

The Concept of ‘Realistic Utopia’: Ideal Theory as Critique

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Abstract

‘Realistic utopia’ has become a popular concept to capture theorizing at the intersection between realism and idealism (e.g. Rawls 1999; Habermas 2010). However, so far it has not been clearly conceptualized and is being used inconsistently by different theorists. For most, making utopias realistic means reaping their positive features while avoiding their inherent authoritarianism that critics of utopia have long decried. Yet this argumentation overlooks that unconstrained, radical utopianism also plays a role itself in forestalling authoritarianism. This paper distinguishes between three types of realistic utopia, and argues that realistic utopia is best understood not as utopia limited in scope, but merely as divorced from its totalitarian tendency. Unlike existing uses of the concept by John Rawls, George Lawson and Erik Olin Wright, the ‘Type III’ realistic utopia achieves this balance by conceptualizing realistic utopia as an open-ended process of utopian visioning within a democratic, pluralistic context. One way in which it might be approached is through the recent innovations in deliberative democracy.

Keywords:

Utopia, realistic utopia, Rawls, deliberative democracy, ideal and non-ideal theory

I Introduction

The controversy around utopia in social and political theory has long been characterized by the extreme positions of outright dismissal and reverent praise. Ruth Levitas summarizes that there is “general agreement that utopias are not necessarily places that the reader would find appealing, that one person’s utopia may be another person’s hell, and that many utopias are alarmingly authoritarian.”¹ Yet, at the same time, utopias are widely used as conceptual frames in the academic literature.² Many theorists add authority to their indispensable features, highlighting the genuine hope embodied in utopian theory as a vital component of social critique,³ if not of humanity’s very survival.⁴

The concept of ‘realistic utopia,’ seeking a middle path between the two extremes, has attracted considerable attention in recent years.⁵ Yet, the concept is used with ambiguous meanings, therefore remaining vague and prey to conceptual stretching. This article contends that the failure so far to give precise meaning to the concept of realistic utopia is both lamentable and unnecessary. A discussion of realistic utopias from a conceptual angle adds insights to our understanding of the purpose of ideal theory, which a less careful usage of the term overlooks. Most existing conceptualizations of ‘realistic utopia’ refer to ideal visions with certain constraints that limit the scope of the idealizations. Against this understanding, this article argues that making a conceptualization of utopias ‘realistic’ should not *limit* the radical terrain within which the utopian spirit unfolds, it should merely foreclose its inherent totalitarian dangers. This is possible through conceptualizing realistic utopia as an open-ended process of utopian visioning within a democratic, pluralistic context; a conception which in fact shares much in common with the normative theory of deliberative democracy.

The debate about ‘realistic utopia’ mirrors a similar debate on ideal versus non-ideal theory, and the turn away from the ideal and towards more realist theories that has come with it.⁶ Thus, my aim in this article is also to offer a new perspective on the purpose of ideal theory, as

a response to those denouncing ideal theory as mere ‘wishful thinking.’⁷ Although ideal theory and utopia are not the same—ideal theory refers to a strand of, or method in, normative political philosophy, whereas utopias span a wider range of disciplines and literature—, utopia (as a generic category) might be viewed as the ‘extreme case’ of ideal theory. If even a piece of creative literature entirely unbound by any ‘rules of the game’ of the discipline can have a useful function for political theory, so should ideal theory in a relatively more concordant form. Thus, the argument in this article has relevance for the ongoing ideal versus non-ideal theory debate, drawing attention from its ‘outside perspective’ to a possible additional, yet previously unrecognized purpose of ideal theory.

The argument proceeds as follows. First, I discuss the controversy around utopia in political theory in order to shed light on the dangerous as well as the constructive elements of utopia. Second, I introduce the concept of a realistic utopia and distinguish between three main types. I show that John Rawls’s, George Lawson’s, and Erik Olin Wright’s conceptualizations of realistic utopia have all remained limited to Types I and II—which, from the critical perspective outlined in the first section, fail to achieve a convincing balance between utopia and reality. Thus, following this discussion, I develop my alternative conceptualization of realistic utopia Type III, and draw out its practical and theoretical implications. I conclude by elaborating a ‘realistic utopian’ perspective on deliberative democracy, advocating ideal theory as one part of this meta-framework.

II The dangers and the promise of utopia in political theory

Utopia has long been used as a conceptual tool in political theory, but has also long been the object of vociferous critique. The debate around utopia is polarized between two extreme positions: that of emphasizing the importance of hope embodied in utopian dreams for human progress on the one hand,⁸ and that criticizing utopias as “at best pleasant but pointless entertainment”⁹ or at worst leading to totalitarianism and violence¹⁰ on the other. Coined by Thomas

More's novel of the same title,¹¹ the very term 'utopia' etymologically combines *eutopia* or 'the good place' and *outopia* or 'no-place:' a vision of a better world, which however does not exist.¹² It expresses that the truly good place only comes with the 'no-place,' i.e. its own inexistence; the search for the pure, perfect 'good place' must fail.¹³

Two main reasons tend to be given for this failure: there is no such thing as the one perfect world; and even if there were, it could not be brought about.¹⁴

First, the very act of idealized theorizing "is open to the accusation of authoritarianism" in that the theorist implicitly claims "a privileged position vis-à-vis those addressed by the theory."¹⁵ A perfect utopia can no longer be changed for the better, for the attribute "perfect" carries with it the notion of "without any mistake" and hence "beyond the need for change."¹⁶ Such an idea of *fixing* the world once and for all can be seen as dangerously undermining the role of politics as an ongoing project, as well as any room for critique and contestation.¹⁷ Thus, even if hypothetically everyone at the time agreed with a particular utopian vision of society, *regarding* it as the one *perfect*—and hence uncriticizable—society might be considered an authoritarian move.

A similar contradiction inheres in the implementation of a perfect society. To the extent that authoritarianism is considered inherently problematic, and room for critique therefore a vital normative demand in modern societies, a vision that does not respect this cannot be good, let alone perfect. Attempting to implement a utopian vision is bound to have problematic consequences. The implementation of a 'perfect' society, for it to be *perceived* as perfect by every member, requires either the support of all or the suppression of some citizens.¹⁸ Given the diversity of and disagreement over conceptions of the good, for Popper, any attempt at imposing a supposedly perfect vision for society thus implies that any alternatives, criticisms, or changes in preferences must be suppressed, resulting in the emergence of "a strong, centralized rule of a few."¹⁹

Based on these common critiques, two aspects have to be distinguished. On the one hand, utopias are rejected because there seems to be something inherently authoritarian about even the act of utopian thinking. On the other hand, it is the *consequences* of utopian thought that are feared.

