

'What is to be done' when there is nothing to do?: Realism and Political Inequality

Political equality has always had a privileged conceptual and rhetorical status within American politics. It's not that Americans aspire to be participatively Athenian, but that we broadly (or at least nominally) hold that citizens, excluding those in office, ought to exercise roughly the same degree of political influence, undifferentiated by factors considered irrelevant to their status as *citizens*.¹ For many, political legitimacy seems synonymous with the availability of democratic procedures which treat participants equally (e.g. 'one man, one vote'). Despite the last century having seen considerable (though still incomplete) gains in overcoming the political disparities engendered by race and gender, class continues to brazenly determine the degree to which citizens affect political outcomes, as it has arguably since the founding (Almond and Verba 1989, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, Mills 2000, Schier 2000, Hacker and Pierson 2010, Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012, Winters 2012, Domhoff 2013). In fact, as Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page have recently shown, it seems that wealthy citizens and the organizations they finance may be the only political actors of any real consequence.

When the preferences of economic elites and the stands of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy... To be sure, this does not mean that ordinary citizens always lose out; they fairly often get the policies they favor, but only because those policies happen also to be preferred by the economically-elite citizens who wield the actual influence (Gilens and Page 2014, 575-6).

Not only are economic elites able to disproportionately influence elections and referendums by financing campaigns and political action committees, but they are dramatically better equipped to nominate candidates, publicize certain issues and downplay others, and lobby lawmakers and bureaucrats both long before and after ballots are cast (Dye 1999). The most recent blow, *Citizens United vs. FEC*, effectively legalized and further facilitated the influence of wealth upon

¹ More contentious examples include, in the case of felon disenfranchisement, one's criminal record or, in the case of undocumented residents, one's legal status.

politics, flagrantly weakening whatever facade of political equality preceded it. As a result, non-elite citizens are starting to take notice; as of 2015, 64% of Americans believe that their votes do "not matter because of the influence that wealthy individuals and big corporations have over the electoral process" (Jones et al. 2015, 30). Both empirically and perceptually, political *inequality* is very much the order of the day.

Under these circumstances, it's important to ask how non-elites fit into contemporary politics. While there's no shortage of thinkers advocating different means of overcoming political inequality -- whether through individual rights (Nozick), ideal deliberative conditions (Habermas), or justice itself (Rawls) -- few consider a political climate that is *foreseeably* lopsided.² Positioning itself as the best alternative to brand of ideal theory offered by those above, political realism explicitly entertains the possibility of a persistently disparate political future. As Mark Philp points out, "If there is a realist 'ethos,'... it lies in the sense that we must engage with a world of the powerful and powerless in a way that allows us to understand it better and to engage and evaluate its participants..."(Philp 2012, 645-6). Baldly put, political realists, such as Raymond Geuss, Bernard Williams, James Tully, and others, are united in their rejection of what Williams calls political moralism: the moral philosophy's overdetermination of political theory by means of formalizing and absolutizing our sense of 'what is to be done' according to first principles.³ We are parties to neither the City in Speech nor any 'original position', but to a complicated, highly contextualized political climate more reflective of conflicting interests held by disproportionately empowered parties than the pursuit of the 'good' or the 'right'; as such, prioritizing overriding principled commitments can contribute to a fundamental misunderstanding

² This is all the more striking when even Habermas has recently conceded that the future of European democracy depends almost entirely on elite efforts to save it (Habermas 2012, 52-4).

³ As such, William Galston further notes that political realists are anti-utopian, recognize the inherency of political conflict, tend to focus on institutional ameliorations to those conflicts (though often pessimistically so), and seek to distinguish properly political legitimations from those better suited for individual morality. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," 394-400.

of political activity. This isn't to assume that our differences will always be settled 'by might,' that David cannot, from time to time, slay Goliath, or especially that progressive aims are out of the realm of possibility. Rather, it's simply that political questions cannot be insulated from imbalanced power relations that consistently trouble the possibility of these issues being decided solely, primarily, or even significantly by appeal to value, principle, or the 'unforced force of the better argument.'

How, then, can political realism contribute to a better understanding of politics for non-elite citizens? While realism takes a much needed step away from ideal theory's overly rosy view of our political context, it doesn't go far enough to address non-elites' distinct lack of power. Specifically, while primarily focusing on legitimacy, Williams, Tully, and their interlocutors fail to demonstrate the concept's relative import for non-elites, who perhaps take for granted a regime's illegitimacy but can do little about it. Though Guess takes the further step of trading in 'legitimacy' for 'power', he exclusively attends to considerations relevant to *elite* decision-making, ignoring non-elites due to their perceived hopelessness. Despite taking political inequality for granted, political realists have yet to adequately theorize its consequences for those citizens only nominally-empowered, those more akin to Aristotle's mechanic than Pericles (Aristotle 1998, 1277b-12778a). If realism aims to do more than just harden our brows, it's important that we turn our explicit attention to the non-elite relationship with political power, as well as the often quietistic character it takes.

