Realism, Utopianism and Human Rights

Raekstad, P.

Link to publication

Article

Realism, Utopianism and Human Rights

Paul Raekstad [iD]

Abstract

In a recent article, Benjamin McKean defends utopian political theorising by means of an internal critique of realism, construed as essentially anti-utopian, in order to defend human rights against realist objections thereto. I challenge that argument in three steps, focusing on the realism of Raymond Geuss. First, I show that the realism of Raymond Geuss is not incompatible with utopianism, that Geuss never opposes realism to utopianism and that he frequently argues that political theory should be both more realistic and more utopian. Second, I show that McKean misconstrues Geuss' opposition to human rights as anti-utopian. Neither Geuss' opposition to ethics-first political theory nor his objections to human rights can accurately be explicated in terms of McKean's 'utopianism'. Finally, I show how this misconstruing of Geuss' realism renders McKean's critique of Geuss ineffective, as a result of which his defence of human rights against Geuss' realist objections fails. I conclude with some reflections on the importance of this for methodological debates in political theory, the value of realistically utopian theorising and the ideological power of contemporary ethics-first approaches to political theory.

Introduction

In a recent article (McKean, 2016), Benjamin McKean defends utopian political theorising by means of an internal critique of realism, which is construed as essentially anti-utopian in nature and orientation. The question of whether, and (if so) to what extent, realism is compatible with utopianism is a subject of considerable recent debate (Estlund, 2014, 2017; Finlayson, 2017; Galston, 2010; Geuss, 2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2016; Hall, 2017; Prinz, 2016; Raekstad, 2015, 2018; Rossi, 2015; Rossi and Sleat, 2014; Sigwart, 2013; Thaler, 2018; Thomas, 2017; Valentini, 2012), especially among realism's critics. For instance, Laura Valentini describes realism as essentially concerned with the feasibility constraints of politics, in particular rejecting thinkers like Rawls' supposedly 'implausibly optimistic assumptions about human nature'

Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding author:
Paul Raekstad Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam Postbus 15578, 1001 NB, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: paul.raekstad@cantab.net

(Valentini, 2012: 659), and contrasts 'Rawlsian "realistic-utopianism" and full-blown realism' (Valentini, 2012) in terms of a disagreement about how many such constraints to admit in one's political theorising. William Galston argues that realists reject the contemporary approach to political theorising 'on the grounds that it is utopian in the wrong way – that it does not represent an ideal of political life achievable under even the most favorable circumstances' (Galston, 2010: 387) while Hans-Jörg Sigwart argues that realism presents itself as offering 'antiutopian theoretical perspective on politics' (Sigwart, 2013: 412). Finally, David Estlund has recently diagnosed realism as a form of utopophobia, focusing 'narrowly on the question of likelihood'; and argued that, contra realists like Geuss and Williams (Estlund, 2014: 114, including footnote 2), there is nothing wrong with moral-political concepts solely by virtue of them being 'unlikely to be achieved' (Estlund, 2014). None of these authors, however, provide much textual basis for their readings of realist thinkers. What makes McKean's article stand out here is that provides both the most detailed attempt at justifying this interpretation of realism as essentially anti-utopianism and thereafter probably the most well-developed critique of realism for this supposed anti-utopianism. There is much to recommend McKean's article, but it errs, in my view, in presenting realism as primarily and essentially anti-utopian. There are certainly anti-utopian realist thinkers and theories. However, I don't think that it is accurate to portray realism as incompatible with utopianism in general. Since there isn't the space to discuss the subtly different realisms of Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, and since only Geuss has a sufficiently developed discussion of utopianism, I focus on him.

