an ethnographic sensibility found in these writings. Adopting an ethnographic sensibility (henceforth: ES) entails, in Zacka's words, '[being] interested not just in what people do, but also in why they do it. It is to be concerned with how they perceive, think about, and ascribe meaning to the contexts that surround them' (2017, p. 255). For a political theorist used to working from the armchair, adopting an ES can entail engaging in fieldwork oneself (Longo and Zacka, 2019, p. 1069), or, less radically, engaging with empirical literature with a certain 'frame of mind' (Herzog and Zacka, 2019, p. 764), where one is open to the possibility that an understanding of people's lived experiences can open up new research questions and might force us to revise our theories and approaches to an issue (cf. Herzog and Zacka, 2019, p. 766).

Many will probably welcome this new player as a breath of fresh air, as reflected by several of the participants in this exchange, notably Zacka and Longo, Iqtidar and Sagar. Others, however, might be more skeptical. Given that normative political theory is concerned with how things should be and what is valuable, the ethnographic approach might seem to involve a form of naturalistic fallacy, going from factual claims discovered through fieldwork to normative conclusions. More specifically, given the ethnographic sensibility's concern with uncovering the moral views of the relevant actors, an ethnographic approach might be accused of confusing descriptive ethics with normative ethics, drawing conclusions about what is actually just or legitimate from various actors' views about what is just and legitimate. To be sure, proponents of ES show an awareness of these fallacies (see, for example, Herzog and Zacka, 2019, p. 779; Zacka, 2017, p. 251). But in light of these worries, it is worth investigating what role the kind of knowledge and understanding given to us by an ethnographic approach can play in normative theorizing.

A first reply to these skeptical worries is that if you are engaged in normative theorizing about a subject, *you need to know what you are talking about*. Clearly, the ethnographic approach is useful in providing us with the factual knowledge we need both to identify which normative questions need to be answered, and to apply the relevant normative principles to these questions. This is something which, I

believe, all political theorists would accept, no matter how wedded they are to the fact-value distinction. The question is thus not *whether* ES can provide political theorists with useful empirical knowledge, but *in which ways* ES is of value for normative theory, and what the limits of its value are. Note that in seeking to answer this question, I largely build on what proponents of ES themselves write about the ways in which this approach can be valuable.

In examining the role of ES, it can be fruitful to consider the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification. It seems relatively uncontroversial to claim that ES can be helpful in the discovery of new normative insights, in several ways.

First, ES can make us aware of normative research questions which one did not previously realize existed (Cf. Longo and Zacka, 2019, p. 1068). Next, even if we reject the claim that the ethnographic approach allows us to see which principles, practices or values actually are valuable or normatively correct, the approach can make us aware of candidates for valid moral principles, concepts or values which we had not previously considered (Cf. Longo and Zacka, 2019, pp. 1068–1069).

Finally, ES can provide us with cases which we can use as 'intuition pumps,' in the sense that we use our moral intuitions about these cases to invalidate or support proposed moral principles, as part of a search for reflective equilibrium (cf. Herzog and Zacka, 2019, pp. 766–767). This last use of ES straddles the context of discovery and the context of justification, since moral intuitions are appealed to both when we search for potentially valid principles, and when we seek to justify the validity of such principles. In the latter case, however, what does the justificatory work is not the fact uncovered by the ethnographic approach, but the moral intuition we have about the case discovered by the ethnographic approach.

More controversial is the claim that ES might play a role in the context of justification. Indeed, this claim might seem to run up against the fact-value distinction. It is useful here to consider the framework developed by G.A. Cohen for analyzing the relationship between facts and normative principles (Cohen, 2003, 2008). Cohen notes that we often take a given fact to support a normative principle, and we say that we hold that principle because of the fact in question (2008, pp. 233–236). Thus, we might take the fact F 'Flying will contribute to global warming' to support the principle P 'One should not fly more than absolutely necessary.' But if someone asks *why* F supports P, we will have to refer to some further and more general moral principle, such as P1 'We should do what we can to avoid global warming.' This is the only way to explain why F provides support for P. As Cohen puts it, 'a principle can reflect or respond to a fact only because it is also a response to a principle that is not a response to a fact' (Cohen, 2008, p. 232, emphasis removed).

This framework allows us to show how the kind of facts discovered through ES can be used to justify normative claims: they support principles because there exists some higher-level principle which explains why they support the principles in

question. Take, as an example, Herzog and Zacka's discussion of the normative significance of Lesley Sharp's work on post mortem organ donation (Herzog and Zacka, 2019, pp. 768–769). Sharp discovered that, contrary to what medical doctors thought, organ recipients and the families of the dead donor appreciated being allowed to get to know each other and 'frequently form strong sentimental bonds of "fictive kinship"' (p. 769). In light of this fact, doctors' insistence on maintaining the anonymity of donors and recipients might seem problematic.

Let us say that we take the fact Sharp uncovered to support the claim that we should reject the anonymity rule. Different moral theories could easily explain why this fact supports the moral conclusion. Thus, while a utilitarian approach to bioethics could use this fact to argue that rejecting the rule of anonymity would increase expected utility, an autonomy-based approach to bioethics could use this fact to explain why respecting patient autonomy requires us to reject the anonymity rule. What they share is the structure of the argument, wherein a higher-level principle ('Maximize expected utility!' or 'Respect autonomy!') is combined with the fact in question (and, if necessary, some further intermediary steps) to reach the normative conclusion one argues for at a lower level. (cf. Herzog and Zacka, 2019, p. 774.)

While Cohen's framework thus shows the role of ES in justifying normative claims, it also indicates that there exists a level of normative theory where the role for ES is lesser. If we are sufficiently high up on the justificatory ladder, discussing the validity of abstract, high-level principles, ES has less to offer. But to be sure, unless we are doing moral theory at the very top level of this ladder, trying to identify principles which are so general and abstract that they rely on no facts – e.g., 'one should avoid causing pain' (Cohen, 2008, p. 245) – we do need some facts to support our principles.

Cohen's framework also gives us a deeper understanding of the role of ES in the context of discovery. Indeed, one particularly salient use of the ethnographic approach might be to show us that a principle is fact-dependent when we did not realize that it was. We might hold a principle which we take to be ultimate, but which is actually implicitly grounded in general assumptions about human nature or society – something we might not realize if we take those assumptions for granted. By showing us that these assumptions do not hold universally, the ethnographic approach might force us to reconsider which principles we should hold and why we should hold them.

We should note, however, that we do not *need* ES in order to realize that our principles are fact-dependent: a creative use of the imagination can play the same role. This is well illustrated by Cohen himself, who invented the scenario of 'beings who were otherwise like us as we are in our adult state but whose normal life spans occupied only twenty-four hours' (Cohen, 2008, p. 246), in order to force us to think about how the fact that we typically live for decades is relevant when weighing the value of freedom against the value of welfare. While the example is

fanciful, imagined cases are all we need in order to be forced to search for the higher-order principles which explain why a given fact is relevant. However, our imagination is limited, and sometimes ES might provide us with examples which we could not have conjured up on our own.

While ES might therefore supplement the role of imagination in the context of discovery, imagination might also be necessary in order to supplement the ethnographic approach. To illustrate: Herzog and Zacka (2019) discuss how Zacka's fieldwork among street-level bureaucrats showed how small talk could be valuable in several ways in the encounter between clients and bureaucrats, a possibility we may not have considered without Zacka's research. But what if, counterfactually, Zacka had observed no such practice of informal small talk? It might still be the case that such small talk could be valuable, but in order to consider this possibility, we would have to use our imagination to discover ways in which the encounter between client and bureaucrat could have been different. The success of ES seems to depend in part on luck – making discoveries which turn out to have heuristic value – and when luck fails, ES might need to be supplemented by imagination.