Indeed, it is clear that an implementation of a utopian vision can imply harmful consequences such as the forceful suppression of critique and opposition. Yet this would not yet imply a rejection of utopian thought as such. Suppose an ideal vision happens to be accepted as such by all those affected by it. In this case, its expression does not result in any harmful consequences related to shutting down critique or punishing those who object. Would this still constitute an act of authoritarianism?

Leaving aside the empirical questions of how full acceptance by all could be established and whether it would be likely, the reason why utopian thought as such seems authoritarian is that it appears to deny the very *possibility* of critique both in the present and into the future. Inasmuch as it is effective in doing so purely through its being presented as a *perfect* vision, it is not just its tangible consequences, but its being granted a general status of being ‘uncriticizable’ that makes it an *instance* of authoritarianism.

Yet, while authoritarian expressions may be objectionable, they are not harmful unless they are *effective* at shutting down possible objections and imposing their vision. A status of uncriticizable perfection, while claimed by the utopian, thus at least partly depends on its acceptance as such by the audience; otherwise it would consist not inherently in the conceptualization, but, again, in a consequence of utopian thought, namely that of suppressing a critique that would have otherwise been voiced. As such, whether or not there is any *effective* (as opposed to objectionable-yet-harmless) authoritarianism depends on the *circumstances* within which the utopia is expressed and received, rather than on the very *act* of conceptualizing it as such. If this is so, there does not seem to be any inherent authoritarianism (at least in a problematic sense) in the conceptualization of utopias at all, but only in its possible, but not necessary, consequences.

This is an important distinction to make in that the mere conceptualization and expression of utopian visions is not only not necessarily harmful, but it can also fulfill important political functions as instances of social critique. Crucially, as I argue in the following, utopian thought fulfils this function not in spite of, but precisely because of its radical content that ignores existing assumptions and feasibility constraints.

The hope embodied in utopian dreaming²⁰ implies an alert attitude towards suboptimal realities, in the sense that hope for a better society is preceded by an understanding of what is wrong in the present. Utopias are thus “not simply pleasant day-dreams, but, in fact, the embodiment, the crystallization, of the entire *Weltanschauung* [worldview] of the author,”²¹ containing profound messages about the state of society.²² Against the critique of utopias as authoritarian, this view responds that utopian visions should not in fact be understood as faultless models according to which society could or should be re-built here and now,²³ but rather as contributions to a stock of reflective and critical thought within society. For this, “[w]hat matters is that the utopian experiment disrupts the taken-for-granted nature of the present and proffers an alternative set of values.”²⁴

Through this disruption of ‘taken-for-grantedness,’ utopias, much in contrast to discouraging opposition, in fact *open up* a political space for critique; for taken-for-grantedness can itself be regarded as an instance, or symptom, of totalizing imposition. Questioning taken-for-granted social ‘facts’ can have the double effect of exploring which actual alternatives lie beyond what is currently thought to be feasible but thereby also making existing arrangements appear in a different light and possibly no longer the only imaginable society. In other words, the exaggeration of visions embodied in utopias often has the explicit function of ignoring currently taken-for-granted ‘facts’ in order to uncover which of these do not actually have to be taken for granted, but are the result of, for instance, power struggles or vested interests.²⁵ It is in this sense that the hope which is expressed through utopia must be seen, according to Bloch,

“not [...] *only as an emotion* [...], but *more essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind*,”²⁶ this ‘cognitive’ step being a necessary starting point for critique.

From this perspective, political thought strictly set on staying within the limits of existing feasibility constraints risks contributing to a ‘cynical realism’ that capitulates to such realities when change would in fact be possible.²⁷ While a utopian ‘perfect’ society (arguably) implies the suppression of critical judgment, one without any utopian visions also lacks critical perspective, which makes it similarly prone to totalizing threats. Utopian thought challenges such cynical realism in that it works as a device to “defamiliarize the familiar,”²⁸ which enables a critical problematisation of reality in the first place. In other words, while progress as such may not require visions as radical as utopian ones, but could be sparked by normal political proposals for *some* reform, it is, on this view, precisely—and only—the complete and unconstrained re-imagination of the whole society that makes true critique possible.²⁹ From this perspective, although critics of utopia are bound to be right that an attempted *implementation* of a utopian society would likely lead to authoritarianism, utopian thought itself is also vital for critique of authoritarian impositions of mainstream views and supposed ‘facts.’

Thus, these arguments reinforce the position that while an *implementation* of a utopian vision is always authoritarian, the mere *conceptualization* of utopias has an ambiguous nature. It might seem indicative of an authoritarian attitude, yet it also contributes to an atmosphere in which more subtle authoritarian impositions can be challenged in the first place. Hence, conceptualizing utopias is not necessarily authoritarian in its effect; it is possible that its critical impact be larger than its authoritarian impact. This suggests that what makes a utopian vision authoritarian is not the unrealistic nature of its substantive content as such, but only the harmful consequences of claiming—and being effectively granted—total validity for it. An *implementation* of utopian visions must always be authoritarian, because it is precisely the determination to enforce one’s fixed vision (in disregard of any political, let alone democratic process) that embodies such a claim to total validity. Yet a *conceptualization* of utopian visions is authoritarian *only*

to the extent that it effectively claims total validity, and regardless of the extent to which it is unrealistic in a practical sense. Hence, to disarm the authoritarian element of utopian visioning, either the utopian has to refrain from claiming perfection and thus total validity; or, since what matters is an *effective*, i.e. consequential, claim to total validity, the context within which the utopia is expressed and the way it is received must be able to resist any such claim. Neither of these options implies any limitations to the substantive content of the utopia; and the authoritarian harmfulness of a utopian vision need not necessarily depend exclusively on characteristics of the utopia itself.

Against this backdrop, the following conceptual discussion of ‘realistic utopia’ seeks out a way between the dangers and the political importance of utopias. I will conclude that it is in fact utopian thought itself, conceived of as a realistic meta-utopia, that is the best safeguard against totalitarianism. In the remainder of this article, I discuss how the meaning of ‘realistic utopia’ can be fruitfully understood in this sense.

