

Realism in Political Theory, Ethnographic Sensibility, and the Moral Agency of Bureaucrats

Abstract

This essay argues that ethnographic methods, or an ethnographic sensibility more broadly speaking, can go some way to addressing a thorny question of political realism in political theory: Realists are committed to taking context seriously and to offering critique; but how can they do both?

Based on a reconstruction of the main lines of inquiry and arguments of Bernardo Zacka's *When the State Meets the Street*, the essay shows that ethnographic sensibility is well-suited to address the realist predicament because it combines two levels of interpretation: On one level it seeks to reconstruct people's understanding of what they are doing and who they are. On a second level, ethnography seeks to interpret the larger ideational and material power relations which affect people's values and practices.

The essay spells out how taking an ethnographic sensibility can enhance (realist) political theorists' understanding of the nature and limits of politics in a particular context, while at the same time providing a starting point for potentially transformative criticism from within this context.

Keywords

Political theory; realism; ethnography; bureaucracy; Bernardo Zacka; methodology

Introduction

Political theories should provide orientation. Thinkers as different as John Rawls and Raymond Geuss agree about the centrality of this task for political theory.¹ Agreement quickly dissolves when considering what constitutes orientation and how theorists might reach orientation. Arguably, the provision of orientation is one of the core issues in current debates between ideal and non-ideal theory, and realist approaches to political theory. A schematic and somewhat simplified account of the three forms of orientation found in these debates would run as follows: ideal theorists provide orientation through offering a polestar in the form of principles or institutional designs that rely considerably on idealizing assumptions. Here orientation consists of a destination, in the direction of which one shall travel. Non-ideal theorists focus on providing orientation in terms of laying out a pathway from the present to a destination which we can be confident of reaching from our non-idealized starting point. At the very least any principles should be subject to feasibility constraints and sensitive to their context of application. In non-ideal theory, orientation focuses on guidance for the journey and on understanding where we currently are. Realists contend that the understanding of politics in ideal and non-ideal theory approaches is typically so detached from practice that they do not, in fact, provide reliable orientation. Any realist orientation must consider more closely how politics is practiced in the context in question. Besides these contentions, however, realists have yet to offer a distinctive pathway to providing orientation.²

Acknowledgements I would like to thank Alan Finlayson, Thomas Fossen and Ben Jones for their generous feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript. I would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for Polity for their very helpful comments. I am grateful to Bernardo Zacka for inspiring conversations about ethnography and political theory. Research for this article was funded by The Leverhulme Trust (ECF-2016-227).

¹ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 3; Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 37-42.

² Realism is a well-established branch of the history of political thought and in IR Theory which emphasizes the importance of power relations, conflict and the fallibility of human agents, as well as the tragic dimension of politics. While these traditions are connected to the recent realism and much can be learned from them (as has been demonstrated e.g. by Alison McQueen, "Political realism and the realist Tradition," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (2017): 296-313; Duncan Bell, "Political Realism and International Relations," *Philosophy Compass* 12 (2017); Matt

The shift from mostly methodological and meta-theoretical criticisms of liberal-analytical political theory, which have by now been established (and extensively discussed³), to offering orientation is, however, proving to be a challenge for realists. Two of the most important challenges concern the way realists relate to “real politics” and how they can generate critical purchase. Attempts to develop realist approaches have thus far mainly relied on conceptual and ontological stipulations about the nature of politics. The lack of engagement with concrete social and political phenomena raises questions about how much weight realist theorizing can have for addressing social conflict and suffering, and about how key realist commitments, e.g. to contextual judgment, can be operationalized.⁴ In addition, the basis for any critical purchase of realist political theory, a key concern both for critics⁵ and for proponents of realism,⁶ remains unclear and has only recently started to receive more attention⁷. We might sum up these challenges as the “realist predicament”: Realists are committed to taking context seriously and to offering critique; but how can they do both? Does taking context seriously not expose the theorist to the risk of becoming caught in people's own value systems? In order to offer critique, does the theorist not need to import values or preferences that betray her commitment to context?

Sleat, *Liberal Realism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), ch. 2), they do not provide solutions to this task.

³ William A. Galston, “Realism in political theory,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010): 385–411; Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat, “Realism in Normative Political Theory,” *Philosophy Compass* 9 (2014): 1–13; Michael Freeden, “Interpretive and Prescriptive realism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 17 (2012): 1–11; David Runciman, “What is Realistic Political Philosophy?,” *Metaphilosophy* 43 (2012): 58–70; Matt Sleat, “Realism, Liberalism, and Non-ideal theory: Are there two ways to do realistic political theory,” *Political Studies* 64 (2016): 27–41.

⁴ Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political. Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

⁵ For two very different ways to get to this question, see: Lorna Finlayson, “With radicals like these who needs conservatives? Doom, gloom and realism in political theory,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 16 (2017): 264–282; Charles Larmore, “What Is Political Philosophy?,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10 (2013): 276–306.

⁶ Matt Sleat, “Legitimacy in Realist Thought. Between Moralism and Realpolitik,” *Political Theory* 42 (2014): 314–337.

⁷ Janosch Prinz and Enzo Rossi, “Realism as Ideology Critique,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (2017): 348–365; Mathias Thaler, “Hope abjuring hope. On the place of utopia in realist political thought,” *Political Theory* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591717740324>.

In this essay, I will seek to show that ethnographic methods, or an ethnographic sensibility in political theory more broadly speaking, can go some way to addressing the realist predicament. The most important contribution of an ethnographic sensibility, I hold, lies in the reconfiguration of the relationship of theory to its context. Taking an ethnographic sensibility transforms the way in which the words and actions of people matter for realist theorizing. This reconfiguration is key to a more complex understanding of politics which, in turn, is a requisite for the generating a basis for criticism and reflexivity compatible with realist commitments.