Returning to the context of justification, one might object that Cohen's framework is too simplistic and does not allow a full understanding of the role ES can play in normative reasoning, though it does describe *one* role which ES can play. First, Cohen's framework has been subjected to a number of criticisms since it was first published (e.g., Pogge, 2008; Miller, 2013, ch. 1). Next, it might be argued that ES does more than just provide the theorist with new facts: rather, it allows the theorist to understand the meaning and value of certain practices. In this way, ES might contribute to the justification of moral principles in other ways than by just providing the factual input necessary to apply higher-level principles to concrete cases.

Thus, to return to the case of organ donation, Herzog and Zacka do not only claim that Sharp's research provides us with facts about the preferences of the actors involved. They also write that 'Sharp's ethnography alerts us to the existence of a valuable kind of interpersonal bond' (p. 769), thus implying that her ethnographic work provides us with information about what is *actually valuable*, something which is clearly relevant in the context of justification. Likewise, understanding the meaning of a practice might give us grounds for arguing that the practice in question should be promoted, or should be shaped in a certain way.

Exploring this possibility in any detail falls outside of the scope of this contribution, so I will here only briefly note that this way of arguing for the role of ES might lead to a dilemma. When the ethnographic account is used in normative theory, we can ask if it is supposed to provide us with knowledge of what is actually valuable or about which meaning a practice actually has, or simply about actors' views about what is valuable and about the meaning which a practice has *for them*. (Admittedly, while this distinction is clear when it comes to what is

valuable, it is less clear when it comes to meaning, as we might argue that meaning always has to be meaning for someone.) In the latter case, what ES provides us with are simply psychological facts about the actors, and these facts will, within Cohen's framework, be normatively relevant only to the extent that higher-level principles make them relevant.

But in the former case, where we take the ethnographic approach to tell us what is actually valuable, we have to ask why we should believe that people's perception of what is valuable reflects what is truly valuable. Indeed, it seems clear that people can be mistaken on this score (cf. Zacka, 2017, p. 251). And while it is less clear that people can be mistaken about which meaning a practice has *for them*, it is an open question what role we should give to their understanding of a practice's meaning in our moral theorizing about this practice. A given practice might have a number of different meanings, and it does not follow from the fact that one set of actors assign one meaning to this practice that this is how the practice is best understood for the purpose of normative theory.

Jakob Elster

Putting phenomena first: What an ethnographic sensibility brings to political theory

A curious feature of the recent studies in political theory that claim to embody an 'ethnographic sensibility' is that none of them are *bona fide* ethnographies, ours included (Longo, 2018; Zacka, 2017). What then does the label refer to? In this contribution we first clarify the term, underscoring two of its distinctive characteristics, then consider how an ethnographic sensibility can contribute to normative political theory. In so doing, we respond to the constructive challenge posed by Jakob Elster in this Critical Exchange.

What is an ethnographic sensibility? A natural way to answer this question would be to start with the paradigmatic method of ethnographic research, participant observation. This involves experiencing and participating in the lives of people over a long period of time, developing informal relationships with them in their local language (Lurhmann, 2010). To speak of an 'ethnographic sensibility' would then be to refer to modes of inquiry that bear resemblance to participant observation, perhaps without being quite so immersive.

We understand the term somewhat differently. As we have used it in our own work (Herzog and Zacka, 2019, Longo and Zacka, 2019), the label 'ethnographic sensibility' aims to capture not a range of empirical techniques in the vicinity of participant observation, but certain qualities of attention that ethnographies tend to exemplify particularly well, but on which they claim no monopoly. Among these qualities of attention, two specifically strike us as opening productive avenues for political theory.

First, to adopt an ethnographic sensibility is to take experiences – the phenomenology of everyday life – seriously as a starting point for social inquiry, and to view disjunctures between such experiences and scholarly categories of understanding as a warrant for research. Second, it is to begin with the presumption that the meanings and values we ascribe to the world can only be understood in light of our experiences in it. As shorthand, one could say that an ethnographic sensibility puts phenomena first and that it endogenizes normativity. The approach builds upon traditions of research in critical theory as well as in feminist, race, decolonial and postcolonial scholarship that Brooke Ackerly and Humeira Iqtidar describe in this Critical Exchange. Let us take its two characteristics in turn.

In a survey of the field that remains incisive, Ian Shapiro (2002) lamented the extent to which our choice of research topics in political science and political theory is driven by received methods and theories, leaving us trapped in specific representations of the world and unable to observe political phenomena that do not accord with our priors. As a remedy, Shapiro recommends that research be driven instead by problems specified independently of methods and theories, a call recently echoed by Jonathan Wolff (2019). This is a welcome corrective, but we think it eschews an important question. For something to be a problem, we must first see it as such. Yet if history is any guide, some of the most entrenched forms of power and deepest social injustices hide behind a patina of ordinariness.

How can we de-familiarize ourselves with the ordinary so as to discern problems where there appear to be none? To this challenge, ethnography has traditionally offered one of two answers: to invite researchers to contend with settings away from home where basic assumptions no longer hold, or to have them describe social phenomena closer to home without resorting to the concepts they would naturally reach for. It is this latter strategy that we have found most useful in our work. It involves embracing a studied naiveté. The state is a collection of administrative bodies regulated by law, yet when we encounter it, it has the form of an envelope or a person seated across a desk. A border is a separation line between sovereign entities, yet when we traverse it, it morphs into a zone with diffuse bodies and functions. What if we took these quotidian manifestations seriously, and used them as a starting point for the elaboration of theory? An ethnographic sensibility invites us to approach traditional objects of study – the state, borders, the security apparatus – without presuming we know in advance what they are, but by looking instead at how they present themselves to us, and how the individuals who belong to them handle the situations and problems they encounter every day (Fassin, 2015).

Against the grain of much contemporary political science, these re-descriptions of familiar phenomena summon up 'what' questions (What is the state? What is a border?), in a discipline typically absorbed with 'why' questions. In the context of political theory, where conceptual questions are more commonplace, an ethnographic sensibility changes how we look for answers. If asked 'what is the welfare

state?' or 'what is sovereignty?' our first inclination as theorists is to turn to previous attempts to answer those questions. An ethnographic sensibility recommends instead that we set our sights on the empirical embodiment of such ideas by looking at the everyday operation of the institutions in which they are putatively housed – in this case, a welfare agency or a border administration. Doing so can help us avert three dangers inherent to doing our thinking about the world through the frames of others: the risk of inheriting their occlusions; the risk of reifying phenomena as we get more distant from them; and the risk of missing out on hidden tensions and contradictions that only become manifest as ideas take concrete form.

Besides putting phenomena first, an ethnographic sensibility enjoins us to see meanings and values as of a piece with experiences – to endogenize normativity. A good ethnography captures not just the meanings people attach to their surroundings, but how these meanings are anchored in particular forms of life: how they are evoked, sustained, or even engendered through ordinary practices. The same is true of our values. They emerge, in part, from our struggles to make sense of our circumstances and make do with them, i.e., from our repeated attempts and failures to make ourselves at home in the world.

Seen in this light, the valuable and the harmful are not (or at least, not just) objective properties that exist in the world for us to respond to, but attributes that are, at least in part, constituted through our practices, and best understood in light of such practices. Valuing something – the care with which one attends to it, the nuances such attention reveals, the emotional vulnerability it brings forth – can transform a mundane object into something that commands respect. Think about how a patch of greenery is infused with wonder through the sustained attention of a horticulturalist, or think instead, to use an example more familiar in political theory, of how practices of piety invest the headscarf with meaning and value. That we value something is of course no guarantee that it is indeed valuable – by objective standards, or at least those detached from our individual viewpoint – but understanding where our values come from, and what they are bound up with is essential to understanding whether they do, in fact, deserve to be affirmed.

To the extent that political theory aspires to be a vehicle for self-understanding, it must pay attention to how the moral landscape we draw for ourselves is in part produced by the circumstances we find ourselves in and our responses to them. This is one reason why political theory has to reach into the social sciences, so as to relate our moral and political values to the experiences and environments in which they take form, and against which they become intelligible. This is of course a staple of the history of political thought, insofar as it is concerned not just with ideas but with how ideas evolve in response to social history and participate in the shaping of that history. Political theory with an ethnographic sensibility extends this mode of analysis into the present, since our values do not just take shape in response to historical events, but also in response to the particular situations we face every day.