III Realistic utopias

A seeming contradiction in terms, the term ‘realistic utopia’ has become a popular concept to denote a compromise between the dangers and the useful sides of utopia. Theorists using this concept seek to reap the best of the two worlds of practically orientated ‘realistic’ theorizing that takes account of the real constraints within society as it is, and ideal theorizing based on unconstrained reasoning. Yet, utopias are ‘unrealistic’ in different ways. The following section distinguishes between three main types of realistic utopia. Based on a discussion of the different uses of the concept in the extant literature, I argue that a realistic utopia is best understood as promoting utopian thought while foreclosing the danger of authoritarian consequences, and argue that none of the existing realistic utopias in the literature achieve this. I show how the ‘most truly realistic’ Type III realistic utopia goes beyond the ways in which this concept has been used so far, and discuss how it can be conceptualized based on this analysis.

Three types of realistic utopias

What does it mean for a utopia to be realistic?

On the one hand, the term ‘realistic’ is often understood to refer to the likelihood or ease with which a vision is implemented. For this, one should be realistic about human abilities, existing preferences, existing institutions and so on. Two main approaches can be distinguished here, which I term realistic utopias Types I and II.

Type I aims to be more realistic than a traditional utopia by limiting the scope of the utopian vision to what is possible ‘here and now.’ Certain facts about the existing society, be it institutions, norms, or mindsets, are taken as feasibility constraints *within the scope of which* utopian or ideal visions are formulated. For example, a realistic utopia Type I would refrain from envisioning a world whose idea of work life depends on humans’ never sleeping, because sleep is a biological necessity.

Type II, in contrast, is realistic about the prospect of realizing grand aims overnight. It aims to be more realistic than a traditional utopia by supplementing the utopian vision with a ‘roadmap’ that connects existing reality with the vision. Thus, it encompasses all possible visions compatible with Type I, plus those that are possible through possible steps from the here and now. For example, a realistic utopia of this type could envision a world in which humans do not sleep, since pills that allow for this are already in the making and thus a plausible future possibility.

On the other hand, however, one can also be realistic about utopias themselves, that is, our ability to conceptualize a perfect society in the first place. This sort of realism I term Type III. Though there are plenty of examples of realistic utopias of types I and II in the existing literature, none of them go beyond associating their realism component with particular material constraints relating to the implementation of a utopian vision. Yet my contention is that the element that causes utopias to lose their positive force is not so much that they cannot be imple-

mented in *practical* terms, but rather the claim to perfection and total validity, only because of which utopian visioning can lead to authoritarian imposition or the suppression of critique. Put differently, against the backdrop of utopias' potential dangers, it is the possible authoritarian consequences that make a utopia unrealistic in the most problematic sense, not its otherwise unfeasible content. At least to the extent that openness to critique and change is considered essential for modern societies, and the suppression of critique a harm, it is unrealistic generally to design *perfect* societies – not because of their particular features, but because of the very intention to design them as perfect. Inasmuch as such an intention has implications for the type of vision that results—such as it not incorporating space for critique and change—or for the way in which it is implemented—such as through imposition—that are considered morally and practically harmful in modern societies, then this very intention alone has instantly rendered the supposedly perfect vision less than perfect, irrespective of its other substantive content. Indeed, since it is presumed from the outset, within the context of this argument, that modern societies value freedom of expression and autonomy as nothing less than their core values, an approach to change that outright reverses these can only be seen as a fundamentally unrealistic attempt at developing a perfect (or probably even a better) society; for part of what makes the society 'good' in the first place is the absence of the types of imposition that claims to perfection appear to justify.

Thus, the way in which Type III renders utopian visions realistic concerns not their particular features that may clash with existing feasibility assumptions, but rather their claim to perfection or total validity, which creates the possibility of authoritarian consequences. No matter what particular features the utopia envisions or how far removed it is from reality, it becomes more realistic by refraining from claiming total validity. As we have already seen, this opens up two possibilities: either a voluntary refraining from claiming total validity on the part of the utopian; yet since this is contingent, it cannot guarantee to cover all cases. Or, as a second option, some way is found in which the circumstances of utopian visioning constrain the extent

to which the utopia can *effectively* claim total validity; for which there might be other ways than an outright ostracism of utopias. Thus, this route rescues more of the core function of utopianism than Types I and II. Type III realistic utopias disarm the claim to total validity inherent in utopian visions, yet unlike in Types I and II, this need not restrict the substantive *scope* of the utopian vision. Once the crucial authoritarianism-risking element is disarmed, it is not problematic even for ‘realistic’ utopias to be ‘unrealistic’ in a practical sense.

In what follows, I develop this alternative conception of realistic utopias based on a discussion of examples of Types I and II in the recent academic literature.

Realistic utopia ‘Type I’

For John Rawls, a realistic utopia as he calls it in his *Law of Peoples* is a vision of society that rests upon assumptions of the real possibilities of humans, but goes beyond existing social arrangements with the aim of overcoming the evils of unjust war, oppression, religious persecution and slavery, telling us that this is where we “ought to want to be.”³⁰ For Rawls, ideal theory as a realistic utopia is important in that it shows us that a better world is possible even within the limits set by given facts of human nature. Theory that is not orientated to ambitious normative ideals such as justice might miss such possibility and therefore be overly concessive.

Defining the limit of fruitful utopian theory as the limits of human possibility begs the question of what to count as ‘possible.’ Rawls himself remains vague on this crucial point, stating that it is “persons’ moral and psychological *natures* and how that nature works within a framework of political and social institutions” that must be taken as given.³¹ Realistic utopian political philosophy, according to Rawls, extends the limits of practical political possibility by developing institutional contexts that enable certain desirable outcomes (such as justice) despite these ‘facts’ about human moral and psychological nature, and thereby “reconciles us to our political and social condition.”³² In other words, the realism component in his ideal theory comes from his respecting what seem to be ‘hard constraints’ of human nature (even though he

includes in the category of *hard* constraints persons' *moral* natures), whereas 'soft constraints' in the form of institutions and existing preferences³³ ought not to limit the ideal vision. Yet even though the range of hard constraints of human nature that Rawls's 'realism' boundary is based on may be very small,³⁴ he does set this boundary, and has to do so in order to achieve the aim of 'reconciliation.'

Thus, Rawls defines a realistic utopia as an "achievable social world"³⁵ and maintains that the ideal vision of altered institutions must limit itself to "ones that we can understand and act on, approve, and endorse."³⁶ This means that although Rawls regards it as the function of realistic utopias to *extend* what is considered within practical political possibility through a cogent depiction of an institutional alternative, this alternative must itself remain limited to what can be 'understood and acted on' *given existing views and mindsets*—and is therefore inevitably influenced by what is considered understandable and practically feasible from within the existing, rather than the extended, remit of political possibility.³⁷ In his brief conceptualization of the concept of realistic utopia, Rawls fails to resolve this circular problem, which is, however, at the core of the problem that makes Type I realistic utopias unconvincing from a critical point of view.