More specifically, an ethnographic sensibility is well-suited to address the realist predicament, because it combines two levels of interpretation. On one level it seeks to reconstruct people's understanding of what they are doing and who they are. Here ethnography produces interpretations of contextualized self-interpretations related to people's practices and the (e.g. moral or political) values which they take to be motivating their actions. At a different level, ethnography seeks to interpret the larger ideational and material power relations which affect people's values and practices (and which come e.g. in the form of ideologies). Operating at both levels at once leads to the analysis of how people's self-interpretations stand toward the wider power relations and structures that affect them. Exploring the misalignments, tensions and gaps between these levels provides a starting point for criticism. An ethnographic sensibility can enable the realist political theorist to understand how normative landscapes are constituted in a particular context while at the same time providing a starting point for potentially transformative criticism from within this context. All the while, however, the realist theorist must remain vigilant about the imbrication of ethnography in, and its potential complicity with, existing structures of power – a point to which I will return later.

After a brief discussion of relevant distinctions within recent realist thought and an overview of the general contributions an ethnographic sensibility can make to political inquiry, I will turn to a reconstruction of the main lines of inquiry and arguments of Bernardo Zacka's *When the*

State Meets the Street. As a new monograph which seeks to use ethnographic methods not just to reach substantive findings but also to present a methodological challenge and alternative in political theory, it provides an example of how to connect ethnographic sensibility and realist political theory.⁸ I then offer a discussion of the value of ethnographic sensibility for realist political theory in conjunction with the critical assessment of the monograph's contributions.

Which realism?

Apart from a basic commitment to take seriously the realities of politics, which are typically viewed as characterized by the pervasiveness of power, historicity, and the potential for conflict, realism in political theory is rife with internal divisions. I will only dwell on such divisions in order to clarify which approaches to realism seek to establish a distinctive form of orientation (rather than try to expand existing taxonomies⁹). I view two pairs of opposition within realist theorizing – which are admittedly painted in broad brush here – as particularly helpful in this regard: Firstly, the opposition between revisionist and radical forms of realism, and secondly the division between prescriptive and interpretive forms of realism.¹⁰ The first opposition is between those who are looking for more realistic recommendations (e.g. on principles or institutions) for, and justifications of, liberal democratic states¹¹ and those who take the turn to realism to require a more profound change of focus toward the criticism of power relations in contemporary societies.¹² Revisionist realists often combine a commitment to finding a more

⁸ Bernardo Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017)

⁹ See note 3 above.

¹⁰ A distinction I borrow from Michael Freedon (Freedon, "Interpretive and Prescriptive realism").

¹¹ Galston, "Realism in Political Theory"; Sleat, *Liberal Realism*; Jeremy Waldron, *Political Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

¹² Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); *Ibid.*, *Politics and the Imagination* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010); *Ibid.*, *A World without Why* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014); *Ibid.*, *Reality and its Dreams* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016); *Ibid.*, "Realism, Wishful Thinking, Utopia," in *Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives*, ed. S.D. Chrostowska, and James D. Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 233-247; Lorna Finlayson, "With Radicals like these"; Paul Raekstad, "Realism, Utopianism, and Radical Values," *European Journal of*

robust basis for justifying liberal states with a retention of basic building blocks of normative analytical political theory, e.g. that orientation should be offered via principles. Radical realists focus their energy on efforts to understand, interpret and criticize conceptual schemes and practices which are crucial for the power structures in contemporary societies. They look to understand how people make sense of politics to provide orientation by starting from within their already existing lifeworlds to identify tensions which they then hope to use as catalysts for questioning currently held views and perspectives.¹³

The second opposition pits prescriptive forms of realism, which seek to retain the structure and purpose of “normative theory”, against interpretive forms of realism. The distinction hinges on different understandings of the tasks of political theory and philosophy. While Michael Freeden sees “prescriptive realism” as essentially a vehicle to retain (rather than to rethink) political theory as a form of “ethico-political” theorizing which prescribes to political actors and the general public what they should do or think, “interpretive realism” is the study of politics, in particular political ideologies, in action.¹⁴ This form of inquiry is political in a different sense, namely in terms of interpreting the political realm through rhetorical practice and the politicization of concepts in everyday speech. On John Horton’s view, interpretive realism is mainly driven by the aim of understanding, not just of “the fundamental concepts of political discourse and argument and at elucidating the structures of different ways of thinking about politics”¹⁵ but also of “the place of leadership, the role of contingency, the idea of political

Philosophy 26 (2018): 145-168; Janosch Prinz, “Raymond Geuss’ Radicalization of Realism in Political Theory,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42 (2016): 777-796.

¹³ This division is not neat, and the work of individual thinkers often crosses the divide. The writings of a key inspiration to many realists, Bernard Williams, on moral philosophy (e.g. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985) may be viewed as rather radical whereas his more political works (*In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005) may be viewed as closer to revisionist realism.

¹⁴ Freeden, “Interpretive and Prescriptive realism.”

¹⁵ John Horton, “What might it mean for a political theory to be more realistic?,” *Philosophia* 45 (2017): 487-501, p. 499.

judgement and the meaning of political possibility”¹⁶. While Freedden’s interpretive realism leads to a division of labor between the interpretive study of political language and rhetoric and normative theorizing, Horton expands the interpretive purview and emphasizes that normative considerations are inescapable when working to understand politics.¹⁷ Horton’s interpretive realism thus points toward the importance of reflexivity about how normative considerations enter and influence any interpretive study of politics.

Radical and interpretive understandings of realism break more substantially with ideal and non-ideal theory than their counterparts in as far as they prioritize the task of diagnosis and seek to conduct it as self-reflexive participants within the social order. The form of orientation these understandings might provide would combine commitments to the study of power, historicity, and context with embedding social criticism in interpretive inquiry. I contend that a turn to ethnographic methods would help develop key elements of this form of orientation, e.g. interpretation, in realist political theory. Theoretical arguments for more interpretation have already been presented in focal areas of realist thought, including the understanding of politics (or the political)¹⁸ and of reality.¹⁹ However, these arguments have not yet led to a change in how realist political theory is practiced. I further contend that ethnographic methods are conducive to the intensive attention to context and to power relations which is central to radical realism. The proximity between the commitments of radical and interpretative realism and ethnographic methods makes the latter look promising for contributing to a distinctive realist form of orientation. Before turning to *When the State Meets the Street* as a showpiece of this potential, I will first give a brief overview about ethnography in (recent) political inquiry.