THE LEGITIMACY OF INEQUALITY

In many ways, we can read political realism as an effort to reclaim the concept of legitimacy from its ostensible misinterpretation by ideal theory; rather than being beholden to first principles, realists take the Weberian-Schmittian-Arendtian position that the conditions of legitimacy emerge radically and unpredictably from the practice of politics itself (see Weber 2004, Schmitt 2007, Arendt 1998). As such, most of the recent literature has been concerned

with demonstrating that it is precisely *this* renewed focus on legitimacy proper that constitutes realism's unique theoretical contribution, with one commentator designating it the discourse's "central concept" (Sleat 2014, 314-5; see Hurka 2009, Risse 2010, Galston 2010, Sleat 2010, Freedman 2012, Larmore 2013, but cf. Menke 2010, Rossi 2010, Philp 2010, Rossi and Sleat 2014, and Hall 2015). Still, as Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears make abundantly clear in their seminal piece "The new realism," we can distinguish between three realist approaches to legitimacy, each associated with a canonical realist thinker (Honig and Stears, 2011).⁴ By briefly engaging with these competing models of legitimacy, we can not only get a sense of whether political equality ought to be considered a necessary criterion, but the degree to which legitimacy itself matters for non-elites as well.

Do realists believe political equality to be an essential element for political legitimacy? Tully offers the most straightforward answer; building off of a Rawlsian-Habermasian emphasis on constitutionalism and democracy, he emphasizes that legitimacy requires active participation on the part of citizens (Tully 2008b, 94). He writes, "Members of constitutional democracies become 'citizens' not only in virtue of a (amenable) set of... rights and duties... They also acquire their identity as citizens - a form of both self-awareness and self-formation - in virtue of exercising these rights..." (Tully 2008b, 99). Democratic participation is understood to be an essential aspect of legitimacy, not because democratic values are inherently legitimating, but because these practices allow individuals to situate themselves and their projects amongst their fellow citizens. The point, as he argues in *Strange Multiplicity*, is to see that "one's culture is respected among others and woven into the public fabric of the association, gaining its strength and splendour from its accommodation among, and interrelations with, the others..." (Tully 1995,

⁴ They actually offer four accounts, the fourth being their own agonistic realism. While their overall approach does temper some of Tully's optimism with a bit of Geuss and William's pessimism, as well as adopt a more explicitly post-modern conception of the real, their sense of legitimacy *per se* fails to differ significantly enough from Tully's account to require its own explanation (Honig and Stears 2011, 201-5).

205). To otherwise remain passive, according to Tully, can only breed alienation, apathy, and malaise, functionally de-legitimizing the polity (Tully 2008b, 103). As such, persistent and systemic political inequality cannot help but hamper political legitimacy. Tully himself, however, remains very aware of trends contributing to further political inequality, citing the increasing power of supranational financial regulatory bodies; the inability of many states to challenge the power of those bodies (as well as they massive corporations they regulate); and the general "decline of democratic deliberation and decision-making within the traditional institutions of representative nation-states;" making one wonder whether legitimacy is on the horizon at all (Tully 2008b, 100-3).

As opposed to Tully, Williams's response to the question of political inequality seems much more ambiguous. Hardly championing the pursuit of justice as a necessary element of legitimacy, he instead turns to stability (Williams 2005, 4-5).⁵ Equated with the absence of revolt, stability cannot result simply from domination or the threat of violence, but must rest on reasons citizens would voluntarily accept; for Williams, our historical conditions are such that this amounts to liberalism (Williams 2005, 6, 14).⁶ Specifically, he asserts that states must minimize coercion, avoid disadvantaging individuals according to their race or gender, and attempt to dismantle any system of hierarchy and privilege which cannot be otherwise justified (Williams 2005, 7). Consequently, democracy becomes a minimal condition for legitimacy, not on its own merits, but due to the inability to justify any other substitutive hierarchical relationship for autonomy or self-rule; "an essential part of modern LEG [legitimacy]..." as he puts it, "delivered

⁵ It isn't that Williams opposes further efforts toward a just society, but simply that such efforts, beyond "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" are superfluous when considering legitimacy (Williams 2005, 3, 61).