In Rawls's own terms, a realistic utopia is not a *compromise* between utopian aims and realistic feasibility. Rather, the utopian element lies in the use of ideal theory to describe the 'ought' in the first place, yet for this ideal vision itself to be cogent, the scope of the vision is not limitless, but it is bound to stay within what is (at the time) considered within the range of human possibility. As a reason for this, Rawls comments on E.H. Carr's realistic utopia³⁸ as a compromise between realism (power) and utopianism (moral judgment and values) by arguing that Carr's compromise approach allows for power to unduly determine the normative ideal outcome.³⁹ Contrary to suggesting a compromise, therefore, Rawls intends to "[set] limits to the reasonable exercise of power."⁴⁰

By aiming for a realistic utopia in the sense of ‘one that we can understand and act on, approve, and endorse’, however, Rawls allows power in through the back door. The ‘Type I’ realistic utopia that he subscribes to undermines utopias’ own critical function, because it precisely works with, rather than questions, what is ‘taken for granted.’ In one sense, utopian thought calls on the assumption that what we currently perceive to be feasible can, given our complex and constantly evolving society, never comprise the full or even a definite picture, so that the category of ‘hard constraints’ must be considered minimal.⁴¹ Yet even if, or indeed precisely if, utopian visions ignore even hard constraints, they more generally challenge what is ‘taken for granted’ as the limits of political possibility, thus nurturing an atmosphere of critical scrutiny. Thus, Rawls not only unnecessarily excludes visions that ignore hard constraints, but he thereby limits his ideal theory to a more conservative outlook than he himself seems to intend.⁴² Despite Rawls’s intention not to allow power to determine the vision of a future, more just society, he does exactly this.

Realistic utopia ‘Type II’

Another way to make a utopian vision realistic is to supplement it with a process, or roadmap, as a means to ‘get there.’

George Lawson emphasizes the need for utopian theory to be realistic in the sense of being based on real starting points and aiming for “mid-range” visions rather than complete overhauls.⁴³ In light of the dangers inherent in grand blueprints, he argues, it is vital that visions “recognize their own limits.”⁴⁴ Lawson draws on E.H. Carr to argue that a process-type realistic utopia achieves this by engaging in a “constant conversation” and “unending dialogue” between utopian visions and political reality.⁴⁵ Thus, for him, the realism side of the concept of realistic utopia does not imply a resignation to power, but rather the recognition that social change must always be progressive rather than abrupt and engineered.⁴⁶

Indeed, the idea of a progressive process towards utopia rather than an imposition of a static vision is able to disarm the totalitarian element inherent in the implementation of traditional ('unrealistic') utopian visions. A progressive utopia implies not a 'perfect' vision that would suppress contestation,⁴⁷ but one that is continuously adapted to a changing reality. Thus, the process opens up the possibility that the vision is not forcefully imposed against opposition. It renders the connection between utopia and authoritarian enforcement no longer a necessary one.

Yet, the process feature alone is no guarantee that the totalitarianism inherent in the implementation of utopian visions is effectively disarmed. A utopian vision could be realized progressively over time, but still originate exclusively in one dictator-like 'social planner.' Indeed, a utopian vision supplemented by a process to realize it could be even more totalitarian than one without it, imposing as it might do not only the visionary goal for society but meticulously also the processes linking that vision with the here and now.

Perhaps for this reason, Lawson does not define his realistic utopia merely as a progressive as opposed to a static vision, but in addition also retains the close connection with existing 'real facts' typical of Type I realistic utopias. He still attacks traditional utopias not for being authoritarian, but for being too unrealistic.⁴⁸ By arguing for a more thorough connection between the existing reality and the future vision, he emphasizes the need to stick to existing facts in order for utopias to be critical in a fruitful way:

"Utopias which provide a cracked mirror to the past and a distorted analysis of the present cannot hope to tell us much about future possibilities. Indeed, when this takes place, utopias serve to sanitise the past and to superimpose purity on complexity, acting as a 'dominant wish' or as a 'static future'⁴⁹ which fail to recognise new challenges, forms of contestation and praxis."⁵⁰

As such, this conceptualization of realistic utopias identifies the core problem of traditional (or 'unrealistic') utopias of imposing a static future, but it attempts to resolve it in a way

that is focused on the implementation rather than the conceptualization of utopias. By doing so, it compromises the positive (anti-authoritarian) features of the conceptualization side. Although Lawson articulates the need for utopian visions to “recognize their own limits,”⁵¹ his version of realistic utopia attempts to achieve this by sticking to more realistic (in the sense of practically feasible) visions, whose implementation follows an adjustable roadmap *firmly rooted in reality*.⁵² This solution is unconvincing, however, as it compromises the critical function of utopias to open up space for a problematisation of reality precisely by ignoring apparent real constraints.

A similar conceptualization, with a similar shortcoming, is Erik Olin Wright’s ‘real utopias’ project. Wright’s⁵³ utopias are “real” in the sense of looking for “accessible waystations” and institutions that allow for a “muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change.”⁵⁴ The aim is to design

“[s]ocial institutions [...] in ways that eliminate forms of oppression that thwart human aspirations for fulfilling and meaningful lives. [...] The process is driven by trial and error much more than by conscious design, and by and large those institutions that have endured have done so because they have enduring virtues.”⁵⁵

“Muddling through” and “trial and error” are approaches far removed from an idea of any exclusive right or ability to impose a new future, including a process of change. Nevertheless, Wright still unnecessarily limits the scope of his utopian visions by suggesting that real utopias are fruitful only if their practical possibility can be judged from within the here and now.⁵⁶ On the substantive topic of his own ‘real utopias’ project, alternatives to capitalism, he wonders:

“Unless one believes that a viable alternative is possible which would actually reduce these harms [the harms associated with capitalism], then what is the point in challenging capitalism itself?”⁵⁷

‘The point,’ of course, could be to counteract a general ‘taken-for-grantedness’ when it comes to apparent facts, in order to challenge authoritarian impositions of this kind. Like Lawson, Wright places ‘reality checks’ on his utopian visioning because he is focused on the im-

plementation side of (realistic) utopias. Although that may be a valuable aim in its own right, this conceptualization obscures the fact that there is also an important role to play precisely for unlimited radical utopianism, even if it makes no direct practical contribution or is never (intended to be) implemented.