Ethnography in political inquiry

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 499

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 499-500

¹⁸ McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political*, pp. 5-20.

¹⁹ Adrian Little ed., Alan Finlayson and Simon Tormey, “Reconstituting Realism. Feasibility, Utopia and Epistemological Imperfection,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 14 (2015): 276–313.

Ethnography is classically associated with the method of participant observation.²⁰ One of the distinctive aims of the approach, at least in anthropology, is to capture the “irreducibility of human experience”²¹ through immersion in strange or familiar cultures and/or groups (“fieldwork”). While participant observation is still the paradigmatic approach for ethnographically oriented research, other, less time-intensive ways of studying people and power have recently become more frequent. This includes forms of non-participant observation, multi-sited fieldwork, interpretation of second-hand fieldwork data, or in-depth interviews.²² To distinguish such methods from qualitative methods more generally, they are often described as driven by an “ethnographic sensibility”²³ which conveys a commitment to proximity or immersion without necessarily involving long-term participant observation.²⁴

This sensibility relies on a bottom-up approach, which seeks to take people seriously in their complexity²⁵ and seeks to give them as much authority as possible over the framework through which they are interpreted²⁶. The concern with lived experience may also open new and different perspectives: “Rather than beginning by specifying variables of interest and excluding others, ethnographic methods provide a means to reach beyond assumptions about what matters

²⁰ In the past two decades ethnographic methods which had largely been marginalized in political science in the second half of the 20th century (at least in the US context) have attracted renewed attention. See, Edward Schatz ed., *Political Ethnography* (Chicago, Il.: Chicago University Press, 2009).

²¹ Paul Willis and Mats Trondman, “Manifesto for Ethnography,” *Ethnography* 1 (2000): 5-16, p. 5.

²² Karen O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods* (London: Routledge, 2014).

²³ Edward Schatz, “Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics” in *Political Ethnography*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago, Il.: Chicago University Press, 2009), pp. 1 – 22; Karen O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods* (London: Routledge, 2014).

²⁴ Within participant observation, there are choices between a more active form of (non-participant) observation which is combined with opportunistic or in-depth interviews and less active forms of listening to informal talk (see Katherine Cramer Walsh, *Talking about Politics* (Chicago, Il.: Chicago University Press, 2004). While ethnographic methods can be practiced against the background of different epistemologies (e.g. interpretivist or. neo-positivist), the most common stance is interpretivist.

²⁵ Katherine Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment. Rural Consciousness and the Rise of Scott Walker in Wisconsin* (Chicago, Il.: Chicago University Press, 2016), p. 218.

²⁶ Harri Englund and James Leach, “Ethnography and the Meta-Narrative of Modernity,” *Current Anthropology* 41 (2000): 225-248.

and discover the previously unknown and unexpected.”²⁷ The bottom-up approach and elicitation of new perspectives are directly related to the potential critical purchase of ethnographic methods. It is important to note, though, that ethnographic methods do not necessarily facilitate criticism. Rather, they can be equally useful, and have historically been used, for exercising oppressive power. Despite the self-reflexive turn since the 1980s²⁸ and current scholarship on the dynamics of positionality and power involved in ethnographic research (at home and abroad),²⁹ ethnographies continue to directly serve the oppressive powers, as exemplified by the “Human Terrain System” approach that formed part of the counterinsurgency campaign by the US military in Afghanistan.³⁰

Only if they have critical ambitions *and* are sufficiently self-reflexive about their positionality and the power dynamics involved in the fieldwork encounter, political ethnographers are well-placed to elucidate how certain terms of debate or certain practices or social identity constructions either reproduce “dominant social arrangements”, serve as examples of the transformation of these arrangements, or help highlight “contradictory practices that paradoxically both reproduce and potentially subvert [dominant sociopolitical] arrangements”.³¹ Ethnographic sensibility could perform a “disruptive engagement with power”³², e.g. through the publication of marginalized views, which could lead to the questioning of terms of debate and dominant sociopolitical arrangements. In many contexts, the publication of marginalized views comes with both the criticism of elite justifications for their

²⁷ Evelyn Z. Brodtkin, “The Ethnographic Turn in Political Science: Reflections on the State of the Art,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* (2017): 131-134, p. 132.

²⁸ James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

²⁹ See e.g. Audra Simpson, “On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, ‘Voice’ and Colonial Citizenship,” *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 9: 67-80; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012²).

³⁰ Roberto J. Gonzalez, *American Counter-Insurgency: Human Sciences and the Human Terrain* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009).

³¹ M. David Forrest, “Engaging and Disrupting Power: The Public Value of Political Ethnography,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* (2017): 109-113, p. 111.

³² Forrest, “Engaging and Disrupting Power”, pp. 109-110.

terms of rule, as well as the development of a dissident perspective (by the ethnographer, co-produced with the people taking part in the context studied), which may have a democratizing effect.³³

Studies of power relations embedded in political theory have successfully drawn on this critical potential of ethnography. They have tended to locate themselves within critical theory and typically have not used their approach and/or findings to challenge the methodologies of analytical normative political theory.³⁴ Increased consideration of ethnography as a method of political theory, as practiced and advocated in *When the State Meets the Street* (and other works of Bernardo Zacka)³⁵, could shift the burden of proof of their aptitude to prevalent approaches for re-presenting reality in political theory, e.g. thought experiments, intuition, rational reconstruction or findings from quantitative or other qualitative social science.