⁶ Matt Sleat argues that Williams's commitment to liberalism implies too much of a contemporary consensus on what counts as legitimate, whereas a more appropriately realist position would recognize not only existence of a multitude of competing perspectives on legitimacy, but that political activity is best understood as the way in which these perspectives interact with one another (Sleat 2010). For Sleat's own account of liberal realism, see Sleat 2011 and Sleat 2013.

at a fairly straightforward and virtually instrumental level in terms of the harms and indefensibility of doing without it" (Williams 2005, 16). This reluctant adoption of democracy is further shown in William's engagement with Habermas over whether political actors must necessarily act in a way oriented toward understanding -- for legitimacy's sake -- rather than success. On the one hand, if Habermas is correct, then a system in which actors aren't appropriately oriented will not be able to persist, instead inviting reform or revolt. On the other hand, if non-deliberative political communities are able to remain stable, it may illuminate precisely how inconsequential robust democratic practices are for legitimacy. As Williams emphasizes,

There are needs that people have which seemingly can be met only by more directly participatory structures; but equally, there are objectives which are notoriously frustrated by these, and other aims which are at least in competition with them, and considerations which raise doubts about the extent to which any procedures can really be participatory anyway (Williams 2005, 16).

His distinction here between democracy's 'seeming' necessity and its 'notorious' frustrations further illustrates Williams's own opinion as to the ultimate value of democratic legitimations. Ge further notes that our contemporary democratic practices "can only speciously be represented in Kantian or Rousseauian terms as either expressions of autonomy or of *self-government*" (Williams 2005, 16). Despite being open to "more radical and ambitious forms of participatory or deliberative democracy," his position is more akin to Judith Shklar's, seeing democracy as more of a 'convenient' ally for liberalism than a worthy pursuit in its own right (Williams 2005, 17; Sklar 1989, 37). As such, Williams's sense of legitimacy seems to require merely the appearance or rhetoric of political equality rather than political equality *per se*.

Rather than adopting either a commitment to participatory legitimation or the historical criteria one supposedly inherits, Geuss remains skeptical that legitimacy claims should have any normative force at all. Instead, he interprets them as strategic attempts to facilitate cooperation and secure political power, echoing, as Janosch Prinz notes, a Foucauldian emphasis on discursive power formations (Prinz 2015, 7). This isn't to suggest that legitimacy

claims are always offered disingenuously as a way of intentionally misleading others, but that they are always situated within a particular set of commitments (whether epistemic, moral, political, etc) that are far from universalizable. In this sense, legitimacy becomes a function of individual interest in the broadest sense; while some claims may be offered with an eye toward material interest, such as those concerning property rights or wealth redistribution, individuals may also prioritize ethical or theological justifications as well, seeking to satisfy the demands of their conscience or soul over their pocketbook. As Geuss further points out, even explicit sets of legitimating beliefs need not be functionally coherent, but "are often as confused, potentially contradictory, incomplete, and pliable as anything else, and they can in principle be manipulated, although not in most cases *ad libitum*" (Geuss 2008, 36). Of course, this assumes that the individuals in question are even thinking critically about the kinds of legitimacy claims they employ and accept. It may also be the case that many (if not most) individuals tend to take whatever criteria they are given, treating them as immutable principles of justice or right based merely on who dispenses them or the absence of any obvious alternatives.⁷ According to Geuss, abstractly posing the question of political inequality's legitimacy would be incoherent; rather, it would fully depend upon who raises it.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEGITIMACY

While Geuss may be satisfied with contextualizing the *kinds* of legitimacy claims we make, we should further question the relative significance of legitimacy *itself* for non-elites. Save Geuss, most of the realist literature has focused on legitimacy as a means of illustrating the alternative realism provides to ideal theory; however, in doing so, these efforts have unintentionally re-committed one of its essential errors: what Geuss describes as the focus on

⁷ Here, one is reminded of the never-ending appeal to the opinions of the 'founding fathers,' often without raising the obvious question of why their positions are authoritative in the first place, much less any historical awareness of just how dramatically they differed from one another.

'beliefs and propositions' over 'action and action-contexts' (Geuss 2008, 11).⁸ For those in a position wherein one has little power to effectively challenge illegitimacy - much less invoke a Lockean 'right to revolution' - the distinction between a legitimate polity and an illegitimate one may hold little consequence for political action. As such, an exclusive focus on legitimacy may leave some realists overly concerned with normative designations and detached from 'real politics'.