This role is to contribute to a fertile critical soil based on which supposed facts are not taken for granted, but opened up for challenge and a search for alternatives in the first place. To retain this important political function of utopias, the challenge is to find ways in which the totalitarian element inherent in utopian visions is disarmed, yet without thereby limiting the scope of these visions; for such limits set by existing assumptions of viability prohibit utopias from challenging that form of authoritarianism that manifests itself in the presentation of certain supposed ‘facts’ as given for interested reasons. For instance, Wright’s claim that “those institutions that have endured have done so because they have enduring virtues”⁵⁸ seems doubtful from this perspective: without any further specification of how the “trial and error” approach will be realized, especially of who will do the trying and who will in what way decide what counts as an error and how this error is to be remedied, there is no guarantee that institutions endure by reason of their virtues rather than, for instance, because they are captured by powerful vested interests.

Realistic Utopia Type III

The key to realistic utopia Type III, then, is the understanding that utopias cannot ‘realistically’ be regarded as static, *perfect* visions that are to be implemented. Rather, as foreshadowed above, what is needed to render utopias realistic is a process of utopian visioning similar to those proposed by Lawson and Wright, yet within a *context* that disarms the totalitarian character of utopian visions not by limiting them – which would abrogate their critical function – but only by denying any specific visions total validity. I will argue that this is indeed achieved by regarding realistic utopias as a process; yet not as a process towards a particular vision, but instead as a meta-process of ongoing utopian visioning that comprises multiple, pluralistic utopias.

The thought here is that the totalitarian character of utopian visions is problematic only if there is a single dominant vision that, as such, can claim total validity (and might therefore impose itself). A meta-process of pluralistic utopian visioning disarms such claims to total validity even if each single utopian vision retains a totalitarian character. In essence, this realistic utopian vision borrows our established insights on forestalling authoritarianism from political theories of the state, to propose a *democracy of utopias*. The realistic meta-utopia includes within it a democracy of smaller utopias; democratic in the sense of equality of status, but also in the sense stressed by agonistic democratic theorists, that critique and contestation must be continuously kept alive. A democratic context precludes utopian visions from claiming total validity, yet without dismissing radical, practically unrealistic utopian thought per se. If this works, utopias can be disarmed, and hence rendered realistic, without the imposition of any restrictions on their substantive content or general legitimacy.

Thus, realistic utopia Type III unfolds at a meta-level because the usefulness of a utopian theory or vision cannot be judged without considering the context it is in: a utopia is a vital contribution to keeping authoritarianism in check, but only if it is situated in a context of a sufficient number of alternative utopias to keep its own inherent authoritarian character in check. The meta-vision of realistic utopian visioning thus calls for more, rather than less, utopian and ideal theorizing, but in a context that disarms their inherent dangers.

IV Realistic utopia as deliberative democracy

This sketch demands a specification of the necessary parameters of such a context.

Not everything that is called ‘democracy’ would create the right context. Since utopian visions do not exercise any formal power, this point is not about the specification of the right democratic procedures by which visions can be imposed on people. Rather, the democratic element consists in the creation of a context in which the sheer number of alternative utopias, together with an acknowledgement that they all have equal standing, ‘naturally’ precludes any one

utopia from claiming total validity. Put differently, the context itself must be so pluralistic and engaging as to achieve this without the help of a ‘moderator’ or planner, for that would risk compromising the radical terrain of utopian theorizing. Hence, the discursive sphere within which utopias unfold, be it in the academic or in the literary sphere, must be open and fair in the sense of granting every contribution equal right and equal access, and ground any possible (even informal) legitimation of a vision in some form of democratic engagement and acceptance.

Such a context disarms the possible totalitarian consequences arising from the totalitarian character of the very act of proclaiming a perfect utopia; but not the content of that utopia. A ‘democracy of utopias’ does not imply that all utopias have to be democratic in terms of the content of their visions. Rather, it refers to the relations between different utopias that together make up the meta-process of utopian visioning. So long as there is an awareness of the overall diversity of utopias such that no single vision can effectively claim the status of being ‘perfect’ (and hence be potentially ‘impossible’), there is no need to restrict the contents of utopian visions to what would seem acceptable to impose. This condition may or may not be given at a particular time in a particular society; it is ultimately an empirical question. Yet the conclusion remains that at least *insofar as* a sufficiently pluralistic context exists, utopian thought need not be constrained; and given the importance of unconstrained utopian thought for societies, it demands the impetus to be on fostering the right context, rather than on limiting utopian thought.

Thus, unlike previous considerations of what makes utopias realistic, realistic utopia Type III does not describe the required characteristics of one specific project, but it manifests itself at the level of the basic framework within which social visioning and change takes place. A realistic utopia in this sense consists first and foremost in institutional structures that allow for diverse participation in a continuous vision-forming process that generally encourages those involved to think beyond existing constraints and seemingly unalterable social ‘facts.’

Concretely, given the desirable features of utopian thought for real-world societies, and numerous recent contributions of ‘real utopias’ referring to real-world policies,⁵⁹ this norm can

be applied to thinking about useful utopian visioning within existing societies. What kind of institutions could facilitate engagement with utopian visioning along the lines of a realistic utopia Type III?

Plausible implications would be strong constitutional guarantees of personal liberty and freedom of speech, support for a flourishing art and literary scene, and an opening up of public spaces for discussion and participation, as well as a recognition within academia of the role of unconstrained ideal theory. Beyond these, however, there are parallels between the idea of a realistic utopia as a democratic process of visioning and the normative theory of deliberative democracy.

Deliberative democracy puts a similar emphasis on inclusiveness, open-endedness and critique.⁶⁰ For deliberative democrats, legitimacy requires reflective assent through a process of public contestation and justification.⁶¹ Deliberative democratic theory views democracy not just as an efficient means to aggregate individuals' interests but rather as a process of collectively validating political norms and values, to which discursive challenge and ongoing contestation in a plethora of ways are central.⁶² Vibrant political engagement and contestation are therefore not hindrances to effective governance, but its precondition.

Institutionally, this implies the necessity of open, autonomous public spaces⁶³ for much deeper engagement and reflection on values than the existing democratic institutions allow for. Deliberative democratic institutions (ideally) create an inclusive, equal and fair overall setting, free from distortion by any form of power.⁶⁴ Such deliberation does not aim to resolve specific technical dilemmas, but rather seeks to lay bare people's wider perspectives, values, and discourses around the issue at hand. The deliberative process is trusted, due to the requirement to justify one's views to a heterogeneous audience, to generate an atmosphere in which citizens abstract from their individual private interests and allude to the common good of all.⁶⁵

Public deliberation in a context of consideration for the views of others as well as a critical questioning of existing norms could be a theory well-matched with a realistic meta-utopia: it

not only allows for, but in fact depends on widespread engagement with core political values, but then tames individual positions through the deliberative process that naturally induces reflection and mediates disagreements. As such, a deliberative democratic setting (ideally) creates a suitable context for an open, democratic process of social visioning and reflection that precludes domination as a result of this interaction itself, as opposed to any formal oversight or enforcement. Thus, when it comes to the real-world implications of the above advocacy for more utopian visioning, in a context that renders utopias realistic, advancing the practice of deliberative democracy might be a fitting proposal.