Responding to this critique is important for three reasons. First, variants of McKean's charges (realism being inherently anti-utopian) are not uncommon in the literature (Estlund, 2014; Freeman, 2009; Thomas, 2017; Valentini, 2012), but are rarely addressed directly by realism's defenders, allowing this mistaken interpretation to persist. By correcting this common misconception, I hope to enable more fruitful and constructive discussion about the methodology of political theory. Second, once we understand that and why realism is compatible with utopianism, we can begin to appreciate the value of realist utopian theorising. Third, there are broader lessons to be drawn from this about the present-day ideological power of ethics-first approaches to political theorising. If we are to overcome these ideological distortions and engage in more fruitful methodological debate, it is important to start by showing that an important and relatively widespread interpretation of realism is in fact mistaken. That is my task here.

I will argue that the realism of Raymond Geuss is not incompatible with utopianism, that McKean misconstrues Geuss' opposition to human rights as anti-utopian, and that his critique of Geuss' realism fails as a result. As I show in the first section on 'Realism and Utopianism in General', utopianism is not only compatible with Geuss' realism; he even argues that political theory should be both more realistic and more utopian. As such, McKean's choice to frame the discussion as realism *versus* utopianism is misleading. Here I also mention, albeit briefly, how this relates to some of Williams' views and how he and Geuss compare on the constraints imposed by realism. The second section on 'Human Rights: Utopianism, Ethics-First or Failure(s) of Realism?' explores how this leads McKean to misconstrue Geuss' objections to human rights, after which it considers and responds to some attempted responses that a defender of McKean might make. The section on 'A Misconceived Critique of Realism' shows how this misreading of Geuss' realism and objections to human rights affects McKean's critique thereof. I will argue that McKean's critique fails to effectively target any aspect of Geuss' realism. McKean's critique of Geuss' realism

therefore fails, as a result of which his attempt to use this critique to defend human rights from Geuss' objections fails as well. Finally, the section on 'A Misconceived Critique of Realism' concludes with some discussion of the importance of these thoughts for improving contemporary methodological discussions in political theory, how this can allow us to better understand the value of realist utopian theorising, and some broader reflections on the ideological power of ethics-first approaches to political theory today.

Realism and Utopianism in General

It is worth starting with how McKean defines utopianism. McKean defines utopian thinking as 'depictions of or reflections on highly desirable and hoped-for social and political circumstances that include no necessary reference to the means, costs, or feasibility of achieving them from our present condition' (McKean, 2016: 876). Essentially, utopianism in this sense boils down to speculations about highly desirable future circumstances without reference questions of what that would require and/or entail, or questions of transition from here to there.[1] He goes on to claim that both:

> Geuss and Williams argue that utopian thinking is constitutively unable to orient people properly to politics because of its theoretical methodology, which determines what is desirable or valuable without any reference to the particular political choices faced by really existing actors (McKean, 2016: 877).

With respect to Geuss, the first problem with this analysis is that this is never a point that Geuss makes *against utopianism*. Geuss never opposes realism to utopianism. He opposes it to ethics-first (Geuss, 2008) and to moralist (Geuss, 2016) approaches to political theory,[2] but these are not the same as, and should not be confused with, the distinct concept of utopianism. In response to this misreading, Geuss has repeatedly emphasised that realism, as he construes it, is not at all opposed to utopianism (Geuss, 2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2016), for example, writing that realism in his sense is 'not at all necessarily anti-utopian (Geuss, 2010b: 428, my translation) and that '"[r]ealism" is not [. . .] best understood in contrast to "utopianism" [. . .], but in contrast to what I shall call "moralism"' (Geuss, 2016: 26). This is because Geuss thinks that it is perfectly possible to imagine and think about highly desirable future circumstances (without considering their means, costs or feasibility), while still acknowledging the ineliminability of power in human affairs and without admitting distorted conceptions of how that power operates.