Williams tells us that legitimacy allows us to distinguish between properly political relationships and outright instances of domination, pointing to the Helots as the prime example of the latter (Williams 2005, 5). While citizens are given reasons for the coercion they might experience at the hands of the state, reasons that they presumably accept, the Helots are treated as 'open enemies' and experience (often violent) coercion without any accompanying justification. Citizens, it appears, deserve the courtesy of an explanation. Matt Sleat further notes that consent shouldn't be considered a necessary feature of legitimacy; in other words, it isn't the case that citizens have to accept the justifications offered by the state, merely that the state bothers to offer them is sufficient (Sleat 2014, 325). This isn't to suggest that these legitimating criteria can be completely arbitrary; as Sleat argues, "it is sufficient for the purposes of legitimacy if the political order makes *some* sense or that it can be represented as congruent with a *plausible* interpretation of the key beliefs, values and principles within that society" (Sleat 2014, 328 *italics original*). For instance, the state can't claim legitimacy if it justifies shooting a dog due to environmental concerns related to its waste or its lack of pedigree; it instead has to show that the dog posed a danger to others or obstructed police business.⁹

⁸ Geuss here doesn't mean that we ought to ignore belief entirely, but that it becomes theoretically relevant only to the extent that it influences political action.

⁹ For the dog owner, these reasons may hardly be sufficient, but they may satisfy the third-party observer or, at the very least, seem intelligible. Still, intelligibility seems like a low threshold when trying to assuage someone who has lost a pet (or worse) and would seem to require an ironic disposition bordering on sociopathy.

Yet, if legitimacy depends merely upon the availability of hypothetical justifications, it remains puzzling as to what value legitimacy ought to hold for citizens. There is certainly something to be said for restricting the state to tenable forms of coercion, but this still leaves open a wide range of possibilities for state action, including violence. Moreover, as new events and changing perceptions guide our evolving sense of what counts as reasonable, what was once reserved for 'open enemies' might become appropriate for ordinary citizens.¹⁰ Sleat himself concedes the greater point in a significant footnote, asking "What is at stake in whether a particular coercive relationship is to be thought of as political or not? Why is it pertinent whether we call this relation "political" (especially in contexts where rulers might be able to rule through coercion alone)? Does realism have a normative account of politics?" (Sleat 2014, 325 fn43).

This is precisely the problem with equating legitimacy with stability; because stability is just as much an indicator of apathy, fatigue, ignorance, fear, or defeat as it is voluntary acceptance -- whether real or hypothetical -- it cannot serve as a definitive measure of anything, much less the degree to which one's political situation differs from involuntary domination. As Honig and Stears (via Tully) stress, stability, rather than an indicator of legitimacy, might even be better conceived as a mark of illegitimacy, a moment in which alternative voices are actively prevented from agitating for change (Honig and Stears 2011, 196-7). Sleat seems to recognize this more than Williams and moves to adopt a partisan commitment to political liberalism over stability *per se*, even conceding that liberal states will have to govern over those who will in no way find them legitimate, such as Marxists, theocrats, etc. (Sleat 2011, 495-6 and Sleat 2013, Ch. 7). While his commitment to liberal principles of respect and tolerance, even for those (not actively) opposed to liberalism, is admirable, this still doesn't answer the question of what value

¹⁰ One need only look to the Trump Presidential campaign or the (de)evolution of the American discourse on torture since 9/11 to recognize just how malleable our political norms can be.

this liberal legitimacy would hold for those who refuse to recognize it. If, for instance, the state prohibits observant Muslims from donning hijabs or engaging in some other religiously significant practice, it would seem to matter little whether the justification given was liberal rather than merely plausible if, in either case, the justification is rejected.

One might at this point consider turning to the 'just agreement' model of legitimacy offered by Tully; while still critically reliant on consent, this commitment introduces a new set of issues. If legitimacy requires developing a shared, plural sense of justice through democratic means, it then becomes hard to find any state we would currently recognize as legitimate, especially if we adopt Tully's robust sense of what constitutes a genuinely democratic practice.¹¹ Under these conditions, we would require an explicit account of citizenship under illegitimacy, one which addresses whether citizens are held to the same norms and responsibilities they would otherwise adhere to within a legitimate political community. For the committed democrat, the legitimacy of one's state may have no bearing on normative political prescription; even under illegitimate conditions, one may, as Stanley Cavell does, see himself as holding an unqualified responsibility to the possibility of a democratic community (Cavell 1989, 113-4; see also Norval 2007). This responsibility, however, would seem to imply a further responsibility for the decisions made by that political community, as well as a possible culpability for their consequences. As Hans-Jorg Sigwart points out, a democratic realism should be seen as "a heroic enterprise -- not just because it demands the ability to face the ongoing struggle over competing interests and powers... but primarily because any attempt to realize ethical principles in this world by political means of coordinated collective action is morally ambiguous" (Sigwart 2013, 431). In other words, to participate politically is to inevitably involve oneself in conflicts

¹¹ It may be that some would be willing to settle with just having the opportunity to participate or, alternatively, acknowledge some active substratum of local, informal, or discursive influence as democratic enough, but this runs the opposite risk of diluting the concept to the point of being able to legitimate any political community, even formally undemocratic ones.