Of course, this is in itself an ideal argumentation. Deliberation might not live up to the expectation to guard against authoritarian visions imposing themselves – both theoretically and practically.

Theoretically, deliberative democracy has increasingly moved away from conceptualizing the society-wide processes of inclusive, critical contestation that coined early deliberative theory, to focus instead on institutional innovations suitable as mere amendments to existing forms of governance.⁶⁶ Whilst a success for the theory in one sense, sparking as it did “an extremely large and rapidly growing literature, both theoretical and empirical,”⁶⁷ this has also contributed to the conceptual watering down of the deliberative ideal,⁶⁸ giving rise to the question of how much of the ambitious normative theory can be retained precisely the more practically relevant deliberative democracy becomes.

Practically, specific instances of deliberation can never be ideal. In contrast to the ideal of a fully inclusive, fair, and equal societal discourse, in reality there are limits to the number of people who can realistically deliberate together,⁶⁹ and deliberative events in the real world are typically devised and controlled by government authorities,⁷⁰ and thus inevitably embedded in the discourses and power structures of the existing political system.⁷¹ Contrary to the original ideal of critical discourse in the public sphere, in practice, deliberation is mostly used to facilitate decision-making in the face of disagreement, and is therefore expected to produce a deci-

sion at some point,⁷² as well as having to function in a profoundly non-ideal context of irreconcilable interests and deep inequality.⁷³ As a result, some authoritarian utopias or claims might pass through the supposed deliberative ‘filter’ simply because the filter cannot realistically be applied in full.

To some degree, the normative theory has a response to this: The discourse conditions that deliberative democracy demands, epitomized by Habermas’ ‘ideal speech situation,’⁷⁴ indeed *cannot* be met in practice – but neither are they supposed to.⁷⁵ Deliberative democracy is an ideal theory of democracy: its normative force consists precisely in the inevitable imperfections of its application in practice, for they imply that every actual discourse must remain open to possible new objections and critique on an ongoing basis.⁷⁶ Put differently, it is precisely the ideal nature of the full deliberative process that empowers participants to “[object] to any agreement reached in actual deliberation.”⁷⁷ From this perspective, while the now dominant one-off deliberative encounters in the real world have certainly proven their many useful functions,⁷⁸ the *key* function of the normative and ideal theory of deliberative democracy is to justify and demand an ongoing political space for reflection and contestation more generally. Thus, although the theory cannot promise to effectively guard against all real-world instances of potentially unjustified acceptances of singular visions in an empirical sense, it does demand and inspire the development of a broader institutional context to harbour the kind of engagement, reflection and contestation in which diverse utopian visioning processes can flourish (and within which singular instances of real-world deliberation are to be understood not as an instantiation of deliberative democracy, but primarily as tractable, ‘easier-to-study’ experiments).⁷⁹

Still, the question remains whether how deliberative democracy in this sense can be achieved in practice, especially as parts of deliberative theory itself appear to no longer share the underlying critical-normative theory. This remains an open question, and so this article cannot present a fail-proof roadmap towards realistic utopian visioning in the real world. Yet, both deliberative democratic theory and real-world processes of engagement with future visions are

(and will always be) still evolving. As one contribution to this ongoing debate, the present conceptualisation of realistic utopias has offered a new perspective on how we ought to appraise utopian visions, which in turn has normative implications for what role and form we assign deliberative democracy. In fact, as part of its most recent ‘systemic turn,’⁸⁰ deliberative democratic theory has just turned its attention back onto a broader sociological concern with the society as a whole,⁸¹ suggesting that there remains significant momentum in the theory in this direction. Parallel to advocating deliberative democracy as a potential real-world strategy to promote realistic utopias, approaching deliberative democracy in turn from a realistic utopian point of view might then be an impulse and additional rationale for deliberative theory to revive earlier models of deliberative democracy as open, diverse, and multi-faceted communicative processes in the wider public sphere. Only if deliberative democracy can come to encompass the very ethos of social and political engagement in a society and be accessible to as well as shaped by all will it be open enough to harbour a process of realistic utopian visioning.

V Conclusion

This article has sought to offer a reply to those wary of utopia (and, by implication, ideal theory) that, unlike many others, goes beyond just brushing it off by accusing the critics of having misunderstood the concept, referring to only a selection of utopias, or being “simply wrong.”⁸² Rather, this article has shown in more detail how an outright dismissal of utopia even on these critics’ own terms can elicit precisely those undesired outcomes that they themselves fear. This means that the extreme poles which have characterized much of the controversy around utopia in the past must be overcome in order to allow for more precise accounts to be developed. Both opponents and proponents of utopia need such more precise accounts in order to use the concept of utopia in a coherent and fruitful way.

The emerging concept of ‘realistic utopias,’ by positioning itself between an outright dismissal of and an uncritical support for utopia, marks a valuable step in this direction. However,

the lack of conceptual clarity and coherence of this notion have meant that existing realistic utopias have not achieved this aim. In particular, despite cogent criticism of (many types of) utopias as authoritarian, it is important to note that utopian and ideal thought also plays the opposite role of challenging authoritarianism. This means that an outright rejection of practically unrealistic visions and theory is too simple an answer to the authoritarianism concern. As has been shown along the example of Rawls's realistic utopia, a conceptualization of realistic utopia that does not take this into account risks falling into the same totalitarian trap that opponents of utopia, as presumably also those seeking to make it more realistic, have sought to avoid.