While this brief introduction to ethnography already provides a sense of how it might be valuable to (radical and interpretative strands in) realist political theory, a more detailed discussion is needed to further concretize this potential. To this end, I will turn to Bernardo Zacka's *When the State Meets the Street*, which explores the moral agency of the bureaucrats responsible for the most common interactions between the state and its inhabitants. Showing the normative importance of such moral agency for the exercise of bureaucratic discretion, the monograph offers an interpretation of the dispositions of street-level bureaucrats such as teachers, police officers, or social workers. While this topic may seem to appeal primarily to scholars of public administration, *When the State Meets the Street* is an innovative contribution to current debates about how to do political theory. In contrast to many mainly meta-theoretical

³³ Ibid., pp. 111-112.

³⁴ See e.g. Clarissa Hayward, *De-Facing Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³⁵ Lisa Herzog and Bernardo Zacka, "Fieldwork in Political Theory: Five Arguments for an Ethnographic Sensibility," *British Journal of Political Science* (2017), doi:10.1017/S0007123416000703. This essay in which Zacka's contribution expands on his findings in *When the State Meets the Street* further and more explicitly engages with the recent debates about realism.

or methodological treatises of which debates about realism are particularly rife, it shows how to practice an approach to political theory that is closer to the experience of the relevant agents by way of example, in this case through the combination of ethnographic fieldwork with the study of secondary empirical and theoretical literatures. In contrast to other incisive examples of political ethnography, it explicitly locates itself in political theory and reflects on the challenge that the use of ethnography means to the dominant methodologies in the sub-discipline. I will first offer a reconstruction of the main lines of inquiry and arguments before considering criticisms of the book and its contribution to realist political theory.

When the state meets the street

Street-level bureaucratic discretion

Starting from the observation that political theorists have had comparatively little to say about the most common, bureaucratic interactions people have with the state, *When the State Meets the Street* unfolds as an attempt to address this lacuna. The introduction sets up the conceptual, substantive, normative, and methodological questions and problems, focusing on the discretion that is so central to street-level bureaucracy in practice, but the normative standing of which is doubtful in extant accounts of bureaucracy. Zacka's analysis of these accounts of bureaucracy finds them wanting when applied to street-level bureaucrats who are characterized by occupying the lowest hierarchical ranks, having direct contact with clients, and needing to exercise discretion in view of underdetermined public policy.³⁶ Not only are the conclusions of these accounts usually directed at high-level bureaucrats, their concern with bureaucrats acting in bad faith (as manifest in corruption, misuse of authority etc.) also cannot clarify what we should think about bureaucrats wielding discretion *in good faith* under the circumstances of increasingly pressured public (or quasi-public) services.³⁷ Bureaucratic discretion is of

³⁶ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 23-25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-48.

heightened interest in current US politics in view of recent resistance efforts to Donald Trump's policies by employees of government agencies (e.g. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)). While many of the resistance efforts covered in the press fall outside the remit of Zacka's study, because they come from managers or are about fundamental disagreements at policy level³⁸, Zacka's framework might still prove useful for studying how moral dispositions relate to resistance efforts and how the latter affect the exercise of discretion further down the ranks.

Once the importance of discretion for evaluating street-level bureaucrats as agents of the state has been established, Zacka turns to the normatively interesting aspects of such discretion, in particular its relationship to the goals of street-level bureaucracy. These goals – to treat clients fairly, efficiently, respectfully and responsively – may easily or even typically conflict.³⁹ Based on his own participant observation – he served as a receptionist at a publicly funded non-state nonprofit organization (called NCDI) which served as the official antipoverty agency for a city in the Northeastern United States for eight months⁴⁰ – and on similar ethnographic studies as well as his readings of political and social theories, he developed an interpretive perspective on discretionary practices.⁴¹ This perspective is centered on the concept of the moral dispositions of street-level bureaucrats which, so Zacka suggests, are key for understanding how they manage to navigate the demands of competing goals under conditions of constrained resources. The notion of moral disposition provides more depth to the interpretation of bureaucratic systems beyond the moment of decision and is also informed by input from within moral and political philosophy as well as by Zacka's ethnographic fieldwork. While the former,

³⁸ See e.g. the collection of documents obtained via FOIA requests at the EPA, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/15/us/politics/epa-foia-requests.html>.

³⁹ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 48-65.

⁴⁰ Longer vignettes from this participant observation appear on pp. 111-112, 146-148, 152-153, 184-192, 212-216. While Zacka gives sustained attention to his participant observation, the process of the development of his interpretive lenses from these observations (or how much they mattered) receives surprisingly little attention.

⁴¹ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 29-31.

particularly if one draws on a post-Wittgensteinian outlook⁴², presents arguments for why dispositions are as important as decisions (or actions) for understanding the normative relationships between people,⁴³ the latter prompts a search for a framework that can make sense of the intricacies of street-level discretion based on contextual judgment rather than universal principles.

Zacka identifies three layers that make up the moral dispositions of street-level bureaucrats: a hermeneutic grid which clarifies their context, an affective attunement responsible for the (re)construction of their clients as persons, and a normative sensibility which guides their prioritization of goals.⁴⁴ Moral dispositions are the higher-level result from the ongoing interaction between the role conceptions street-level bureaucrats may profess and their more ad-hoc tendencies (“modes of appraisal”) to relate to clients and to process information.⁴⁵ In short, they considerably influence how street-level bureaucrats will interact with clients along dimensions of extent and mode of involvement.⁴⁶ Zacka argues that one of the most pressing challenges for street-level bureaucrats lies in avoiding all too common reductive moral dispositions, which are often not due to bad faith but are caused by the conflict within and between the normative criteria of public service (efficiency, responsiveness, fairness and respect) and constrained means. He develops three ideal types – indifference, caregiving and enforcement – which characterize extreme positions on axes of extent of engagement (from withdrawn and overinvolved) and mode of engagement (from regulating to serving people).⁴⁷

The indifferent street-level bureaucrat views herself as processing people and scores highly in terms of efficiency and impartiality-based fairness because of their withdrawn relation to clients

⁴² See e.g. Cora Diamond, “Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value, in: Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 79-109.