which will, tragically but inevitably, produce real winners and losers, meaning that the democratic citizen must shoulder "one's part of the moral guilt that politics necessarily involves-- to pay one's share of the moral price, as it were, for the existence of a peaceful, collectively organized order in society" (Sigwart 2013, 432). When considering all the state actions for which one would have to answer to assume a *democratic* orientation toward the question of legitimacy, it's questionable why ordinary citizens would necessarily want to accept that burden at all. Rather, many individuals prefer to cognitively disassociate themselves from politics for that very reason, that the 'crimes' of the state are often too terrible or too many to take responsibility for or, more shamefully, that even if one had the opportunity to act differently, one wouldn't. In these instances, the state's legitimacy might even result from relieving citizens of this responsibility rather than inviting them to it, allowing to them to embrace, in Arendt's words, a "freedom from politics" (Arendt 1963, 272).

The underlying problem may be the assumption that legitimacy -- or, more accurately, its absence -- produces a uniform or consistent set of observable effects; that the experience of legitimacy is the same for all, behaviorally reducible to either complaisance or satisfactory political engagement. Holding this assumption, however, conceals less tangible dimensions of legitimacy, those that concern feelings of belonging or alienation, hope or despair, and trust or fear. These perceptions, whether singularly or in combination with others, fail to routinely produce any predictable behavior for either populations or individuals. We can imagine instances when illegitimacy seems to inspire reformist or revolutionary action; however, there are those moments in which even the most depraved acts of domination fail to catalyze action, times when citizens find themselves either paralyzed, dismissive, self-deluded, or resigned. We should fully expect citizens to differ not only as to whether they think political equality is necessary for legitimacy, but, more fundamentally, over the ultimate significance of that designation as well. Some may see political inequality as a fundamental threat to legitimacy and

make efforts to correct the situation; others may fully recognize precisely how unjustifiable such an arrangement is, but instead use it to rationalize cheating on taxes, ignoring jury summons, or avoiding military service; others still may not let it influence their actions at all, either consciously or simply because they don't often think about it.

When nothing definite can be said about either *the criteria for* or *practical consequences of* legitimacy, Geuss seems right to relegate it to a secondary concern. This is not to argue that legitimacy claims are meaningless; far from it, they can inspire and sustain new forms of coordinated-action that may have previously been considered irrelevant or taboo (Geuss 2008, 35). This ability to generate collective action, however, hardly distinguishes successful legitimacy claims from unsuccessful ones; they may just as easily be offered with the intention of disparaging participation and maintaining a passive citizenry, as in the case of Bush's call for normalcy following 9/11. Yet, not even intention can serve as a faithful criterion for evaluating legitimacy claims, as this assumes that they're merely unidirectional justifications for authority, unable to be contested or reappropriated. As such, legitimacy is too fickle or inconstant to play the critical role advocated by some realists; whether a non-elite believes her political community is legitimate or not may have no bearing on how she interacts with that political community. Deep down, she may believe that the state is unjust and, given the opportunity, she may not attempt to save it, but she may also have non-political reasons (e.g. convenience, disinterest, material gain/loss, reputation, etc.) for tolerating state coercion or even actively embracing the state's will. Far from being a definitive or 'central' feature of the non-elite political experience, legitimacy -- whether interpreted as stability or justice -- appears to be only one of many considerations influencing how one ultimately relates to the politics; realists would do best to take this to heart and theorize accordingly.

POLITICAL REALISM FOR NON-ELITES

Instead of focusing on what constitutes legitimacy and why it matters, realists interested in the political subjectivity of non-elites should turn their attention to a different set of concerns: not what ends (liberal, democratic, or otherwise) realists ought to pursue, but how they ought to pursue them. As such, political realism should primarily focus on power; this is partly what Jansoch Prinz means in his recent call to 'radicalize' realism. Following Geuss, Prinz advocates for a 'detoxified' approach to power which encourages citizens to more creatively imagine its exercise, drawing upon both the concrete political terrains they inhabit and the criticisms which inform their perspective (Prinz 2015, 7, 13). In this way, power is not approached as something to be "normatively sanctioned in either a positive or negative way," evaluating it according to presumed democratic or liberal norms of legitimacy, but as a set of "contextually specific techniques and rationalities" that can be put in the service of "potentially radically subversive and transformative criticism" (Prinz 2015, 13-4). Prinz sides with Philp here in stressing that such considerations need not be amoral, but "must recognize the impact of contingency and the importance of political will and commitment in determining what it is in fact possible to do, and it must acknowledge the element of decisionism in rendering these abstract values into concrete proposals and policies" (Philp 2010, 483). This turn away from pure normativity toward tactics seems to echo Giles Deleuze's sentiment some twenty years prior when he wrote, "There is no need to ask which is the toughest or most tolerable regime, for it's within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront one another... There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons." (Deleuze 1992, 4). If this is the critical aim of political realism, what new weapons can it offer non-elite citizens?