This article proposes a more coherent concept of realistic utopias. Based on a discussion of existing accounts of realistic utopias, I have outlined a new type of realistic utopia that differs from previous concepts in that the utopia itself is conceived of as an ongoing process rather than an end-state, and as pluralistic rather than as a singular vision. This circumvents the problem with static utopias of wrongly presuming that any one theorist could conceptualize a perfect society, which is the central feature that renders traditional utopias 'unrealistic.' Yet, at the same time, this concept safeguards the core political function of utopian thought to question taken-for-granted assumptions. As such, the concept of utopia is not rendered realistic by limiting the radical nature of its vision, but it in fact *demand*s widespread unconstrained utopian visioning, which creates an alert and critical context within which an authoritarian imposition of any single utopia becomes more difficult. Utopian thought, once disconnected from totalitarian fantasies of imposing a new society, opens up spaces for rethinking and deliberating existing social reality in the first place, by 'defamiliarizing' what is commonly taken for granted. This is an important heuristic function of utopias that is often overlooked as utopias are hastily dismissed as dangerous. Yet the widespread dismissal also shows that utopias might not realize this heuristic potential unless they are conceptualized with an eye to the fundamentally critical role they play in societies, and unless a suitable context is found in which they realize these heuristic functions yet cannot follow through their simultaneous totalitarian tendencies. It is against this backdrop

that this article has conceptualized a new type of *realistic* utopia, arguing that utopias, *if and only if they are realistic in this sense*, realize an essential heuristic function in modern societies as much as in political theory.

Thus, this discussion has important theoretical and practical implications. To political theory, this article adds an understanding of the notion of ‘realistic utopia’ that allows for a fruitful conceptual use of this notion without having to ‘take sides’ in the controversy around utopia, which has developed along similar lines to the ideal versus non-ideal theory debate. Those using the concept of ‘realistic utopia’, in order to do justice to the term, should see it as a framework for defamiliarizing and questioning existing realities not by advocating the one, all-encompassing solution, but by setting in motion an inclusive process of deliberation and continuous rethinking of how society could be different.

Consequently, utopias as well as ideal theories should be understood as contributing one vision, or one step, on a longer process of rethinking reality—and indeed as *opening up* this process in their specific area, by defamiliarizing it for the first time and thus making it an issue that can be so deliberated and questioned. Ideal theory is one way in which societies engage in critical discourse, and has an important role to play in challenging the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of supposed social facts. This makes the overall discourse more realistic in the sense of preventing any one contribution, and especially the dominant ‘taken for granted’ assumptions, from claiming total truth. Thus, the realistic utopian perspective reveals one sense in which there is no stark dichotomy between ideal and non-ideal theorizing: ‘realistic’ theorizing *presupposes* ideal theory—and ideal theory becomes realistic not by limiting itself to staying within feasibility constraints, but rather by understanding itself as one part of a larger meta-process of discursive critique instead of a single ‘perfect’ account, despite being an idealized abstraction.

In practical terms, the notion of a ‘realistic utopia’ proposes a methodology for conceptualizing social change. It urges policymakers to refrain from imposing reform agendas in a top-down fashion, and highlights the importance of opening up social spaces for critical deliberation.

Yet for society at large to be able to make use of such spaces in the first place, a necessary first step is to question the taken-for-grantedness of the existing social reality around them. This is where utopian visions offered for discussion play a vital role. If couched into a fair and open framework of discussion and a pluralistic culture of visioning, utopias diversify, broaden, and democratize paths for social development, rather than forcefully closing them down. In thus advocating widespread engagement and critique, this discussion is closely related to the norms of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democratic engagement might create a suitable context for social change to proceed as within a realistic meta-utopia.

I have argued that a realistic utopia, couched within such a framework, contributes to building up significant critical and reflective capacities within society, without however becoming a new authoritarian force itself. As such, the combination of utopian thought with democratic elements makes a realistic utopia itself the best safeguard against totalitarianism. The conclusion of this paper is therefore an optimistic one. Whilst agreeing with Karl Popper's resolute criticism of (traditional) utopianism, the utopian spirit, vital as it is for a critical-reflective society, can still be retained and nurtured. In its realistic form, it is utopia itself that plays a central role in fostering a new ethos of engagement as part of a "democratic revolution"⁸³ countering an apathy that would otherwise lend itself to succumbing to new totalitarian tendencies.

¹ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (New York: Philip Allan, 1990), p. 21.

² E.g. Sibylle Scheipers and Daniela Sicurelli, "Normative Power Europe: A Credible Utopia?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 45 (2007): 435-457; Lea Ypi, "Justice in Migration: A Closed Borders Utopia?" *Journal of Political Philosophy* 16 (2008): 391-418; Lennart Sjöberg "Rational Risk Perception: Utopia or Dystopia?" *Journal of Risk Research* 9 (2006): 683-696; Bryan S. Turner, "Culture, technologies and bodies: the technological Utopia of living forever," *Sociological Review* 55 (2007): 19-36.

³ Lyman T. Sargent, "In Defense of Utopia," *Diogenes* 209 (2006): 11-17; Ruth Levitas, "Looking for the blue: The necessity of Utopia," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12 (2007): 289-306; Shannon Brincat, "Reclaiming the Utopian imaginary in IR theory," *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009): 581-609.

⁴ Frederik L. Polak, *The Image of the Future: Enlightening the Past, Orientating the Present, Forecasting the Future* (New York: Oceana, 1961), p. 82.

⁵ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Jürgen Habermas, "Das Konzept der Menschenwürde und die realistische Utopie der Menschenrechte," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 58 (2010): 343-357; Andrew F. March, "Taking People As They Are: Islam as a "Realistic Utopia" in the Political Theory of Sayyid Qutb," *American Political Science Review* 104 (2010): 189-207; George Lawson, "A Realistic Utopia? Nancy Fraser, Cosmopolitanism and the Making of a Just

World Order,” *Political Studies* 56 (2008): 881-906; Erik O. Wright (ed.), *Associations and Democracy* (London: Verso, 1995).

⁶ See e.g. Andrew Mason, “Just Constraints,” *British Journal of Political Science* 34 (2004): 251-268; Colin Farrelly, “Justice in Ideal Theory: A Refutation,” *Political Studies* 55 (2007): 844-864; Ingrid Robeyns, “Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice,” *Social Theory and Practice* 34 (2008): 341-362; Laura Valentini, “On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17 (2009): 332-355; Charles W. Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” *Hypatia* 20 (2009): 165-183; David Wiens, “Prescribing Institutions Without Ideal Theory,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 20 (2012): 45-70.

⁷ Raymond Geuss, “Realismus, Wunschdenken, Utopie,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 58 (2010): 419-429; Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁸ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Sargent, “In Defense of Utopia,” p. 11; Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (London: Porcupine, 1948 [1891]).

⁹ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 1962), pp. 159-60; Lyman T. Sargent, “Choosing Utopia: Utopianism as an Essential Element in Political Thought and Action,” in *Utopia Method Vision. The Use Value of Social Dreaming* (2nd ed.), ed. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (Bern: Peter Lang), p. 301; Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 99-101; Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 3; Luis Villoro, “The Triple Confusion of Utopia,” *Diogenes* 209 (2006): 5-10, p. 7; George Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies* (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 23.