This brings us to Jakob Elster's probing challenge. Elster recognizes that by uncovering empirical facts, an ethnographic sensibility can help political theorists discover new normative insights. He finds its purchase more limited, however, when it comes to the justification of normative views since, ultimately, such views must be grounded in fact-independent principles. Or as he puts it, following Cohen (2008), a fact F can only ground a principle P in light of a further (fact-independent) principle P1 that explains why F supports P.

We acknowledge the allure of Cohen's argument. It assigns facts and principles clearly defined roles and, as Elster notes, it seems to do justice to some of our more abstract normative commitments – that we should promote autonomy, say, or treat persons with dignity – which many of us could not imagine revising in light of new facts. Yet, as Elster also recognizes, the merits of Cohen's view are widely contested. Several scholars have taken issue with the clean division of labor it envisions between empirical research and philosophy, challenging the fact-value distinction, for example, or arguing, as Miller (2013) has done, that there are several ways in which facts can support principles.

We do not seek to revisit these debates here. Instead, we want to register a different worry, namely, that drawing a sharp distinction between facts and principles, between discovery and justification, directs our attention away from the inter-relation between these registers, which should be a central object of concern for political theory. For us, the appeal of an ethnographic sensibility is precisely that it articulates how values and forms of life are co-dependent. This is what we meant when we spoke earlier of endogenizing normativity: the values and harms one discovers through ethnographic observation are not merely instantiated in the practices one describes, but partly constituted through them. To divide this ensemble into two rubrics – facts and discovery here, principles and justification there – would be to obscure the connection between them, allegedly in the name of analytic clarity.

We do not want to suggest of course that distinguishing between context of discovery and context of justification serves no purpose, and we recognize that the exercise may be helpful to shed light on the structure of our moral views. Nor do we mean to reject outright the possibility of universal values. Our point rather is that as political theorists we should be concerned with how values and forms of life are connected. By separating them, we lose sight of what social practices our values depend on, why these values are attractive to us, and how they might evolve alongside our social practices.

One way to make the loss palpable is to consider that even if one could reconstruct chains of justification down to a stable bedrock uncontaminated by facts, as Cohen suggests, this still wouldn't settle the question of why – *here* and *now* – we find this bedrock persuasive. The answer would have to be informed by history or by the kind of insights an ethnographic sensibility can provide: in light of what experiences did we come to see X as valuable in the first place? If theory is

about explicating our values to ourselves, we need to understand how these values have come to be appealing to us, not least because that story may shake our conviction in them. The reconstruction of a justificatory chain does not tell us moreover about the implications of finding X valuable. What kind of life do we have when committed to X? What values does X displace, and at what cost? By enjoining us to look closely at experiments in living and inviting us to see how our values hang together with our forms of life, an ethnographic sensibility can help us make progress on these questions.

A second reservation we have about the distinction between context of discovery and context of justification is one of emphasis. Insofar as this distinction serves to frame the landscape of normative political theory, we are concerned that it presents an incomplete picture of 'where the action is,' to paraphrase one of Cohen's most famous titles. In particular, the distinction leaves out the wide range of normative questions that pertain to the enactment of our values. These questions, however, are crucial. More often than not, the harms and wrongs we find in the world are not the result of confusion about the grounding of our morals, but a consequence of the obstructions and occlusions that are generated by how we frame problems, how vested interests and power structures shape our gaze, how we imagine the consequences of our actions, how our interests are (mis)aligned by our institutions, and so forth.

With this in mind, it is helpful to distinguish between two types of normative questions: first-order normative questions (i.e., What should one do in situation X?) and second-order normative questions (i.e., How does someone placed in situation X think about what they should do, and how should they think about it?). Both of these questions call for moral reasoning, and both hinge on social scientific facts, though in different ways. In the first type of question, facts often take on a subsidiary role, as input into an evaluative framework set by moral reasoning. Such reasoning may convince us, for example, that a consequentialist framework is appropriate for the problem at hand. To determine which way the utilitarian calculus points, we would then query the social sciences for the relevant facts.

Political theorists who adopt an ethnographic sensibility, however, have typically set their sights on the second family of questions. Here contact with the empirical world is more involved, because the obstacles to 'doing the right thing' are not faulty moral reasoning or shaky moral premises, but particular social arrangements that distort or muddle how we conduct ourselves. The social sciences are helpful not just because they provide factual input into the process of moral reasoning, but because they alert us to the very mechanisms that might be leading us astray and that should be the subject of our attention. Describing these mechanisms and explaining what makes them wrong is a normative enterprise too, and one that can proceed relatively independently from our answers to first-order normative questions. For while we may not know exactly what should be done in situation X, we may have greater confidence as to how our thinking about X may be going

astray. These second-order questions may appear to be of merely derivative importance for political theory – a matter of 'application.' We think on the contrary that they should be center stage.

In our view, it is by understanding the sources and strictures of our values that we are better able to understand why they are right or wrong, and by reconstructing how they appear to actors *in situ* that we learn how to better attend to them, if indeed we should. This is not oblique to political theory; rather, to borrow from Tocqueville, it is political theory well understood.

<div align="right">Matthew Longo and Bernardo Zacka</div>

Texts do not talk back: Political theory's silence about colonialism

In her exhaustive and helpful survey of political theory's engagement with colonialism and imperialism, Jennifer Pitts notes that only in the early 2000s did political theory 'come slowly and late to the study of empire' (2010, p. 212). It is worth pausing and thinking about this. Why did political theory, a discipline ostensibly committed to thinking about the demands of justice and the workings of power, not engage earlier with the foundational role of colonialism in shaping the modern world, especially when other disciplines had already begun to do so? While certainly not the whole story, I would like to suggest here that one important reason for this is the methodological narrowness of the discipline.

Pitts is not alone in noting that anthropologists were the first to begin a process of internal questioning regarding their discipline's complicity with colonial structures. No doubt this was in large part because anthropologists were explicitly entrenched in the running of the colonial administration (Asad, 1975). They provided practical information that colonial states used to organize, manage and discipline the populations they ruled over. Measuring body parts under the influence of eugenic ideas, delineating local customs and kinship patterns to make the locals 'legible' to their colonial rulers, and building relationships that could be leveraged in the interest of the colonial state, the origins of anthropology were deeply entwined with colonial power. However, many anthropologists, even then, were critics of imperial hubris and importantly, of the imposition of European norms. This really came to the fore from the late 1960s onwards, when vociferous internal critique of colonialism and the complicity of the discipline became important debates within the field.

Yet it seems to me that anthropologists' complicity in colonial rule was not significantly more egregious than that of political philosophers, many of whom provided intellectual and ideational support for colonialism. Some influential thinkers like Locke were actively engaged in and profited from colonial enterprises, including the slave trade. More significantly, they provided frameworks that served as justifications for colonial and imperial expansion (Arneil, 1994; Tully, 1994).

Locke famously defended the expropriation of lands and resources from Native Americans on the basis of their lack of industry and hard work. Tocqueville (1841), despite his concerns about the savagery of French expansion in Algeria, condoned it because he saw it as a possible solution for the problem of overpopulation within France as well as an effective means for enhancing French standing against the British. Tocqueville's analysis served as the basis of parliamentary reports on the issue of the colonization of Algeria. John Stuart Mill, a longtime employee of the East India Company that was the vehicle of British imperialism in India until 1857, elaborated a detailed account of individual liberty that nevertheless declared multiple groups such as women and the colonized as not yet ready to exercise this freedom (Mehta, 1999). Mill, an influential public intellectual of his time, proposed as a solution tutelage for these segments of the population until they could reach the maturity required to govern themselves. This notion of tutelage was close in its structure and implications to the civilizing mission that became a professed *raison d'etre* of colonial expansion.