Because the answer to 'what is to be done?' is so contextually-dependent, Geuss argues that political theory should aim to adequately orient citizens in such a way that they may be able to make sound, or at least competent, political judgments. In this sense, what citizens gain from political realism is not so much a yardstick by which to measure their society's worth, as a

compass with which to navigate it, regardless of the direction intended. How, then, should we characterize this realist disposition? Geuss writes that,

Humans in modern societies are driven by a perhaps desperate hope that they might find some way of mobilizing their theoretical and empirical knowledge and their evaluative systems so as both to locate themselves and their projects in some larger imaginative structure that makes sense to them, and to guide their actions to bring about what they would find to be satisfactory (or at any rate 'less unsatisfactory') outcomes or to improve in some other way the life they live. Furthermore, many modern agents would like it to be the case that the form of orientation which their life has is, if not 'true,' at least compatible with the best available knowledge, and they would like the principles by which they guide their action to be in some kind of contact with reality... (Geuss 2008, 42)

Here Geuss offers us three dimensions of a realist orientation. First, it pertains to the ability to think about oneself and one's pursuits in such a way that 'makes sense' within the context one inhabits. We might best interpret Geuss here to mean that individuals, rather than being bewildered, feel that their self-understandings broadly cohere with their general comprehension of the way in which 'the world works'. For instance, if a zealot assumes an impending apocalypse that fails to manifest, she may feel as if she is out of sync with the world around her (i.e. that the world no longer makes sense), leading her to either repudiate it, suffer an existential crisis, or take flight into self-delusion. Second, not only must the world 'make sense', but it must also yield some sort of practical opportunity for improving one's station, even if only minimally so. An individual may not be able to meaningfully affect political outcomes, but she should be able to identify some avenue that allows her to attend to her situation, whatever it may be. Finally, it's important to have an accurate picture of one's society; though the zealot mentioned above may find comfort by retreating into fantasy, the realist would opt for an accurate picture of her world over a reassuring one. Thus, orienting oneself allows the individual to critically diagnose the present in a way that is neither blindly normative nor sterilely descriptive, but allows whatever evaluative criteria employed, even when utopian, to be conditioned by the concrete circumstances in which the individual finds herself.

How, then, should non-elite citizens orient themselves under conditions of political inequality? To begin, Geuss would instruct them to be aware of the degree to which formal modes of exercising political influence are actually effective; if we know that voter preference has very little to do with policy-making, then we should put less stock in voting. Beyond this point, however, Geuss seems to substantively offer very little for practically-disadvantaged political actors. In *Philosophy and Real Politics*, he consistently focuses on judgments made by elites, ranging from the Pope's decision to crown Charlemagne to George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq; in his essay "Political Judgment in Historical Context," he focuses on judgments made by British ambassadors, the Truman and Bush administrations, and Al Qaeda, but not the billions of people whom those decisions affect (Geuss 2008, 35, 97-8; Geuss 2010, 1-3, 10-16). In an essay critiquing Kant, Geuss further suggests an understanding of politics that *only* pertains to elites:

Politics then is about exercising power to attain various ends; it is not an inherently rule-governed activity, but one better understood as the conjunction of different actors making context-specific judgments, taking advantage of unexpected opportunities, and innovating. There is nothing unnatural in exercising power, and part of the process of exercising such power might be to subject those under one's control to rules of one's choice (Geuss 2010, 51).

This, of course, makes sense when describing the activities of elected officials and other political leaders, those who, in a Weberian tenor, must balance conviction with responsibility when deciding for an entire community, but in what sense does (or can) this apply to non-elite citizens? What of those who, rather than rule, are consistently under the rule of others?

One explanation for his inattention to non-elites may be his pessimism as to whether they have any hope of politically orienting themselves at all. Immediately following a passage above, Geuss notes that "Both the extent to which this hope [for orientation] is present in a certain group and the extent to which it can be realized are empirical matters, although one would have to be extremely sanguine to expect it to be realized to any significant extent" (Geuss

2010, 42). He obviously doesn't see much hope for political orientation through the formal machinery of liberal-democracy, pointing out that to rely on representation as an extension of our political capacity seems naïve and doing so "is to engage in an extremely contestable form of theoretical interpretation of what is going on when the system functions in its everyday way" (Geuss 2005, 108). In concluding his essay "The Loss of Meaning on the Left," he further stresses the deep malaise he finds among left-leaning political actors, whom he believes have either lost faith in the "traditional diagnosis" or the "recommended therapy" provided by Marx and later critical theorists (Geuss 2014, 111). All in all, Geuss gives us little reason to hope for widespread political orientation, especially among non-elites.