In fact, Geuss has argued that political theory 'has to be both fully realistic and fully utopian' (Geuss, 2010b). At one point McKean acknowledges this, writing of Geuss that 'in other moods, he has written that realism is not necessarily antiutopian' – although even here he is at pains to point out that Geuss' conception of utopianism is '[s]hadowed by the worry that utopian thinking will result in the reduction of politics to enacting blueprints' (McKean, 2016: 881). It should now be clear why this is a misreading. Geuss did not start by developing a realism opposed to utopianism, only later, in his 'other moods', to re-introduce utopianism under a different guise. Instead, as his clarifications show, Geuss' realism was never opposed to utopianism to begin with, and this is recognised in the secondary literature on Geuss (Finlayson, 2017; Raekstad, 2015, 2018; Rossi, 2015; Rossi and Sleat, 2014). Geuss' later discussion of a mode of utopian theorising he finds useful and enlightening for contemporary political theory marks no deviation from this position, but rather a further development of it.

With respect to McKean's other target, Bernard Williams, things are a bit less clear, as there are two places where Williams can be read as anti-utopian. First, what has been called Williams' 'realism constraint' can be argued have a partly anti-utopian function (Hall, 2017; Raekstad, 2018), insofar as it restricts acceptable conceptions of liberty to things which could be provided by a state. Oddly, McKean never discusses this. Second, there's Williams' comment that 'the nearer political thought gets to action [. . .] the more likely it is to be frivolous if it is utopian' (Williams, 2005: 25 – see McKean, 2016: 7–8), which can justly be read as critiquing at least some kinds of utopian political thought in certain specific situations – namely those where it is supposed to be directly action-guiding. Although I cannot explore both of these in-depth here, it is worth mentioning that neither of them do quite what McKean accuses Williams of, namely rejecting utopianism in general. The former is not focused on aspirations and feasibility constraints, but rather argues that if something is to be an acceptable political value it cannot be incompatible with politics in general. Interestingly, this marks a potential difference with Geuss, insofar as Williams seems to take a state to be a necessary condition for politics and imposes a constraint on political theorising which Geuss does not (see Raekstad, 2018). The latter is a straightforward claim about effective action-guiding principles that many non-realists can and do accept, namely that principles suitable for directly guiding political actions (e.g. policy) (perhaps as opposed to more fundamental principles of right, good, or justice) need to take concerns about feasibility and implementation into account – even an arch-moralist like G. A. Cohen (2011) explicitly endorses such a view. Both of these cases are less about ambition, feasibility, or implementation (i.e. utopianism) of political principles in general than they are about taking seriously the requirements of political values that are supposed to function well in particular forms of politics. *Pace* McKean, neither expresses any general anti-utopianism.

This error is mostly one of interpretation. Geuss and his realism are inaccurately portrayed as being opposed to utopianism in general. But I want to go further than this, to show how this erroneous interpretation of Geuss' realism in turn leads McKean to misconstrue Geuss' objections to human rights. This will enable me to pick apart the critique that McKean levels against them.

Human Rights: Utopianism, Ethics-First or Failure(s) of Realism?

Briefly put, McKean discusses three critiques that Geuss makes of the doctrine of human rights: (1) it neglects the fact that in real politics all actions have costs associated with them, *inter alia* that every choice of one action rules out a host of other potential actions with which it is incompatible; (2) it 'ensures that advocates overlook power and have an incoherent relation to institutions and enforcement' (McKean, 2016: 880); and (3) it leads its adherents 'to mistake their own character as political agents' (McKean, 2016: 880), in particular by unduly focusing on individuals and neglecting the importance of real and possible institutions. McKean summarises Geuss' overall critique thus:

> In short, like egalitarian liberal ideal theories, the human rights utopia articulated by the UDHR and its proponents describes a desirable world without any reference to the means for its achievement while its hodgepodge of goals seem to aim simultaneously too high and too low. A right to holidays with pay may seem not merely unrealistic but irrelevant in a world where a billion people live on a dollar a day. At the same time, even global protection of the rights in the UDHR would fall short of a genuine utopia (McKean, 2016: 880).

First, we must note that none of Geuss' arguments are explicitly directed against human rights because they are utopian, in the sense of being 'depictions of or reflections on highly desirable and hoped-for social and political circumstances that include no necessary reference to the means, costs, or feasibility of achieving them from our present condition' (McKean, 2016: 876). Instead, they target human rights for distinct failures of realism. Argument (1) is essentially about rights doctrines neglecting an important aspect of real politics; argument (2) targets human rights for leading its advocates to overlook essential aspects of real politics, in particular power; while argument (3) targets human rights for causing its adherents to misunderstand themselves in their capacities as political agents.