⁴³ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 14, 66-67, 87, 110.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-95, see also Figure 3 on p. 95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88; see below.

⁴⁷ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 95- 110.

and their reliance on the letter of directives and targets. These strengths, however, are outweighed by the lack of responsiveness their approach allows (which may also compromise respect for individuals) and by their inability to cultivate a sense of responsibility for their discretion. Due to the unquestioning reliance on directives and targets, indifferent bureaucrats have difficulty with grasping the importance of discretion.⁴⁸ Caregivers seek to establish a personal, warm relationship to their clients. While caregivers excel at responsiveness, they often fall short of achieving high levels of efficiency, fairness and of supporting self-respect. In terms of the latter, their tendency to gravitate toward those most visibly in need may provide false incentives to their clients to present themselves as minimally capable, which in turn may undermine their self-respect and may entrench the bureaucrat's paternalistic attitudes.⁴⁹ Enforcers view themselves not as personal caregivers but as agents of the state and focus on fairness and respect in the sense of concentrating on distinguishing deserving clients from free-riders. They thereby seek to bolster respect and trust for public services. Enforcers tend to view clients through a prism of suspicion which opens the ground for the unchecked influence of discriminatory attitudes and thus undermines the enforcers' claims to fairness and respect. Their motivation to identify all those who abuse the system makes them less willing to compromise which reduces their ability to work efficiently.⁵⁰

The reductive ideal types of dispositions all prioritize one element of the normative goals of public service at the expense of others and thus leave practitioners unable to approach cases openly.⁵¹ Zacka argues that in response to the threat of reductive dispositions public service agencies should cultivate a combination of indifference, caregiving and enforcement in order to meet the widest range of the normative goals of street-level bureaucracy. Chapters 3,4 and 5

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 101-104.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 104-106.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 106-109.

⁵¹ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 12-13, 20-22.

of *When the State Meets the Street* offer responses to the pitfalls of reductive dispositions on the individual, community of practice and managerial level respectively.

At the individual level, Zacka shows – drawing on examples from secondary fieldwork – that discretion is normatively problematic for street-level bureaucrats if they develop reductive understandings of their role (as described above). They either fall short of their duties to their clients in several ways, and/or become emotionally overinvolved and “burn out.” In response Zacka suggests *gymnastics of the self*, a notion which takes recourse to the practices of the self from the late writings of Michel Foucault. Such *gymnastics* center on self-examination of, or self-reflection on, their adopted role conceptions, the “calibration” of their level of involvement and the “modulation” of the way they engage clients.⁵² They seek to develop greater self-awareness about one’s inclinations and their interaction with one’s role conception which, in turn, shall enable increased scrutiny of one’s level of emotional involvement with clients (“calibration”). Such scrutiny may bring up the need for reestablishing boundaries between personal and professional spheres, as one of Zacka’s co-workers relayed, the success of which in turn may depend on the third dimension of the *gymnastics*, which is changing the mode of involvement as well (“modulation”).⁵³ If taken together, these *gymnastics* should enable street-level bureaucrats to revisit the relation between their role conception, the goals of public service, and their own self.

At the level of communities of practice, Zacka explores the value of informal taxonomies shared between colleagues. These taxonomies may allow them to judge cases on the basis of their collective experience, thus superseding or further concretizing directives and rules.⁵⁴ Zacka calls this form of judgment “institutional phronesis” and argues that its contextual embeddedness makes it well suited to co-realize many of the normative goals of public service.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 135-150, also consider the figure on pp. 88 and 145.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 146-148.

⁵⁴ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 157-167.

He discusses the example of how his co-workers at NCDI categorize clients and situations when “the guidance provided by the rules that street-level bureaucrats inherit effectively runs out”⁵⁵ by collectively developing an informal taxonomy based on assessing whether clients had a “situation”, “issue” or an “attitude” and adapting their responses accordingly.⁵⁶ While such informal taxonomies may appear non-transparent from the outside (and to clients), Zacka argues that this disadvantage is sometimes outweighed by their ability to permit casuistic reasoning which is often required to deal with complex cases responsively and yet efficiently.⁵⁷

At the managerial level, Zacka argues that discretion can be granted to street-level bureaucrats with most desirable results by recruiting people with varied role conceptions and encouraging practices of constructive peer evaluation and self-care. Another important task at the managerial level consists of avoiding pushing workers into impossible situations, in which they are structurally forced to experience conflict between their instructions and the self-understanding they have learned as moral agents on the frontlines of public service.⁵⁸ In response to impossible situations, managers should enable “voice” as an option for their employees (which is more likely to contribute to realizing normative goals of public service than the alternatives of “exit” or “loyalty”). For voice to be a viable response to impossible situations, managers need to work toward establishing communicative channels that reach all the way from the street level to the policymaking level, so that the implementation process can be treated “as a valuable source of feedback.”⁵⁹ In as far as Zacka offers advice to managers his book is open to be used as a resource within existing governance frameworks and power relations, e.g. to improve performance indicators. Its findings are, however, at least equally addressed to street-level bureaucrats as to managers and policy-makers, and indeed one of the book’s virtues is the

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 159.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 158-167.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 197-209.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 230-240.

⁵⁹ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, p. 234.

attention it devotes to a sympathetic, yet critical rendering of the experiences of lower-rank workers who do not have access to the reins of power within their own organizations.