In terms of offering 'new weapons,' both Tully and Williams hardly fair better. Tully, building off of the familiar call to "Act Locally, Think Globally," argues for a 'glocalized' understanding of citizenship that involves re-democratizing local spaces and cultivating relationships between 'on the ground' activists with academics and other fellow travelers (Tully 2008, 300-303). The obvious issue with this prescription concerns the practical obstacles faced by citizens in developing and maintaining those networks, as well as finding the motivation to pursue them in the first place. In the present context, advocating for more empowered participation seems akin to emphasizing the need for water in a drought-ridden community; though technically correct, it remains far from helpful. Williams's own attention to the citizenry seems less oriented towards how individuals can influence the state and much more with their status as an epiphenomenal indicator of stability. In other words, the Leninist focus on 'what is to be done?' takes a back seat to a descriptive interest in 'what they are doing'; either citizens are in a state of revolt because they feel as if they're treated more like Helots than Spartans, or their passivity suggests a prevailing sense of state legitimacy. Philp goes further to offer a normative defense of, to paraphrase Robert Entman's phrase, a state without citizens, attempting to ameliorate Tocqueville and Constant's anxieties about the need for active participation by

suggesting that 'surrogate' participation may be an adequate (or even improved) substitute for mass participation (Entman 1990). Philp argues that these surrogates can act "both as a constraint on government and as a signaling device for the broader public as to the reliability and impartiality of public procedures and judgments" (Philp 2007, 231). However, this doesn't seem to challenge political inequality as much as act as an *apologia* for it. Obviously, if elites are charged with the responsibility of involving the mass public at crucial junctures, non-elite participation will only occur when it benefits some group of elites, reminding one of E. E. Schattschneider's point, himself a self-described realist, that "the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (Schattschneider 1960, 35).

Left with few alternatives, one way of resuscitating the value of Geuss's position for non-elite citizens would be to turn our attention to a point made earlier: that our action should be guided to "bring about... satisfactory outcomes or to improve in some other way the life they live" (Geuss 2008, 42). Though Geuss presents a bleak prognosis for affecting outcomes, he says surprisingly very little about what might constitute these 'other ways' of improving our lives. If our political context can only 'make sense' to us when taking seriously the immense disparity in political influence engendered by wealth, a realist political theory directed toward non-elite citizens should focus on fleshing them out. As such, adequately orienting non-elites requires coming to terms with a relatively limited political significance and placing additional emphasis on apolitical or ethical responses to unsatisfactory political outcomes. When unable to exercise non-negligible political influence, ordinary citizens should consider creative alternatives for addressing the consequences of unfavorable decisions, even if this only involves treating the symptoms of what they perceive to be society's ills. For instance, if a non-elite citizen does not have the adequate resources to mount a serious attempt to repeal a law, then she must consider ways in which they can either privately resist or technically adhere without sacrificing her own values or interests. Whereas a democratic logic predicated on political equality relies

upon formal, political methods for challenging unfavorable legislation or policy, a realist disposition further acknowledges elite support as a precondition for achieving desired policy outcomes and, consequently, remains skeptical of collective political possibility without it. *Contra* Philp, elite political clout is seen here, not a satisfactory surrogate, but as a necessary evil.

CONCLUSION: ABANDONING POLITICS OR THE POLITICS OF ABANDONMENT?

To make good on Philp's sense of what ought to constitute a realist ethos, political realism needs to more seriously consider the impact of political inequality on how the vast majority of citizens approach political activity. I have argued that this is best accomplished by turning away from concerns pertaining to legitimacy in favor of a stronger focus on power, treating 'what is to be done?' as more of a practical question than a normative one, as well as recognizing that the ways in which ordinary citizens react to political decision-making need not be entirely political. Some will take issue with this last point by asserting that any reaction to politics will itself be political, gesturing to certain micro-political possibilities consistently open to us. However, when we fail to distinguish between those actions which have some explicit impact upon decision-making and those which merely reflect an interest in those decisions (e.g. political discussions between neighbors, symbolic protests, etc.), we lose sight of the extensive degree to which most citizens are practically disenfranchised. In the last instance, voice and the opportunity to 'tend one's garden' are not equivalent with decisive influence; the two are not even in the same ballpark (see Voltaire 2005).