Historicism, a teleological, 'stageist' vision of human development, pervaded the thought of influential thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, but also Karl Marx (Chakrabarty, 2000). Marx's analysis of capitalism, its need for markets and labor at a global scale and thus its imbrication with colonialism, was inspirational for many anti-colonial activists. Yet Marx, too, had maintained until fairly late in his life that colonialism could lift India out of 'oriental despotism' into the next stage of history and serve as a step towards a communist revolution via capitalism. Colonialism, for Marx, was a progressive step insofar as it could facilitate eventual liberation from traditional forms of despotism. Philosophers and historians of the late colonial period who engaged seriously with the ideas and 'civilizations' of the 'orient' were, notwithstanding their appreciation for the depth of those ideas, employed to train colonial administrators at premier universities. In part due to their distance from the lived realities of the 'civilizations' they studied, their epistemological appropriation went hand in hand with contempt for the natives (Thomas, 2010). That there were many critics of empire and colonialism among these thinkers is undeniable (Muthu, 2003). The legacy of some of these critics remains ambiguous though. In a thoughtful collection about Kant, a major enlightenment figure claimed by some as a critic of colonialism, the editors (Flickschuh and Ypi, 2014) note that while individual thinkers might have been more or less nuanced, the canon on the whole is racist, and deeply imbricated with colonialism.

What is surprising, therefore, is that in the aftermath of World War II, the mainstream of Euro-American political theory did not engage with either the enthusiasm for decolonization in the rest of the world or the imbrication of canonical thinkers with imperialism until the new century. Following the professionalization of political philosophy into an academic discipline during this period, many political theorists may not have directly supported colonialism but are

conspicuous in their silence about it. Southern theorists, such as Fanon and Césaire, who did talk about colonialism and its dehumanizing impact on both the colonized and the colonizer, did not belong to the academy, nor are they even now considered part of the canon. In Rawls' influential *Theory of Justice*, written through the late 1960s, a period rife with debates about decolonization, we hear almost nothing about colonialism, its aftermath and legacies. This a strange lacuna for a theorist committed to justice and a discipline dedicated to political realities and normative values.

Given the historical entanglement between political theory and colonialism, the reason that anthropologists started reflecting on the relationship between the knowledge they produced and colonial power cannot just be that they had contributed more to upholding colonial structures. One reason why political theorists might have been able to avoid directly contending with critiques of colonialism is that the discipline's methodological repertoire allowed them to sidestep such concerns relatively easily. Euro-American political theory is perhaps more traditional than other traditions of thought in terms of its deep reliance on a relatively easily defined and contained canon (Iqtidar, 2016). Textual analysis remains the dominant method of theorizing. Decolonial, feminist, and indigenous/ 'non-western' theorists who have long sought to go beyond texts to incorporate their own experiences and those of others have not been recognized as theorists, as Ackerly points out in this Critical Exchange. Texts, when read with care and imagination, can certainly open new questions, bring novel concerns to light, demand different comparisons and inspire alternative visions for the future.

However, texts do not talk back. They do not insist to the political theorist that her analysis is wrong. In fact, they do not tell the researcher that her answers are wrong because her questions are mistaken. Texts, in short, do not question the researcher repeatedly. In contrast, people often do. Ethnographic immersion requires the theorist to place herself in situations where her ideas are open to critique and questioning from those beyond the known confines of academia. There are, of course, better or worse ways of conducting ethnography, and there are rich methodological debates for political theorists to learn from. However, it remains the case that interaction with humans contains greater possibilities for surprises, challenges and pushback. This interaction has its own dynamics such that even at the height of colonial anthropology, practitioners could not avoid some questioning of their own assumptions (Iqtidar and Piliavsky, 2019). The very act of justifying one's inclusion into a particular context requires an explanation. While professional political theorists typically only need to explain their projects to other practitioners, an ethnographer's interlocutors will ask for accounts free of jargon and relevant to their life-worlds. They can question the values and norms the researcher holds dear, actualizing the de-familiarization that Longo and Zacka mention in this Critical Exchange as a valuable intellectual resource. And, of course, the theorist might find

herself contending with the coming together of different traditions of thought in unpredictable and non-intuitive ways (Iqtidar, 2017).

Anthropologists working in 'the field' from the 1950s on could not ignore the immense upheaval that colonialism and anti-colonialism entailed. They could not fully avoid being swept up in conversations about colonial responsibility and legacies. Anthropologists could also not entirely ignore their informants' and interlocutors' perceptions of colonialism. Moreover, given the methodological demands for linguistic capability, new entrants to the discipline were often locals who brought with them to the discipline a distinctive, explicitly critical relationship to colonialism. In her influential article that offered a reassessment of the role that anthropology could play in the postcolonial context, Diane Lewis recognizes explicitly that '[T]he era of Western colonization and white supremacy is currently being challenged by revolutionary wars of liberation and revolutionary modes of thinking. The peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the ethnic minorities in North America are currently questioning the integrity of the anthropologist, forcing him to look critically at himself and reconsider some of his assumptions.' (1973, p. 590) Given their methodological reliance on ethnography, anthropologists had to work through the relationship between their ideas, disciplinary norms and colonialism.

As Pitts points out, an important source of the turn towards the study of colonialism in political theory is the sense that 'American unilateralism and militarism after 2001, demanded a re-interrogation of the idea of empire' (p. 212). Pitts' suggestion is that understanding the legacy of colonialism is important not just for historical accuracy, but to diagnose contemporary dynamics. To say that is to recognize that historical legacies are linked inextricably to the philosophical commitments and conceptual repertoires we adopt today. It is not just a matter of setting the record straight but of thinking through whether the ideas and methods we have now are adequate to the needs of the time. It is worth considering exactly how colonialism or racism inflected normative commitments and foundational ideas. For instance, Charles Mills insists that questioning what he calls 'racial liberalism,' where race is 'retroactively edited out of national (and Western) memory because of its contradiction of the overarching contract myth that the impartial state was consensually created by reciprocally respecting rights-bearing persons,' is critical not just for historical accuracy but to rethink conceptual frameworks and acknowledge that 'at the conceptual and theoretical levels… this record shows that the workings of such a polity are not to be grasped with the orthodox categories of raceless liberal democracy' (2008, pp. 1388–1391).

This is a fundamental challenge for political theory. What is the relationship between ideas, actions and practices? Did Hobbes articulate a new conception that helped shape the state, or did he capture some changes that were already underway but had not made themselves fully apparent yet? Is the fact that the high tide of liberal thinking coincided with dramatic colonial expansion of any significance? As

Mehta asks, were colonial practices and liberal theories 'ships passing in the night,' or did they have a relationship to each other? Does the fact that political theorizing became an academic discipline in the shadow of colonialism have any bearing on how it is practiced today? How do we understand what really is critical to people in different parts of the world or those leading lives very different from the political theorist? How do we make sense of new empires, if indeed that is what they are? More importantly, how do we move beyond colonial legacies to engage with alternatives to the ideas that hold us 'conscripts to modernity,' to use David Scott's (2004) evocative term?

These are difficult questions for political theory, but ones we cannot avoid. One concrete and transformative step in the direction of answering them is the broadening of our methodological repertoire. Ethnography is not a panacea, but it has a role to play as part of a larger rethinking of the discipline. It is not an easy method to adopt, nor one that is by any means without its limitations. The kind of explicit commitment to avoiding epistemic oppression and skeptical scrutiny of sources, human and textual, that Ackerly has suggested in this Critical Exchange is part of an ongoing debate about positionality in ethnographic research. Ethnography does, however, represent a concrete alternative to actualize the connection with the real world that many political theorists aspire to. As the embarrassing silence about colonialism in political theory has shown, diversifying the sources of normative and ideational debates and engaging with questions beyond those raised by texts is necessary not just for the legitimacy of our field but also for its continued vitality. The proof, as always, is in the pudding. If contributions to political theory from decolonial and postcolonial scholars (Mahmood, 2004; Asad, 2003; Du Bois, 1903) who have relied on ethnographic immersion are anything to go by, then there is a solid foundation for us to build upon.