Meta-theoretical and methodological contributions

In his conclusion, Zacka provides a methodological and meta-theoretical framing of the arguments and conceptual elucidations offered in the substantive chapters. Without claiming to fully develop a distinctive approach to political theory, Zacka invites the reader to view his book as a primer in the political theory of implementation. Implementation for Zacka should not be understood as the application of principles but rather as the development of contextual judgment from the ground up. To make sense of the complexity on the ground, political theorists should become fluent in ethnographic sensibility.⁶⁰ This sensibility would allow them to detect that street-level bureaucrats are engaged in a kind of “institutional phronesis”⁶¹ rather than the application of standard operating procedures, let alone principles. The recourse to such phronesis, Zacka suggests, may be key to the resilience of the state by replacing its distinctive logics of simplification⁶² with a form of judgment closer to the everyday experience of its inhabitants⁶³. Further benefits of this form of judgment—if derived from ethnographically studying experiments in living, which show what our values, once practiced, lead to—include the ability to address the disagreements arising from the implementation of laws that are typically underdetermined.⁶⁴

It is important to note that *When the State Meets the Street* does not use ethnographic sensibility as a piece of evidence to validate normative stipulations, but rather lets it guide the normative

⁶⁰ Elsewhere (Lisa Herzog and Bernardo Zacka, “Fieldwork in Political Theory: Five Arguments for an Ethnographic Sensibility,” *British Journal of Political Science* (2017), doi:10.1017/S0007123416000703) the author has developed in more detail a breakdown of the different aspects of the value of ethnographic sensibility for a more orthodox understanding of “normative political theory”.

⁶¹ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 248-250.

⁶² James R. Scott, *Seeing like a State. How some schemes for improving the human condition have failed* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁶³ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 248-253.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

inquiry, by “open[ing] ourselves [as political and moral philosophers, J.P.] up to the possibility that we may have something to learn from, not simply about, how [ordinary people] answer [normative] questions”, such as “what we have reason to value, what we owe to each other, and what kind of persons we should aspire to be”.⁶⁵ This openness is one more reason why the book may be recommended not just to students of politics, political and social theorists in particular, as well as moral philosophers, but also to practitioners of street-level bureaucracy. The framework Zacka offers struck me – and I am somewhat of an informed outsider as the child of two street-level social workers – as close enough to their experience and yet distanced enough to offer them new tools for reflection.

Realism, politics, and ethnographic sensibility

Political theorists may at this point ask whether *When the State Meets the Street* is at all about politics, even broadly construed. After all, its main focus lies on the moral agency of street-level bureaucrats. I will address this concern through a discussion which clarifies its potential contribution to the current debate about realism in political theory and reveals weaknesses of the book.

Moral agency and the autonomy of politics

In view of the substance of, and self-reflection on, its methodological contributions alone *When the State Meets the Street* should be read as a contribution, and a challenge, to recent debates about the nature of political theory, in particular realism and non-ideal theory (even if the explicit engagement with realism and non-ideal theory is limited to a passing remark).⁶⁶ For this claim to fully make sense, the objection that Zacka is primarily concerned with the *moral* agency of street-level bureaucrats needs to be addressed.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, p. 258.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶⁷ After all, a focus on administration would seem to be a core target of realist criticism against depoliticized political theory. I would like to suggest that such criticism is mostly directed against high-

Zacka's concentration on the moral dispositions of street-level bureaucrats may only be deemed irrelevant on a (too) narrow reading of politics which focuses on high-level office holders and institutions. If street-level bureaucrats are one of the quotidian faces of the state, the dispositions of these bureaucrats have a political dimension. Moreover, what in abstraction might be separated into moral, social and political concerns, interacts and blends in these quotidian contexts. *When the State Meets the Street* exemplifies that the richness of context provided by ethnography enables the theorist to make sense of how these blends and mediations gain political meaning. In Zacka's case, they bring to the fore the different ways in which the decades-long drive to evaluate public service according to cost efficiency influence the dispositions and practices of street-level bureaucrats (e.g. "impossible situations" caused by underfunding and understaffing discussed in chapter 5). These dispositions and practices are always mediated by political and social contextual input which may materialize in a variety of forms and presents to us concerns of collective action.

For realists in political theory, Zacka's interpretations of the moral agency of bureaucrats can serve as a much-needed reminder that they should avoid two related mistakes: They should not equate moral concerns with universalist moral theories and they should not rule the former out as potentially helpful for making sense of real politics. Realists may consider this as an argument for the rehabilitation of taking an interest in moral philosophy for making sense of politics in the broadest sense. The approaches to moral philosophy which might be most congenial to Zacka's emphasis on moral dispositions and his view of them as embedded in wide social and political structures would be contextualist and non-prescriptive, as found e.g. in Bernard Williams' explorations of the phenomena of ethical life (as a more empirical

level public administration that functions according to the theories of bureaucracy Zacka shows do not apply to the street-level. Once these are cast aside, realists should be open to considering the political-moral dimensions of street-level bureaucratic administration.

development of which Zucka's approach may at times be viewed)⁶⁸ and e.g. in the post-Wittgensteinian writings of Cora Diamond.⁶⁹

Secondly, they should not make the autonomy of politics one of their key assumptions (or commitments). The autonomy metaphor suggests that there are separate spheres of politics and morality. While realist concerns with the ambition of certain versions of prevalent moral theories (e.g. utilitarianism or deontology) to fully regulate politics with their preferred moral principles are well-founded, the idea of the autonomy of politics often reads like the negative mirror image of such ambition: that politics does not need to consider moral claims. Whether or to what extent this may be the case cannot, however, be determined *a priori* or outside a particular context. The context for much of contemporary realist political theory is "liberal democracies", in which moral matters seem to be intertwined with politics in one form or other. *When the State Meets the Street* showcases one way of studying how politics and moral concerns are intertwined in street-level bureaucracy.