Others still will register the complaint that a renewed focus on non-political strategies of endurance or survival -- especially at the presumed expense of time spent theorizing progressive possibilities for collective action -- smacks of defeatism and, hence, conservatism. A similar critique has been recently raised by Lorna Finlayson, who accuses political realism of settling for a diluted liberalism devoid of aspiration beyond stability (Finlayson 2015, 7). Despite noting a number of ways in which realists can avoid this pitfall without sacrificing their core

commitments, she takes both Williams and Geuss to task for adopting such a pessimistic view on social organization that anything more than eliminating violence or explicit domination appears far-fetched. She makes clear this "kind of 'pessimism'...", which ignores both human plurality and "certain recalcitrant phenomena..." such as anti-war movements, "is not the understandable gloom or anxiety about the fate of human societies, but a mask for misanthropy so profound as to be incompatible with any serious interest in either political philosophy or political action" (Finlayson 2015, 11-2).¹² She later takes the extra step of comparing such realists to those who blame victims of rape (rather than the rapist), suggesting that Williams and Geuss's dismal views of humanity lead them to condemn the masses rather than the elites who not only share their faults, but govern despite them (Finlayson 2015, 12-3).¹³

While I agree with Finlayson that the existence of 'irrationality and conflict' and other regrettable features of human life are hardly reasons to take a constricted view of political possibility (beyond perhaps, as she does, ruling out some utopian expectations only possible in their absence), I also want to defend a very different kind of pessimism than the one she attributes to Geuss and Williams.¹⁴ Rather than adopting the position that some flaw in human nature has permanently dashed our hopes for a brighter tomorrow, I argue that change is not only possible but inevitable; the issue is, however, that the vast majority of us will not play any meaningful role in its realization. There are some important exceptions here; both elites and, in some instances, activists can and will find themselves in positions where they can non-

¹² We should note, however, that even many of the record-breaking (in terms of size) protests to stop the Iraq War failed to influence the decision to invade which, just as it seemed to many back then, was decided far before the possibility of war was raised to the general public.

¹³ One concluding passage of hers is worth noting in its entirety: "At its worst, the realist attitude to citizens is imperious-bordering on imperialist reminiscent not only of rape apologism but also of classic depictions of 'barbarians' and 'savages': passion-driven beasts who, if left unchecked, will stick spears into each other and eat their own babies" (Finlayson 2015, 13).

¹⁴ Far from agreeing with her characterization of the two, I tend to take more seriously the moments of optimism found for Williams at the end "The Liberalism of Fear" and made explicit for Geuss through Jansoch Prinz's account (see Prinz 2015).

negligibly contribute to decisions which affect us collectively. Still, these individuals constitute such a minority as to make any attempt to generalize from their experiences toward reasonable assumptions about citizens at large a mistake. A realism adequately attuned to political inequality would instead take a pessimistic view not of political possibility, but the probability that one will play either a significant or unique role in what comes next.

This realization carries significant consequences for theorizing citizenship in our contemporary moment. Even for liberals comfortable with the mere opportunity (in case of emergency) for civic liberty will have to acknowledge that a noble citizenry cannot be mobilized overnight; in cases where it seems to, it is inherently susceptible to misinformation and demagoguery, risks which are exacerbated by a politically disparate context where wealth has a near absolute correlation to voice. This further assumes that a People ever manifests at all or that it's ever deemed sufficiently necessary for them to do so. In either case, the idea of mass citizen participation remains hypothetical, raising further questions as to whether ordinary citizens owe anything to a political community from which they're demonstrably alienated (at least according to democratic norms). Here, the recognition of legitimacy counts for very little; whether one lives in an illegitimate society or not, one inevitably has to engage with it.

The question then becomes how. Unless trends shift dramatically, these engagements, for most citizens, will tend to be more passive than active, private than public, and subject than autonomous. Even Finlayson notes that, in some instances, quietism might constitute "the most appropriate course," as long as one holds "some kind of commitment to the possibility of change for the better, even if this is no more than a leap of faith..." (Finlayson 2015, 11). In a context in which hope for influence, not progress, has become a leap of faith, we need to begin to recognize and explore the manifold forms quietism can take, ranging from partisan

spectatorship to ironic detachment, furtive resistance to silent desperation.¹⁵ In many ways, this amounts to a kind of practical stoicism in a political context largely out of our control, the difference being that, rather than direct others to cultivate themselves in such a way as to be comfortable with powerlessness, realists should embrace their anxiety and concern themselves with both the theoretical and practical consequences of persistent, mass, systemic political insignificance.

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¹⁵ See, for instance, Green 2010 on spectatorship or Riesman 2001, 180-84 on detachment.

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(see Hurka 2009, Risse 2010, Galston 2010, Sleat 2010, Freedman 2012, Larmore 2013, but cf.

Menke 2010, Rossi 2010, Philp 2010, Rossi and Sleat 2014, Prinz 2015, and Hall 2015).