<div align="right">Humeira Iqtidar</div>

Epistemic oppression, grounded normative theory, and an 'ethnographic sensibility'

Epistemic oppression poses a foundational, if not existential, problem for political theorists: how do the politics of knowledge shape the questions we take up and how we take them up? Considering the pernicious ways that social injustice permeates the politics of knowledge, do the ways we theorize reify the systems that give epistemic authority to those already privileged in epistemic and other spheres? Can we theorize in ways that reveal and challenge epistemic privilege? Many political theorists dance up to the edge of these questions on a broad range of topics.

In this contribution, I set out what I take to be the principle purpose of empirically grounded normative theorizing: to take on epistemic oppression within the politics of knowledge, including the politics of moral theorizing. While I find

the phrase around which this Critical Exchange is organized – 'ethnographic sensibility' – provocative, substantively, I worry that it is both too narrow and too vast on its own to help us address the serious problem of epistemic oppression. As I argue below, it is too narrow, where it is limited to specifically ethnographic methods, and insufficient, where it fails to benefit from the insights of scholars who have made attention to marginalization and the methods for doing so central to their work.

The contribution proceeds by answering three questions:

What is epistemic oppression and why is it the key problem for theorists?
Why and how does grounded normative theory address the twin problems of epistemic injustice, namely to be recognized as a knower and to have one's ideas recognized as knowledge?
What role can an ethnographic sensibility play in grounded normative theory?

In concluding, I note that, in order to take on epistemic oppression, an ethnographic sensibility must demonstrate: (a) a concern with the epistemological politics embedded and concealed in norms of moral reasoning in political theory, and (b) a commitment to developing methods for charting better, more accountable ways of doing political philosophy. I argue that what I propose to call Grounded Normative Theory (hereafter GNT) offers guiding commitments for these. GNT is not so much a new approach to political theory as a way of recognizing the methodological commonality under a broad tent of theory practices. It draws inspiration from, and remains attentive to, the ideas and practices of groups that are politically marginalized in the world. As Iqtidar's contribution to this Critical Exchange notes with regard to the problem of empire, their understanding of important normative problems, their approach to those problems, and the work that they have done on those problems, needs to be visible.

For centuries, feminist, race, and decolonial scholars and activists have fought a twin battle over the politics of knowledge. One part of the battle is to be recognized as a member of the community that determines the norms of what kinds of arguments and data contribute to knowledge. Women, people of color, and indigenous people around the world have historically been denied access to the kinds of education that would enable them to participate in the spaces in which ideas were developed and transmitted to future generations. The few exceptions illustrate the more general point: that social, economic, and political oppression kept most from being equal participants in knowledge creation and transmission. Yet, winning or even making significant strides in this first battle still left them losing or being significantly disadvantaged in a second: the battle to have the content of their arguments incorporated into common knowledge. The lived experience of oppression made their claims of oppression epistemically suspect: they were subjective.

In that politics of knowledge, claims of objectivity privilege and then sustain the epistemic privilege of those who enjoy gender, race, and political privilege. In other words, epistemic privilege both is endogenous to social, economic, and political privileges *and* cannot be reduced to these (Dotson, 2014).

The flip side of this epistemic privilege is epistemic oppression. Epistemic oppression has been at the center of much Third World Feminist scholarship and the methods it developed for challenging the norms of politics and the disciplines that have studied politics for generations (Stewart, 1831; Wells, 1897; Baker and Cooke, 1935; Spivak, 1988; Ackerly, 2000). The academic discipline of normative political theory favors insight embedded in text, while feminist and race theorists have a well-founded commitment to supporting engagement with the words and insights of those in struggle. We need methodological tools for respecting the insights of those in struggle even when their vantage points or discursive resources have been limited by the politics they resist and that theorists seek to reveal. The result is a political theory that can be assessed not only by those well versed in the ways of reasoning (as if our mode of argument is apolitical and privileged only by our ability to make a better argument), but also by those whose lived experience gives them an epistemic privilege in assessing whether a normative argument is accountable to the political experience it attempts to address. To resist epistemic oppression, feminist, race, and decolonial theorists follow activists in making normative arguments grounded in the lived experience of struggle against slavery, for independence and against the caste system, to end lynching, to promote gender justice in civil rights, and so many others.

GNT draws on the critical methodologies that scholar-activists, generally feminists and generally women of color, have pioneered in order to create and teach methods for doing normative theory that break the pattern of epistemic oppression (Ackerly, 2000; Ackerly and Attanasi, 2009). While the label is not important, the reason to refer to this approach specifically as GNT rather than generally as 'empirically informed' is that, like Grounded Theory in sociology and other empirical fields, GNT entails a recursive methodology such that its normative conclusions 'ring true' with those with lived experience of the political problem at the center of the theory. Within that broad purview, there are many variants (Mansbridge, 1980; Ackerly, 2008; Tully, 2008; Cabrera, 2010; Coulthard and Simpson, 2016; Johnson *et al*, 2017; Zacka, 2017; Ackerly, 2018; Forman, 2018) and conversations with these scholars as well as Chris Tenove and Antje Wiener have informed the account I present here.

Without assuming that all political theory arguments are tainted in their assumptions and justificatory arguments with unexamined epistemic bias, GNT takes a methodological approach to the possibility that, due to the perniciousness of epistemic injustice, any might be. The method is driven by four commitments: it is focused on normative challenges that are raised by and in political contestation; it utilizes empirical data that rely on a broad and diverse range of actors and ideas; it

attends to the potentially obscured and silenced informants and ideas that can and should inform a theory's assumptions and justificatory steps; and it proceeds recursively, revising the theory through analyzing and reanalyzing empirical data. The goal is to offer arguments that are substantively accountable and recognizable to those with situated knowledge as well as to those with the privilege of political security. Grounded normative theorists are not the only ones who have these commitments; what distinguishes the approach is the centrality of the politics of knowledge as *part of* any political theory question and the confidence in these methodological commitments to enable the theorist to destabilize their own privileged position as a normative authority. To do this work, GNT methodology utilizes the methods best suited to the problem: surveys, interviews, observation, participant observation, physical science data, engineering analysis, ethnography itself, or mixed methods.

Historically, feminists have been rigorous in using a range of methods to draw theorists' attention to the range of lived experiences that bear on all manner of political life in and beyond households, personal relationships, employment arrangements, and intersecting systems of oppression (e.g., Wells, 1897; Baker and Cooke, 1935; Pateman, 1970; Okin, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, [1990] 1991). While the journal's format for a Critical Exchange discourages extensive citation, in light of the argument I am making here, some signaling is essential. Given that the problems of the politics of knowledge, and more specifically epistemic oppression, are central to the reasons for taking up GNT (and maybe an ethnographic sensibility), it is appropriate to recognize at least some of the feminists, particularly women of color and indigenous scholars, who have led this work. Attentive to the role that oppression can play in silencing words or preventing them from becoming part of the historical record, these scholars look beyond what people say to how people live their lives and toward the struggles in which they choose to engage.

Regardless of which empirical methods one chooses, GNT relies on methods that explicitly destabilize epistemologies. I argued in my earliest work that Third World feminist scholar-activists provide a model for such methods: recursive reflection, skeptical scrutiny, and ongoing commitment to ever broadening the range of sources that inform normative theorizing (Ackerly, 2000). This methodological response to epistemic oppression has been developed across time and struggles and can be utilized with any empirical or normative methods so as to prompt the researcher to notice and address possible overdetermined assumptions, underdetermined assumptions, insufficient methodological self-reflection, insufficient analytical self-reflection, confirmation bias, and other remnants of epistemic privilege.

The challenge for GNT, particularly for a normative theorist who seeks to diversify, broaden, and deepen the range of views she wants to inform her theorizing, is to do so in a way that is fully attentive to the range of problems

related to the politics of knowledge. Though empirical particulars may vary by research design, the outline of feminist social criticism is essential for taking on epistemic oppression while doing normative theory.