Realists may then look to the book for inspiration to finding an alternative to the concept of the autonomy of politics. This alternative would be the concentration on the mediatedness of politics. The concept of mediatedness focuses on how e.g. a value, a justification attempt, the prioritization of certain goals over others, or a way to appraise other groups or individuals has become meaningful as political action in the context at hand. More precisely, it opens consideration for politics as a construction made of multiple perspectives, which is often in flux, by focusing on how something is made (un)available for politics, i.e. (de)politicized, and in what kind of mode of politics it operates. To give an example of the different modes of politics, we might consider the difference between the considerations that feed into devising policy and the considerations that drive public debate. And yet both are typically recognized as

⁶⁸ See e.g. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁶⁹ Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

core parts of politics. The ethnographic emphasis on the importance of the creation and organization of meaning generates questions about politics as the institutionalization or policing of meanings, and as the process of reinforcing, subverting or overturning meanings. It also generates questions about how these processes are shaped by forces deemed to be outside politics and vice versa.⁷⁰ More concretely, the questions that the ethnographic emphasis on meaning production helps realists ask are self-reflexive ones about the constitution of reality and of politics.⁷¹ This emphasis fosters appreciation of how at any one time politics may feature clashes between different substantive positions and between different understanding of politics and reality. If realists integrated the analysis of different modes of politics with the interpretation of meaning production, the orientation they could provide could be distinctively sensitive to the multiple configurations of politics operating in any one context and their internal complexity (think of “Trumpland” vs. San Francisco Bay Area, “Brexit England” vs. London).

A realist basis for critique (which addresses the realist predicament)

The way Zacka makes use of ethnographic sensibility is not only relevant for the understanding of politics and the place of moral agency in realist thought but is also relevant to another central concern for developing a distinctively realist form of orientation, namely the basis of realist criticism. Zacka offers two main lines of criticism, with the first directed at political theorists for their methodological and substantive shortcomings in making sense of street-level bureaucracy. As my interest here is in criticism as an element of providing substantive orientation, we will leave this meta-theoretical line of criticism aside. The other line of criticism concerns approaches to public management and austerity regimes. This line of criticism starts from the suffering of the bureaucrats and is of interest for exploring how Zacka may provide

⁷⁰ Kari Palonen (“Four Times of Politics: Policy, Polity, Politicking, and Politicization,” *Alternatives* 28 (2003): 171-186) distinguishes four times or dimensions of politics: policy is about regulation, polity which is about the imagination of what’s possible (and what’s not), politicking is about performance and politicization opens something to any of the three above.

⁷¹ See Adrian Little ed., Alan Finlayson and Simon Tormey, “Reconstituting Realism. Feasibility, Utopia and Epistemological Imperfection,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 14 (2015): 276–313.

inspiration for a realist basis of criticism. Suffering here appears in the form of inter- and intrapersonal pressures which he contrasts with the co-realization of the normative goals of public service (i.e. responsive, fair, respectful, and efficient treatment of clients). On the surface, Zacka's approach looks like a form of interpretation-based internal criticism. The co-realization of the normative goals of public service provides the standard to be restored in the practices of street-level bureaucrats. However, instead of leaving these goals untouched, Zacka transforms the understanding of this set of goals by considering the tensions between them and (tentatively) their relationship to wider social and political dynamics. As far as these goals are values, they become problematized: why is it that they cannot be co-realized? What might one do in view of this challenge: demand different working conditions or settle for reductive dispositions?

This problematization points to the transformation of the original set of goals from exclusively moral values to political values that are embedded in complex relations of power. More concretely, this problematization may focus on discussion of the conflict between the goals of street-level bureaucrats and the goals of senior public managers, and how the priority given to goals of the latter leads to the suffering of the former. Alternatively, it may focus on how street-level bureaucrats operate to navigate these tensions without, however, being able to resolve them. Comparing self-interpretations of values and practices to the power relations that directly impinge on them, in this case the current ideology of public management, likely brings to the fore misalignments, tensions, gaps or contradictions between them.⁷² The understanding of criticism Zacka employs might be better understood as immanent and non-teleological rather than as internal. This means that while criticism starts via engagement with the specificities of the context rather than detachment it seeks to identify potentials for transformation, without,

⁷² Zacka performs this comparative task imaginatively for the reader (rather than for or with the people he observed), thus lifting it from its context to make it an example of wider tendencies in public service.

however, working toward a previously set end goal. This understanding of criticism provides a starting point for developing a realist basis of critical purchase, because it begins from actual practices and values and works up a perspective for their transformation from within this material (similar to the triangulation sketched above). It connects well to the recent interest in the ethics of realism, and to efforts to explore what it means for values to be political (as against moral values applied to politics) and to specify their conceptualization in particular contexts.⁷³

Such an ethnographically infused approach to criticism would combine critical evaluation and contextual interpretation, two tasks that have been set up in opposition in recent discussions of critical social and political theory. Like the ethnographer, the realist political theorist seeking to provide orientation needs to co-produce empirical and theoretical knowledge with her interlocutors. The interpretation of the relationship between contextualized self-interpretations and wider social and political power relations has the potential for starting a critical process that may lead to the transformation of both, if not through the interlocutors themselves, then through the wider publics that are a main audience for such forms of scholarship. This is the gist of the answer an ethnographic sensibility, as exemplified by *When the State Meets the Street*, enables us to give to the realist predicament. A distinctively realist form of orientation emerges based on a triangulation between theories or concepts from political theory, the interpretation of people's actions, and the interpretation of their own account of their actions and of the wider social order.

The place of politics in When the State Meets the Street

⁷³ See for example Edward Hall, "How to do realistic political theory (and why you might want to)," *European Journal of Political Theory* 16 (2017): 283-303, and Matt Sleat and Edward Hall, "Ethics, morality and the case for realist political theory," *Critical Review in International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (2017): 278-295. Shalini Satkunanandan's *Extraordinary Responsibility: Politics Beyond the Moral Calculus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) might perform a similar role in the way it weighs the claims of moralistic reasoning against the demands of political responsibility.