These objections do not target human rights for their utopianism, but for their distinct failures of realism. Recall that Geuss construes politics in terms of three interconnected sets of questions: questions about the agents and contexts of actions; questions about the timing of actions; and questions of motivation, justification, and legitimation (Geuss, 2008: 23–36). Relatedly, he construes realism in terms of making sense of and contributing to such real politics. This shows us the rationale behind the objections that Geuss levels against human rights. Essentially, the latter function to hinder political agents properly making sense of the real politics they are faced with and their status as political agents. In Geuss' work, this is not tied to any general rejection of a notion of utopianism of the kind that McKean discusses. Given realism's vocation of, *inter alia*, making sense of real politics, the point of Geuss' accusations against human rights for neglecting and overlooking key aspects of the real politics they are supposed to address (arguments (1) and (2)) and causing agents to misunderstand themselves in their capacity as political agents (argument (3)) is clear – and this is so regardless of whether we find his arguments plausible. The point of his arguments is that human rights hinder political agents in making sense of important aspects of real politics and that this means that human rights doctrines fail what he takes to be the vocation of political theory.

A defender of McKean could respond that, whereas Geuss doesn't target utopianism per se, he does target what he calls the 'ethics-first' approach to political theory, and that this comes down to basically the same thing – it is possible to read McKean as suggesting this. But this response won't do. First, in the discussions of human rights that McKean refers to (Geuss, 2001, 2013) Geuss does not primarily target human rights for their being instances of ethics-first political theory. Second, however, what Geuss calls ethics-first political theory is not the same thing as, nor sufficiently close to, what McKean calls utopianism. Geuss defines ethics-first approaches to political theory, which view politics as basically applied ethics, thus:

> 'Politics is applied ethics' in the sense I find objectionable means that we start thinking about the human social world by trying to get what is sometimes called an 'ideal theory' of ethics. This approach assumes that there is, or could be, such a thing as a separate discipline called Ethics which has its own distinctive subject-matter and forms of argument, and which prescribes how humans should act toward one another. It further assumes that one can study this subject-matter without constantly locating it within the rest of human life, and without unceasingly reflecting on the relations one's claims have with history, sociology, ethnology, psychology, and economics. Finally, this approach proposes that the way to proceed in 'ethics' is to focus on a very few general principles [. . .]; these principles are taken to be historically invariant, and studying ethics consists essentially in formulating them clearly, investigating the relations that exist between them, perhaps trying to give some kind of 'justification' of at least some of them, and drawing conclusions from them about how people ought to act or live (Geuss, 2008: 6–7).

When Geuss is objecting to this, he is objecting to the acceptability and desirability of doing political theory in a particular way – a topic that has recently begun to be explored in depth in the literature (Hall and Sleat, 2017). This notion of 'ethics-first' political theory is very different from McKean's definition of utopianism and the realist opposition thereto. Unlike the latter, the former says nothing about the importance of questions of feasibility, transition or realisation, or about depictions of the future having to make any reference thereto.

Another possible defence of McKean's argument starts from Geuss' objection that the idea of human rights is 'incoherent', because it postulates a notion of rights in cases where one does not have 'a political agency, which has granted the right, an agency that will interpret cases and determine when the right has been violated, and an agency that will enforce the right' (Geuss, 2013: 84–85). If we then further suppose that this view is premised on the idea that any normative commitments require reference to the means, costs, or feasibility considerations required for their realisation, then one can construe Geuss' argument as anti-utopian in McKean's sense. However, this response won't work for two reasons. First, Geuss' argument here is strictly limited to notions of rights, not to other values or principles. It therefore cannot be generalised without further argument, which is not to be found in Geuss. Second, it is clear from Geuss' discussion of other values like freedom that he does not accept such strictures. For example, he is perfectly at ease talking about a positive concept of freedom as real possibilities without necessarily restricting it in these ways (Geuss, 1995, 2005: 67–77).