An ethnographic sensibility might be a useful specification of GNT because ethnographic methods can reveal the ideas and experiences that epistemic oppression can conceal from researchers using other methods. And yet, an 'ethnographic sensibility' is too narrow if it is focused only on ethnographic methods and insufficient because 'sensibility' is not fully specified.

Ethnographic methods help to identify a diverse and broad range of actors, to assess their ability to represent the ideas of others, and to evaluate whether the range of actors and ideas actually reflect the full pool of views. Ethnographers have developed methods for identifying marginalized views and the reasons behind the reasons. These are ideas that are not captured well in survey methods or certain interview formats. Yet, while potentially useful in GNT, ethnographic methods are not the only ones appropriate for uncovering epistemic oppression and thus an *ethnographic* sensibility too narrowly specifies a methodological solution to the problem. Further, *sensibility* is not sufficient on its own for intentionally challenging unexamined epistemic oppression. For that, any approach needs a critical methodological complement such as feminist social criticism.

However, if by 'ethnographic sensibility' we mean an ethnographic approach that is modified so as to take in hand concerns of epistemic oppression with methodological commitments like those of feminist social criticism, then an ethnographic sensibility is a form of GNT that utilizes ethnography as its predominant mode of empirical inquiry.

For some, political philosophers reason best when they reason from an Archimedean point. Their knowledge is 'objective.' Their facts are facts. Yet the pretense of an objective reasoning stance is a political privilege. The rest of us confront the two-pronged challenge of epistemic oppression: to be perceived as a knower and to have what one knows perceived as knowledge. Our knowledge is 'subjective,' our facts are 'opinion.' Awareness of this concern reveals that the point Elster raises (drawing on Cohen), and the response Longo and Zacka offer, both lack attention to the epistemic power that is the subtext of their dispute. It adds further depth to the problem Allen raises below (drawing on Skinner).

GNT disrupts the pretext of an objectivity-subjectivity dichotomy by revealing that what is political is not 'subjective,' it is thorough. That is, by attending to the problem of epistemic oppression as an always-present feature not just of politics, but also of moral reasoning about politics, a Grounded Normative political theorist offers a more complete account of her assumptions and reasoning than the theorist who does not explicitly situate her argument within the politics of knowledge, but assumes a stance of 'objectivity.'

Epistemic reflection is part of GNT in all parts of the research: selecting a problem in need of normative theorizing, defining the problem, selecting and

carrying out the empirical methods appropriate for grounding the normative analysis, and in doing the normative analysis. In all stages of the work, GNT benefits from learning how those in struggle have engaged in and thought about their struggles. With explicit and rigorous methodological attention to epistemic oppression, an ethnographic sensibility can be an important form of GNT, particularly in balancing the importance of respecting people's own words and in analyzing those words without letting the words overdetermine the insights they provide.

GNT does not assume away the epistemic privilege of the political theorist, but rather recognizes her professional responsibility to interrogate that privilege and to address it with methodological intent. An ethnographic sensibility can be part of that, but alone it is insufficient to carry the weight of that responsibility.

Brooke Ackerly

Neither handmaid nor assassin: Political theory and contextualism

Just over fifty years ago Quentin Skinner argued, in the controversial then canonical article 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,' that a 'knowledge of the history' of ideas concerning past social and political arrangements 'can show the extent to which those features of our own arrangements which we may be disposed to accept as "timeless" truths may be little more than contingencies of our local history and social structure' (2010, pp. 88–89). In doing so, he challenged the contemporary practice of locating 'unit ideas' across historical texts, which had in turn allowed for the possibility of unmediated conversation across time. *Contra* E.M. Forster we should not imagine past thinkers or writers as all 'seated together in …a circular room' (2005, p. 27) but rather as engaged in their own particular intellectual, political and ideological battles. The meaning of texts could not simply be accessed by repeated close reading and the assumption that we share with their authors a similar way of using language and concepts, but instead needed to be framed in terms of what a given author was trying to do via their particular speech acts.

This was presented as primarily a debate within historical methodology – the question of how best to interpret the meaning of past writing. Indeed, Skinner's explicit targets in this and his other methodological writings were other historians. However, this reconsideration of the scholarly practices of historians of political thought naturally raised a series of further questions about the relationship between it and the broader field of normative political theory. While this was not presented as a programmatic element of the contextualist 'Cambridge School,' it was quickly recognized, by both historians and theorists, that this project could undermine the feasibility of analytical political theory itself, at least insofar as the latter is a search for universal normative truths. It is perhaps an irony of the historical mode of study

that many of the thinkers who were shown to be very much bounded by their time presented themselves as revealing universal truths about both human nature and the demands, purpose and limitations of the political sphere. By demonstrating that their ideas were in many ways instrumental and/or limited by their context, the same questions were inevitably raised about those current political theorists who make similarly universalist claims.

If this historical understanding pointed to a move away from the possibility of generating concrete, immediately applicable insights from the work of past thinkers, then it remained unclear what the *political* value of past works could be, if indeed there could be any at all. John Dunn's famous statement that he 'simply cannot conceive of constructing an analysis of any issue in contemporary political theory around the affirmation or negation of anything which Locke says about political matters' (1969, p. x) seemed to point to the pure antiquarianism of the entire enterprise. But, despite this doubt generated by the historical particularism of past thought, the very recognition of the latter's contingency also led to a more optimistic alternative, and a broad consensus built up to the effect that the value of the history of political thought (HPT) for politics was essentially dispositional. As suggested by the opening quotation, it highlighted the equal contingency of our own views and thus freed us from the authority of both past thinkers and present 'common sense' (Janssen, 1985). Past thought couldn't tell us anything about the *content* of current politics, but it could teach us a bracing general skepticism, a point weaponized by philosophers, such as Raymond Geuss (2005), in the rejection of, especially, Rawlsian liberalism.

What is striking about HPT since these methodological interventions, however, is the increasing prominence of something like a third way: that, once we recognize our own contingency, we are freer not only to 'do our own thinking for ourselves,' but also to do so with the judicious use of the past. History might not only tell us how and why we arrived at the present, but also act as a means to return to and recover paths not taken, and hence to useful concepts that were unjustly side-lined for essentially political and ideological reasons. This is the story often told around the rediscovery and increasingly broad application of Neo-Roman or republican freedom, presented as an alternative to its positive and negative variants and currently the subject of an ever-expanding academic industry in its application to a range of 'issue[s] in contemporary political theory' (Skinner, 1998; Laborde and Maynor, 2008). In the words of Gordon Graham (2011, 87), here the history of political thought seems to act as a 'handmaid' rather than as an 'assassin' to normative political theory, generating further material for testing and use by philosophers.

In these three options for a potential relationship between normative political debate and HPT we can begin to see striking parallels between HPT and ethnographically informed political theory. In demonstrating the possibility of radical difference, the latter is a field which (also) pushes us 'to criticise the

functioning of our own societies and to interrogate their unsubstantiated claims to universality' (Zacka, 2017, p. 255). However, the nature of these parallels suggests that ethnographically informed political theory may face the same choice of roles which historians are currently choosing between. There is a clear desire among many practitioners of this mode of political theory to contribute to normative debates in the third manner, i.e., in a way which is conceptual rather than merely dispositional (Herzog and Zacka, 2019). However, it is not clear that it is possible to act as a handmaid when one has been trained to be an assassin. The same methodological commitments which reveal our particularism, both historical and cultural, seem to push against the possibility of using past historical examples to analyze, or even escape, our own contexts. As Iain Hampsher-Monk (2001) has argued, despite recent trends in practice there may be an irreconcilable – or at the very least, thus far irreconciled – gap between the 'philosophical foundations' of the 'historical revolution,' which pushed against the possibility of intellectual continuity, and the contemporary normative deployment of past concepts (2001, p. 173).