Despite these various contributions to the development of realism (and beyond), I will maintain that a concern with a lack of attention paid to politics in *When the State Meets the Street* is warranted. *When the State Meets the Street* does not sufficiently connect its account of street-level bureaucracy as a site of politics to wider political dynamics. There is a gap between the politics of the moral agency of street-level bureaucrats and accounts of the macropolitical “moment”. Street-level bureaucrats (and everyone else) may use such accounts as heuristics that impinge on their self-understanding which in turn may affect their exercise of discretion. The accounts of the macropolitical moment Zacka does draw on seem extraneous to the ethnography and mostly limited to austerity regimes in public service provision (see above). And while street-level bureaucrats are mostly dealing with the implementation of policy, their political relevance may well go beyond the level of implementation. They may affect their clients’ understanding of the social order and in turn their practices may feed into their clients’ wider political imagination. Zacka seems to understand these ramifications, but they do not lead him to consider street-level bureaucrats not just as moral but at the same time as political agents.⁷⁴ When he writes, that he “attempted to assess how well their actions and dispositions measure up against the normative values that lie at the heart of our democratic political culture”⁷⁵, he depoliticizes these values as static rather than considering them as constantly being modified, contested, or reproduced e.g. at the sites of street-level bureaucracy.

More concretely, more attention might have been paid to how the ways street-level bureaucrats exercise discretion relate to their own political leanings and, more importantly, to their ways of evaluating their wider political and social order. Considering their interpretations of the macropolitical backdrop would add to the comprehensiveness of our understanding of street-level bureaucrats and could help view the particular dispositions of street-level bureaucrats not as drawn from general human possibilities, but as arising and playing out against such a

⁷⁴ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, p. 252.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

backdrop which could be transformed.⁷⁶ To take an example from the book: When a police officer concentrates on arrest metrics and hence on “law enforcement” rather than on “maintaining order” he positions himself not just in terms of role conception but also toward larger political struggles.⁷⁷ It would further be important to consider whether this stance-taking is explicit and hence potentially a form of politicization.⁷⁸ As much as interpretations of the macropolitical developments (and aspirations) in a context may differ between individuals, in the case of street-level bureaucracy their professional interaction may require establishing a somewhat shared account of the macropolitical backdrop to their practices. Further, their interactions may involve attempts to review this account which may in turn feed back into their moral dispositions. Even if the interactions Zacka witnessed did not in fact feature such discussion, it would have been useful if *When the State Meets the Street* had at least critically discussed this aspect of the relationship between moral agency and politics in the broader sense. This holds true as well with regard to the presentation of the *gymnastics* of the self as a remedy to the challenges to street-level bureaucrats which should have been further contextualized in, and distinguished from, neoliberal individual responsabilization and activation narratives.

Conclusion

When the State Meets the Street is an unusual work of political theory, in particular an unusually invigorating and innovative work in terms of its methodology and argumentative thread. While political theorists have written insightfully on what the state should say when it speaks, *When the State Meets the Street* draws our attention to the importance of listening, for political theorists and for the state.

⁷⁶ Bringing the macropolitical dimension in may also strengthen the claim of a political theory of implementation to evaluate the agenda in question.

⁷⁷ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, pp. 203-204.

⁷⁸ See Thomas Fossen, “Politicizing Brandom’s Pragmatism: Normativity and the Agonal Character of Social Practice,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 22(2014): 371-395; Ibid., “Language and legitimacy: Is pragmatist political theory fallacious?” *European Journal of Political Theory* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885117699977>.

The book showcases how an ethnographic sensibility could help develop a distinctively realist approach to political theory and offers inspiration for addressing what I have called the realist predicament. It investigates questions of political theory about what we should value and the conditions we should create for our collective exercise of values through an interdisciplinary perspective that starts from how we practice our values. Its arguments are the result of a reflection on observed practices and interpretations and analyses of similar practices in philosophical and social scientific literatures. The perceptiveness and care with which it builds taxonomies for the intra- and inter-personal challenges involved in navigating the normative demands of street-level bureaucracy are an outstanding example of this approach. It allows Zacka to address several audiences differently, thus providing orientation for political theorists, for street-level practitioners and their managers as well as for citizens dealing with public services. Each of these audiences may come away with changed views on what their values are, should be, and how they instantiate them. While these offerings are best read together, so that political theorists can grasp how this orientation is embedded in practice, they may be read separately, as a criticism of methods in political theory and theories of bureaucracy, as a critical interpretation of moral agency in street-level bureaucracy and as social criticism of public service regimes.

The potential significance of the book for theorizing wider political dynamics lies in drawing attention to the normative importance of what Zacka calls the level of implementation as a site of politics (thereby inverting the focus on principles, institutional and policy design typical of political theory). In order to make good on this potential, further development of the understanding of how wider political dynamics manifest at the implementation level, and how studying the implementation level can lead to criticisms of the very purposes of the policies or systems being implemented, is needed. Realist political theory, especially of the radical and interpretive outlooks, which adopts an ethnographic sensibility is arguably well-placed to support these developments.

Zacka's ethnographic sensibility concretizes what realist orientation might look like. Realist orientation would help make sense of where one is and which paths are open from there, as well as how one got there in the first place. It would also put competing accounts of the political moment in touch with the tension between people's self-interpretations and wider power relations. Such orientation would be based on a complex understanding of how politics is constituted and delimited within a particular context. Reaching this understanding depends on unlocking a more complex relationship between theory and its social and political context, which not only entails foregrounding the interpretation of social phenomena, but also giving people more voice and authority over how they are being interpreted. The latter not only means that realist orientation goes hand in hand with what we might call a democratization of political theorizing in terms of bringing more perspectives to the table without privileging the views of political theorists; it also requires accounting in more detail for how political theorists arrive at their interpretations of a social and political order. It further helps differentiate the ways in which political theory is political, in as far as it requires reflexivity and attention to the different dimensions and modes in which politics manifests, including (de)politicization, and to its own interventions into politics.

Finally, the unlocking of a more complex relationship between theory and its social and political context via an ethnographic sensibility is key for addressing the realist predicament: Exploring the misalignments, tensions and gaps between people's self-interpretations, and interpretations of the wider power relations and structures that impinge on them, generates the starting spark for potentially transformative criticism from within. An ethnographic sensibility thus enables the realist political theorist to understand how normative landscapes are constituted in a particular context while at the same time providing a starting point for their criticism.

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