In short, Geuss' objections do not accuse human rights of utopianism. Instead, his objections target human rights for distinct failures of realism – failures which do not and need not be explicated through a notion of utopianism.

This is important, because McKean's definition of utopianism incorporates a certain kind of vagueness that neither Geuss' construal of ethics-first political theory nor his critique of human rights do.[3] For example, what McKean calls 'highly desirable and hoped-for social and political circumstances' (McKean, 2016: 876) is importantly vague in ways that the discussion by Geuss it refers back to is not. Such 'circumstances' can refer to rules and norms which take the form of principles (e.g. principles of justice) which lay down rules or rule-like injunctions about what ought to be the case – for example, political and economic inequalities 'are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society' (Rawls, 2001: 42–43). It could refer to normative values without this rule-like structure, such as freedom in the sense of real possibilities to do and/or to be. It can refer to particular sets or combinations of values and principles of either of these kinds. Or it can refer a set of perfect institutions, on varying levels of specificity, from any broad description of substantive institutions of a future society (e.g. bottom-up democratic planning, distribution according to needs), more specific models of the institutional forms of a future society (e.g. models of Property-Owning Democracy, market socialism, or Participatory Economics), or complete visions of a perfect society in toto (such as the grand utopias of Fourier or Saint-Simon). These are all utopias in McKean's sense, being highly desirable social and political circumstances that can be construed so as to make no necessary reference to questions of means, costs or feasibility considerations.[4] By contrast, Geuss' above-cited discussion of the ethics-first approach that he opposes to realism says nothing about institutions. Nor does it say anything about the question of limiting values or principles in any way. There are certainly some things which can be considered both utopian in McKean's sense and ethics-first in Geuss' sense – such as Rawls' Justice as

Fairness – but as this shows, McKean's utopianism includes much that Geuss' notion of ethics-first political theory does not.

As we have seen, McKean's definition of utopianism is not something that Geuss ever utilises, is defined very differently from the target of Geuss' realist critiques, and is not co-extensive with what Geuss opposes realism to – in particular to ethics-first political theory. As such, Geuss' critique of ethics-first political theory and objections to human rights for failing to be realist cannot be assimilated to, or spelled out in terms of objections to, utopianism in McKean's sense. This has further consequences for McKean's critique of Geuss.

A Misconceived Critique of Realism

McKean goes on to argue that 'Geuss suggests that the root of the problem with how ethics-first thinking guides political action is its conception of normative values'; in response, he sets out to examine whether realism is really able to 'offer an alternative means of judging what to do' (McKean, 2016: 880). He argues that realism has three options: being simply a corrective to other views (which McKean considers an implausible reading of Geuss), that realism can guide action without providing normative justifications (which is rejected as implausible both on its own and as an interpretation of Geuss) or that it can provide its own normative justifications (McKean, 2016: 880–881). To the third alternative, McKean argues that since Geuss' political commitments require value judgements, along with questions about how to rank and weigh competing values, he cannot coherently retain both his realism and commitment to certain political goals. This supposedly puts Geuss in a bind: either retaining his political claims, but giving up his methodological rejection of utopianism, or retain that critique at the cost of renouncing his claim to improve political actions (McKean, 2016: 881).

It is hard to see why McKean thinks that this is the case, but I suspect it is due to the conjunction of interpreting realism as opposed to utopianism and a very broad construal of utopianism (including alternative institutions, values, principles, etc.). In a nutshell: if utopianism includes virtually all normative values (as depictions of desirable political circumstances with no reference to means, etc.), and realism is essentially anti-utopian, then it is hard to see whether, and if so how, realism is compatible with (recognisable) normative values and using them to justify political actions and alternatives in familiar ways. This would put Geuss in the McKean's bind, if it wasn't a misreading.