While Hampsher-Monk's challenge is a serious one, and one which might indicate that historians of political thought must choose between rigor and relevance, I want to suggest that this pessimism is over-stated. But in order to have both, practitioners must undertake a deeper, more consciously genealogical contextualism than is often used. This is an approach inspired by recent work in global intellectual history – i.e., work which faces the dual mission of highlighting the possibility of both transhistorical and transcultural conversations. One key benefit of such a method is that it enables us to use past interventions in contemporary debates while allowing us to set aside, or remain agnostic about, the possibility of universal truth or even stable concepts. In other words, the relevance of past ideas is demonstrated not by their philosophical universality, but rather by the demonstrated fact that their applicability might be broader than micro-contextualist studies suggest. If successful, this methodological intervention also has significant implications for the possibility of overcoming the same challenges in integrating the fruits of ethnographic research into normative debates.

In the 2013 volume *Global Intellectual History* Christopher Hill provides an illustration of what this kind of work might look like, through a method which he describes as 'conceptual universalization' in which concepts acquire the *attributes* of universality. In his account, we can see how the European Enlightenment concepts of 'civilization' and 'society' were translated and adopted by Japanese intellectuals and civil servants in the Meiji period. The process of translation revealed tensions and multifarious meanings within the original concepts. But it also meant that, because this translation occurred very consciously by reference to works such as John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and Montesquieu's *L'esprit des lois*, we are permitted to say that these French and British texts were a part of debates over 'civilization' in Meiji Japan. Despite the radically different context in which

they were written, they form a part of the context of political thinking in their new home in a non-trivial way. Their implicit or explicit meaning, and the assumptions which underpin them, may well have impacted these much later, and geographically distant, debates in ways which can be excavated by later theorists and which may continue to be important in contemporary discussion.

Crucially, in such cases the historian is not attempting to locate genuinely universal concepts, as we might characterize the earlier search for 'unit ideas' and their multiple manifestations across time and space. Nor is the aim to suggest that through this process a concept could eventually, through mass transmission across the globe, become truly universal. Instead, the aim is to identify moments at which, for recognizably contingent reasons, particular concepts are treated by past thinkers *as if* they were universal for the purpose of argument. The historian is thus identifying and tracing non-universal, but importantly non-parochial, ideas. There are numerous concepts which will never attain this status; the reasons why some do and others do not will have as much to do with the historical facts of power, domination and influence as with any intrinsic philosophical value or coherence found in the concept itself.

The case study of 'civilization' in Japan is an essentially historical one, but it provides some guidance for HPT that aims to integrate past ideas or texts into current debates. Such work will need to demonstrate a similar process of 'non-parochialization' of the concept in question. This can be done in at least two distinct ways. Firstly, a historian might demonstrate that non-parochialization takes place despite a radical shift in immediate context. Work in this vein will need to focus on the demonstrable transmission or inheritance and then uptake of texts and ideas. This may necessitate greater focus on institutions and networks, and on moments of rupture and transformation as well as on conceptual continuity. It will in many ways be a form of reception history, distinct from a pure focus on the intentions of authors, and it will thus be a form of genealogy. Secondly, the historian can seek to demonstrate that there is enough contextual similarity between their times and our own that past thinkers could conceivably be addressing the same problems as we are, not least because we have inherited specific frameworks for both understanding and approaching this context. Both of these options stretch the boundaries of 'context,' but by focusing on the processes of non-parochialization historians should be able to avoid the flawed approach whereby similarities between concepts throughout history, and hence the construction of spurious intellectual traditions, emerges purely as a result of the historian's own mind.

Such work is already being done. Adom Getachew's recent monograph *Worldmaking After Empire* consciously presents itself, in a genealogical vein, as a 'history of the present' that aims to destabilize a story in which 'the transition from empire to nation in the twentieth century' was 'inevitable.' However, its normative ambition is broader. Getachew also aims to demonstrate that despite a difference in context, institutional continuities mean that past thinking about

postcolonial sovereignty can 'reorient the questions we ask about international justice' (2019, p. 9). In a slightly different but related model, Paul Sagar's *The Opinion of Mankind* (2018) pushes back against the idea that there are no perennial questions, insofar as we do in fact inherit them. This approach explicitly rejects the universalism of some forms of ideal analytical political theory, and, inspired by the work of Bernard Williams and others, instead posits the importance of locating a shared moral community. For similar reasons, Williams' call to engage in normative debate 'now and around here' has also provided theoretical scaffolding to a number of ethnographically informed political theorists, including Bernardo Zacka (2017) and Matthew Longo (2018). However, the Hill case suggests that it might be possible for such moral communities to be much less bounded by distance, or indeed other markers of difference, than Williams suggests, in a way particularly congenial to ethnographically informed work. Such studies demonstrate that we might be in a broader epistemic community than micro-contextualism suggests, but that the community is still limited by what historians are able to prove.

Returning to political theory, the possibility of non-parochialism has implications for theorists who work in ethnographically sensitive ways and who want to contribute to normative debates. Longo and Zacka have suggested, in this Critical Exchange and elsewhere (2019), that ethnographically informed political theory can act as a critical genealogy of the present. Ethnographically won insights can indeed provoke us to think along new lines, but to be fully integrated into normative debate, it will be necessary to precisely demonstrate the shared applicability of the concepts in question. The vertical, historical model of genealogy used by Hill, Getachew and Sagar may not be available to theorists who work in this way, but a horizontal model which focuses on the spread of shared discourse and the commonality of institutions may suffice. The findings from ethnographic research can simultaneously pose a challenge to the genuine universality of concepts while also allowing for the possibility of debates and judgements across time and space. As in historically informed political theory, however, this attribution of non-parochialism to concepts will need to be earned via the careful tracing of transmission or relevant similarity.

Signy Gutnick Allen

Don't be boring! Political realism and social anthropology

Over the past decade there has been a growing call in some quarters for Anglo-analytic political philosophy (or theory; I treat the two as synonymous) to be more 'realistic.' Yet what exactly this means, why it is needed, and what it should consist of, is not always fully clear or uncontroversial, even among those who call for it. Nonetheless, in its present guise 'realism' owes much to the work of two figures:

the mostly posthumously published political thought of Bernard Williams (2005), and the later writings of Raymond Geuss (e.g., 2008, 2010).

Both Williams and Geuss expressed dissatisfaction with what they called the 'ethics first' (Geuss) or 'political moralist' (Williams) approaches that have come to dominate Anglo-analytic political theory in the post-war period, in no small measure due to the enormous influence of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), and the discipline's wider preoccupation with specifying which values ought ideally to be realized by social and political arrangements. What both Williams and Geuss objected to was the lack of distinctively *political* features in mainstream normative theory, which often presented politics as simply the arena in which previously determined moral principles were to be applied or instantiated, and where political considerations should feature only in terms of questions about applicability or feasibility, but not as the subject of distinctive normative and theoretic interest in their own right. What Geuss and Williams (despite major differences in further questions) both agreed upon was that a political theory that treated politics as though it was simply the application of separately determined moral principles was going to get things very wrong. At least, that is, if we are genuinely interested in understanding the social world, and not simply the content of our particular moral imaginations. As Williams put it, he wanted a political theory that paid more attention to 'distinctively political thought' (2005, p. 3).

The impact of Williams's and Geuss's attack on 'ethics first' or 'moralist' political philosophy is difficult to assess. On the one hand, those who engage in the so-called applied morality approach that Geuss and Williams criticized have generally not been moved by the challenge, seeing the demand for more 'realistic' work as a confusion about the nature of political philosophy itself, how labor is best divided between theories of the ideal vs. application, or have just preferred to ignore the charge of irrelevance and double down on insisting (with Rawls) that unless we clearly affirm our moral foundations at an ideal level, then we have no way of guiding reform in a principled way at the practical level (but without tending to worry much that the practical level never actually seems to be reached).

By contrast, those sympathetic to Geuss and Williams for some time struggled to avoid getting bogged down in a series of meta-debates, with realists often tending to try and argue the 'moralist' camp into submission by stating the theoretical case for why a more realistic *method* is required in order to do a form of political philosophy that is more attentive to what is, mundanely speaking, politics – and not just imagining scenarios in which different moral values more or less magically obtain. So far, however, those who have taken up Geuss's and Williams's mantle have generally had no more success in persuading the mainstream than the originators of the realist critique. Instead, the effect has been for both sides to end up consistently talking past each other.

Until recently the situation that realists found themselves in was thus a rather unsatisfactory one, suffering from two connected malaises. First, realism had

become overly dominated and characterized by debate about method (both in terms of realist contributions and replies from their opponents). The result is that, rather than actually doing realistic political theory, realists often became stuck in debates about what realistic political theory ought to look like – which rather defeated the point. Second, and somewhat ironically, realism became boring. Rather than offering new and interesting insights, as it originally promised, it became enmeshed in logic-chopping, meta-debate, and inside-baseball arguments that were generally interesting only to those who penned them (and sometimes not even them).

This was unfortunate, because Williams's and Geuss's original challenge was certainly not boring. Indeed, part of its impetus was to point to the reams of post-war Anglo–analytic political theory and state that the emperor has no clothes. If one wanted to use the tools of theory to actually understand *politics*, then the endless literature on 'what justice demands of us,' or what kinds of inequality would be permitted in a more or less ideal society we have no hope of ever actually living in, and so on and so forth, was bound to be unhelpful. Realism promised to be exciting, by contrast, because it promised to return the discipline back to its earlier preoccupations with what were once universally recognized as the essential components of properly *political* political theory, to borrow Jeremy Waldron's apt phrase (Waldron, 2013; cf. Sleat and Rossi, 2014). A serious interest, that is, in things like power, coercion, legitimacy, authority, prevailing institutional structures, historically inherited material conditions and beliefs, and how all of these are absolutely indispensable if one wishes to have a meaningful grasp of values like justice, equality, and freedom – values that will never be realized in the absence of the former can only be properly understood in complex conjunction with them.

Realism – if it is to live up to both its billing and its promise – needed to come unstuck from both difficulties. Happily, such a shift is now well under way, for example, in recent work by Mark Philp (2018a, b) on political corruption, Edward Hall (2018) on political integrity, Robert Jubb on civil disobedience (2019), Demetris Tillyris (2019) on 'dirty hands' and public ethics, and Ilaria Cozzaglio (forthcoming) on populism – to name but a few. But, as Janosch Prinz (2020) has asked elsewhere, how might realism benefit from a specific turn to social anthropology, rather than just 'the real world' in some wider sense?

My own work has tentatively tried to show what this might look like by considering the question of legitimacy, and how it operates in practice (Sagar, 2018). Following Williams's suggestion that a precondition of realizing any substantive political goods is the establishment of order, but that there in turn needs to be sufficiently widespread agreement about who has the right to use coercive force so as both to maintain that order and, in turn, to provide more substantive normative goods off the back of it, my work has investigated the variety of ways in which beliefs in such coercive legitimacy do in fact arise. Drawing on the writings of James C. Scott (1990) and Lisa Wedeen (1990), I suggest that legitimacy is likely to be a complex phenomenon that cannot reliably be read off the surface of

people's behavior or pronouncements. As Wedeen and Scott demonstrate in different ways, putative acts of accepting dominating power as legitimate are often revealed, upon closer inspection, to be coded and strategic patterns of survival, designed to avoid being brutalized, while often also *denying* the legitimacy of a dominating power. Imagine the servant who bends over to pick up the materials his master has commanded, but 'accidentally' has an attack of flatulence in the process. On the other hand, many instances of voluntary subordination that are given freely really are just that. Human beings *do* defer to power, and willingly so, even in situations where philosophers think they ought not to. Take, for example, widespread British – and American! – mania regarding royal weddings. Identifying which kind of case we are dealing with – genuine acquiescence to power, its calculated simulacrum, or any of the many shades that lie between – has major implications for the normative assessments we make of any given regime type or form of political rule, and what it is attempting to do with the power it possesses. But making those assessments in a reliable way requires a genuine engagement with the lived experiences of the actual peoples whose politics we claim to be trying to understand. In short, it means engaging in some level of anthropological investigation, or at the very least, operating with an anthropological sensibility.

My own work is only a tentative step in such a direction. Nonetheless, the following considerations indicate that there are other promising directions that might be developed in this spirit. In the first place, realists have often suggested that history may prove a valuable resource for understanding how politics actually works, and hence what is interesting and distinctive about political actions, values, choices, and so forth. After all, history is in part the record we have of past political successes and failures. Yet realists have sometimes tended – the present author very much included – to focus on the history of political *thought* as a resource for doing realistic political theory today. However, it is not clear how examining what past theorists had to say from their armchairs is an obvious improvement on the failings of present-day armchair speculation. What is really needed is what Geuss and Williams originally insisted upon: coming to see that our political (and indeed, moral) values are themselves deeply historical products, which come down to us in rich and complex formats in ways that we often cannot control, and that we can only partially re-direct or re-shape – and hence that we have no hope of understanding these values unless we grasp something of that constituting historical inheritance.

The interest in an anthropological turn, from a realist perspective, is that history is to some degree and in some modes, an ethnography of the dead, while in a sense ethnography can be understood as a sort of history of the present. Of course, the two disciplines are importantly distinct in several regards – but insofar as ethnography seeks to understand the complex forms of life in myriad human settings on their own terms, 'from within' as it were, it offers the chance to explore the real texture and substance of those complex situations that humans variously

find themselves living through, and so ought to complement realism in a way that history is claimed to. As Bernardo Zacka (2017) shows in his study of the street-level bureaucracy of welfare provision that lived reality often turns out to be vastly more normatively complex, and indeed fraught, than could possibly be guessed at – let alone deduced – in advance, and especially not by using the conceptual tools of philosophical analysis alone. Ethnography will to a degree necessarily pick up on how the historical inheritance of values and ideas affects the way these play out in practice – and hence is likely to surprise and confound us, in illuminating ways, given the complexity of human experience.

This connects to a conceptual point already made by Longo and Zacka in a recent overview article (2019) about the fundamental nature of the very ideas that political theorists claim to be preoccupied with. Longo and Zacka argue that ethnography may reveal that conceptions of political values – their example is freedom – are not only conditioned by particular lived experiences but are not properly comprehensible unless those lived experiences are integrated directly into the analysis. As they suggest, upon closer inspection some political values may prove to 'resist objective, time- and space-independent characterization,' and instead only be properly comprehensible if placed in the thickly textured experiences which give rise to them (Longo and Zacka, 2019, p. 1069). Realists, most especially, ought to be directly sympathetic to this line of thought: that the lived context of politics is what constitutes political values and concepts, and so we must pay close attention to those lived contexts if we want our theory to genuinely be about what it purports to be about.

As to whether the results of anthropological investigation lead to 'philosophically cogent understanding,' Zacka and Longo rightly note that '[E]thnography will not settle this question – that is the province of political theory' (Longo and Zacka, 2019, p. 1069). This, however, pushes in the direction of a point I have tried to make in my own previous 'realist' work (Sagar, 2016): that if realism is to live up to its billing, it will end up looking a lot less like pure philosophy than most of what passes at present for political theory. While the tools of philosophical analysis will continue to be integral to a realist approach – allowing clarity of meaning, focused engagement with normative concepts, the ability to carefully construct and assess technical arguments, etc. – they will need to be supplemented with the insights of other disciplines. The ethnographic grounding of social anthropology – its insistence on going and actually looking so as to reflectively understand what it is like under certain aspects of the human condition – is a complement to realists' attempts to take on board the substance of politics.

Williams once remarked that good philosophy could be conceived of as '*a priori* anthropology,' i.e., a common attempt to understand human life and its values but based on the tools of abstract analysis rather than ethnographic fieldwork (2005, p. 76). When it comes to understanding politics, however, the *a priori* will not get

us very far. Realists would do well to see what they can learn from those doing good old fashioned *a posteriori* anthropology. It may turn out to be rather a lot.

<div align="right">Paul Sagar</div>

Acknowledgements

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