It should now be clear that this rests on a series of misreadings of Geuss. We saw in the section on 'Realism and Utopianism in General' that Geuss never opposes realism to utopianism in general; nor does he ever construe utopianism in the way that McKean does. We saw in the section on 'Human Rights: Utopianism, Ethics-First or Failure(s) of Realism?' that neither Geuss' objections to human rights nor his construal of ethics-first political theory either involve or commit him to rejecting utopianism as McKean defines it – the former is neither equivalent to, nor coextensive with, the latter. As such, McKean's reading of Geuss' realism as anti-utopian has no adequate basis in Geuss' writings. Furthermore, when Geuss rejects the ethics-first approach to political theory he is rejecting a very specific way of doing political theory, not to some theorists' degree of ambition. As such, neither Geuss' critique of human rights nor his construal of ethics-first political theory commits him to rejecting ambitious political values and using them to justify political actions in familiar ways.

In fact, Geuss points out that one of the tasks of realist political theory is to judge things like actions and institutions according to our values, ethical and/or otherwise, and

that humans can use the latter to orient their actions (Geuss, 2008: 38–42). This could even include 'having a clear and motivationally effective set of principles and directives about how to act in life, what do to or perhaps about what goals I should pursue' (Geuss, 2008: 42). The latter could well include, for example, a set of ranked and prioritised principles of the kind that McKean seems to think that realism rules out. As we saw in the section on 'Human Rights: Utopianism, Ethics-First, or Failure(s) of Realism?', Geuss even discusses some normative values (e.g. a positive concept of freedom) and points out that an important part of realist political theory concerns using normative values to assess things in the world and orienting ourselves as political agents. This aspect of realism could in fact be used to support McKean's arguments for the positive role of utopias in political theory, a subject to which I return in the conclusion.

Of course, this is not to say that realism is not motivated by certain ethical concerns – it is (Hall and Sleat, 2017). It is only to say that there is no incompatibility between Geuss' realism on one hand, and talking about normative values, their ranking and priority, and using them to justify actions and alternatives in familiar ways on the other hand. The two only seem to be incompatible due to misconstruing Geuss' realism as being opposed to utopianism in general, coupled with construing utopianism very broadly in ways that are neither equivalent to, nor co-extensive with, anything that Geuss opposes his realism to. This in turn means that McKean's critique of Geuss' realism fails because it is based on a misreading thereof.

Methodological Disagreements, Realist Utopianism, and the Ideological Power of Ethics-First Political Theory

I have challenged McKean's discussion of Geuss' realism, utopianism, and human rights. The section on 'Realism and Utopianism in General' argued that utopianism is not incompatible with Geuss' realism, the section on 'Human Rights: Utopianism, Ethics-First or Failure(s) of Realism?' showed how McKean misconstrues Geuss' objections to human rights as anti-utopian, and the section on 'A Misconceived Critique of Realism' showed how McKean's critique of Geuss fails to target a position the latter holds. This means that McKean's critique of Geuss' realism fails, which in turn leaves the latter's objections to human rights effectively unchallenged.

There are three broader reasons why this misinterpretation of realism is important: it confuses an important debate about how we can and should do political theory today; it elides the realist potential for making positive contributions to utopian political theorising and engaging in fruitful dialogue with just the kind of utopian theorising that McKean and others are concerned with; and all of this suggests an analysis of the ideological power of ethics-first political theorising.

To begin, these relatively widespread misconceptions about realism unduly muddle the important and often difficult contemporary methodological debates in political theory. The stakes in the realism debates are high. They concern not only the prescriptions that political theorists make, but deeper questions of how we should and should not go about doing political theory. To be able to decide whether political theory should or should not be realist, it is first of all important to understand what realism is and isn't. Unfortunately, these and other misrepresentations of realism are rife in the literature and rarely corrected. Correcting one such misrepresentation, and explaining where it goes wrong, should help to enable more fruitful debate about what realism is and about what its strengths and weaknesses truly are.

Second, correcting these misconceptions allows us to appreciate the contributions that realism can make to utopian political theorising. While realism does not insist on restricting our ambitions to what seems feasible or likely to happen, it does insist that we not fall prey to ideology and wishful thinking – in our utopian theorising as elsewhere. There is no reason why a realist like Geuss cannot embrace a number of different kinds of utopias for different purposes. By ambitiously theorising beyond current constraints on feasibility and theories of transition, utopias can help to disrupt and challenge undesirable forms of legitimation, foster new forms of political identity, and reveal new possibilities within current institutions. They can thereby help to orient political agents in new and valuable ways. One example of this is precisely the kind of 'content-based' utopianism that Geuss finds in Gustav Landauer's work: a utopianism that instead of perfect blueprints offers to study the 'human needs and desires that cannot be satisfied in the basic structure of society as it now exists' (Geuss, 2016: 47). Remaining grounded in an analysis of existing politics, this kind of utopianism draws our attention to the desires and needs that we already have and points us towards considering how we might change existing reality to better satisfy them. This is a theoretical view that comes close to the kind of utopianism that McKean approvingly writes that Foucault found in events of revolt, which 'point beyond themselves to a world in which the collective sense of possibility and unity of that moment impossibly continues beyond the revolt itself' (McKean, 2016: 884).

Another example worth mentioning here is how, for example, Ursula Le Guin's (1999) masterful utopian novel, The Dispossessed, depicts an anarchist in comparison to a more recognisably capitalist one. The depiction of a utopian anarchist society 'in a reflective, dynamic and ambiguous manner' (Thaler, 2018: 674), Le Guin is able to both avoid depicting a pristine and static society devoid of political pluralism, disagreement and conflict, while still offering a thought-experiment with powerful critical potential. I would like to relate this directly to one of McKean's tasks for utopian political theorising, namely disrupting undesirable forms of legitimation. As Mathias Thaler rightly points out, utopias like Le Guin's 'break the spell of the here and now, and thereby throw the existing power structures and ideological formations into sharper relief' (Thaler, 2018: 674). By showing that alternative social formations are conceivable and inviting us to reflect on them critically by showing us characters who can and do question and debate them, utopias like The Dispossessed can help to disrupt certain current undesirable forms of legitimation and thereby further the critical and reflective vocation of especially Geuss' critical theory-inflected realism.

There are thus potentially good realist grounds for not only for embracing the kinds of utopianism that McKean is interested in, but also for pursuing the reflective and critical vocation of specifically Geuss' radical realism. Exploring this common ground could have made for a much more fruitful dialogue with realism.

Finally, I would contend that uncovering the misrepresentation of realism as anti-utopian suggests something important about the ideological power of ethics-first political theorising.[5] As we saw in the introduction, such misrepresentations are not uncommon in the literature or our discipline more broadly and a realist emphasis on the connection between power and theorising should lead us to consider why this is so. Realists might argue that this is an instance of the contemporary ideological power of ethics-first approaches in the following way. Ethics-first approaches today exert such an ideological force that their adherents tend to see it not only as the best, but as the only possible approach to political theory. This in turn distorts their understanding of alternative approaches, realism in particular. Instead of reading, for example, Geuss as advocating a

truly different approach to doing political theory – one focused on guiding real politics in certain ways – they instead read him as an anti-utopian advocating merely restricting political theory's ambitions to what is deemed feasible or achievable. From a realist perspective, this can be viewed as an issue of how the ideological power of ethics-first approaches is able to distort the understanding of its adherents in such a way that they fail to make sense of other, competing approaches to the subject. Such ideological distortions are surely not impossible to overcome, but doing so requires that we first acknowledge that they are, in fact, distortions.

Funding

ORCID iD

Paul Raekstad [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8756-3428

Notes

1. This has interesting parallels to Alan Thomas' (2017) reading of the realist critique of Rawls, but unfortunately this point cannot be further developed here.
2. Geuss typically talks about 'political philosophy' rather than 'political theory'. I will here use these two terms synonymously.
3. To be clear, while I think that this makes McKean's definition of utopianism rather broad, I am not criticising him for that here. Rather, I am criticising him for his distinct misrepresentations of realism, which in turn require me to clarify the different things that fall under his broad concept of utopianism.
4. Depending on how strongly we interpret McKean's requirement that utopian include no 'necessary' reference to means, costs, and feasibility, this may not be entirely true. For example, advocates of Participatory Economics and Property-Owning Democracy typically take a large number of feasibility constraints into account. However, the models can be construed without reference to such constraints. Since this question is peripheral to my argument, i leave it aside for now.
5. I'd like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this to me.

References

Cohen GA (2011) How to Do Political Philosophy. In: Otsuka M (ed.) *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp.225–235.
Estlund D (2014) Utopophobia. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42 (2): 113–134.
Estlund D (2017) Methodological Moralism in Political Philosophy. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (3): 365–379.
Finlayson L (2017) With Radicals Like These, Who Needs Conservatives? Doom, Gloom, and Realism in Political Theory. *European Journal of Political Theory* 16: 264–282.
Freeman S (2009) Review of Philosophy and Real Politics, by Raymond Geuss. *Ethics* 120 (1): 175–184.
Galston W (2010) Realism in Political Theory. *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (4): 385–411.
Geuss R (1995) Auffassungen der Freiheit. *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 49 (1): 1–14.
Geuss R (2001) *History and Illusion in Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Geuss R (2005) *Outside Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Geuss R (2008) *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Geuss R (2010a) Raymond Geuss on Realism and Utopianism in Political Philosophy. Interview, 8 May.
Geuss R (2010b) Realismus, Wünschdenken, Utopie. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 58 (3): 419–129.
Geuss R (2013) Human Rights: A Very Bad Idea (Interview of Raymond Geuss by Lawrence Hamilton). *Theoria: A Journal for Social and Political Theory* 60 (135): 83–103.
Geuss R (2014) *A World Without Why*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Geuss R (2016) *Reality and Its Dreams*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hall E (2017) How to Do Realistic Political Theory (And Why You Might Want To). *European Journal of Political Theory* 16: 283–303.

Hall E and Sleat M (2017) Ethics, Morality, and the Case for Realist Political Theory. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (3): 276–290.

Le Guin U (1999) *The Dispossessed*. London: Gateway.

McKean BL (2016) What Makes a Utopia Inconvenient? On the Advantages and Disadvantages of a Realist Orientatino to Politics. *American Political Science Review* 110 (4): 876–188.

Prinz J (2016) Raymond Geuss' Radicalization of Realism in Political Theory. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 42: 777–796.

Raekstad P (2015) Two Contemporary Approaches to Political Theory. *International Critical Thought* 5 (2): 226–240.

Raekstad P (2018) Realism, Utopianism, and Radical Values. *European Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1): 145–168.

Rawls J (2001) *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. London: Belknap Press.

Rossi E (2015) Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible (Unpublished Manuscript). Available at: http://www.academia.edu/10140242/Being_Realistic_and_Demanding_the_Impossible (accessed 2 January 2017).

Rossi E and Sleat M (2014) Realism in Normative Political Theory. *Philosophy Compass* 9 (10): 689–701.

Sigwart H-J (2013) The Logic of Legitimacy: Ethics in Political Realism. *The Review of Politics* 75: 407–132.

Thaler M (2018) Hope Abjuring Hope: On the Place of Utopia in Realist Political Theory. *Political Theory* 46 (5): 671–697.

Thomas A (2017) Rawls and Political Realism: Realistic Utopianism or Judgement in Bad Faith? *European Journal of Political Theory* 16: 304–324.

Valentini L (2012) Ideal Vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map. *Philosophy Compass* 7 (9): 654–164.

Author Biography

Paul Raekstad has a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Cambridge, is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Amsterdam, and will shortly be taking up a lectureship at the University of Edinburgh. His work focuses on envisioning and achieving free, democratic, and ecologically sustainable economic institutions.