¹¹ Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989 [1516]).

¹² Cf. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams, “Introduction,” in Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xi.

¹³ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 20; see also Ulrich Arnsward, “Einführung: Zum Utopie-Begriff und seiner Bedeutung in der Politischen Philosophie,” in *Thomas Morus’ Utopia und das Genre der Utopie in der Politischen Philosophie*, ed. Ulrich Arnsward and Hans-Peter Schütt (Karlsruhe: Karlsruher Institut für Technologie, 2010), p. 19.

¹⁴ Lyman T. Sargent, “Authority and Utopia: Utopianism in Political Thought,” *Polity* 14 (1982): 565-584, pp. 568-9.

¹⁵ Maeve Cooke, “Realism and Idealism: Was Habermas’s Communicative Turn a Move in the Wrong Direction?” *Political Theory* 40 (2012): 811-821, p. 811.

¹⁶ Ralf Dahrendorf, “Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis,” *American Journal of Sociology* 64 (1958): 115-127, p. 115.

¹⁷ Lawson, “A Realistic Utopia?” p. 882.

¹⁸ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 298.

¹⁹ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 159; see similarly Michael Walzer, “Should we reclaim political utopianism?” *European Journal of Political Theory* 12 (2013): 24-30, pp. 26-7.

²⁰ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*; Sargent, “In Defense of Utopia,” p. 11.

²¹ Miriam Eliav-Feldon, *Realistic Utopias. The Ideal Imaginary Societies of the Renaissance 1516-1630* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), p. 11.

²² Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia. A Study in Theory and Practice* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 29-30; Alasdair Morrison, “Uses of Utopia,” in *Utopias*, ed. Peter Alexander and Roger Gill (London: Duckworth, 1984), pp. 139-40.

²³ Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, pp. 213-4.

²⁴ Ruth Levitas, “The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: Utopia as Method,” in *Utopia Method Vision. The Use Value of Social Dreaming* (2nd ed.), ed. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 57.

²⁵ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 20; cf. Mark Holloway, “The Necessity of Utopia,” in *Utopias*, ed. Peter Alexander and Roger Gill (London: Duckworth, 1984), p. 183.

²⁶ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p. 12, original emphasis.

²⁷ Pablo Gilabert and Holly Lawford-Smith, “Political Feasibility: A Conceptual Exploration,” *Political Studies* 60 (2012): 809-825, p. 815.

²⁸ Levitas, “The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society,” p. 56.

²⁹ Note that this does not necessarily conflict with views such as Popper’s that in day-to-day politics societies need “piecemeal” change based on “continuous readjustments” towards the ‘better’ as opposed to overhauls towards the ‘perfect’ (see Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 158-9, 163). Yet it

denies that such view implies a complete dismissal of utopian thought as such: While piecemeal reform is also necessary in real-world politics, societies equally need a ‘background discourse’ of the entirely unconstrained, horizon-widening perspective that only ‘perfect’ utopias provide. Similarly, against political realists such as Geuss, for whom “political judgment” rests in the use of “models of reality”, whereas “an ‘ideal theory’ without contact to reality is [...] no guide to action” (Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, pp. 97, 93), this perspective suggests that while ‘models of reality’ may also be an important task for political theory to produce, this does not mean that ideal theory altogether fails to guide action – it simply does so at a different level, continually pushing the boundaries of the ‘thinkable’ all the while more reality-oriented political theories may simultaneously be devised for other purposes.

³⁰ Chris Brown, “The construction of a ‘realistic utopia’: John Rawls and international political theory,” *Review of International Studies* 28 (2002): 5-21, p. 20; cf. Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, pp. 6-7, 126.

³¹ Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 7, emphasis added.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³³ Holly Lawford-Smith, “Understanding Political Feasibility,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21 (2013): 243-259, pp. 252-3.

³⁴ David Estlund, “A Little Bit Utopian?,” draft from 13/02/2013, published in the Crooked Timber blog (2013), accessible at <http://crookedtimber.org/2013/03/20/a-little-bit-utopian/>, last accessed 26/03/2013.

³⁵ Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁷ Christian Arnsperger, “What is Utopian about the Realistic Utopia? Relocating Rawls in the space of normative proposals,” *Review internationale de philosophie* 237 (2006): 285-300.

³⁸ Edward H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919-1939. An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

³⁹ Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; see also Brown, “The construction of a ‘realistic utopia’,” p. 20).

⁴¹ For example, just a few decades ago, it may have been taken for granted that babies born more than three months prematurely simply could not biologically survive, yet now they stand at least a fairly good chance. Not all too long ago, it may have sounded perfectly reasonable to assume that humans are bound to their own planet, whereas now there is talk of manned missions to as far as the planet Mars.

⁴² Arnsperger, “What is Utopian about the Realistic Utopia?”

⁴³ Lawson, “A Realistic Utopia?,” p. 882.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 900.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 902.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 887.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1960).

⁵⁰ Lawson, “A Realistic Utopia?,” pp. 886-7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 900.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 899-902.

⁵³ Wright, *Associations and Democracy*; Erik O. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2009), full manuscript available online at http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU_files/ERU-full-manuscript.pdf, last accessed 06/09/2013.

⁵⁴ Wright, *Associations and Democracy*, p. ix.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁵⁶ Estlund, “A Little Bit Utopian?,” p. 4.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, p. 57.

⁵⁸ Wright, *Associations and Democracy*, p. x.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Associations and Democracy*; Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*; Philippe Van Parijs, “The Universal Basic Income: Why Utopian Thinking Matters, and How Sociologists Can Contribute to It,” *Politics & Society* 41 (2013): 171-182; Fred Block, “Democratizing Finance,” *Politics & Society* 42 (2014): 3-28; Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ernesto Ganuza, “Participatory Budgeting as if Emancipation Mattered,” *Politics & Society* 42 (2014): 29-50; Jaime Ahlberg and Harry Brighouse, “Education: Not a Real Utopian Design,” *Politics & Society* 42 (2014): 51-72.

⁶⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996); John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond. Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); John S. Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy. Politics, Policy, and Political Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge Universi-

- ty Press, 1990); Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in *The Good Polity. Normative Analysis of the State*, ed. Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (New York: Blackwell, 1989); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- ⁶¹ John S. Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 23.
- ⁶² Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," in *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 73-4.
- ⁶³ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, pp. 360-7.
- ⁶⁴ Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, p. 2.
- ⁶⁵ Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," pp. 70-1.
- ⁶⁶ Simone Chambers, "Rhetoric and the Public Sphere: Has Deliberative Democracy Abandoned Mass Democracy?" *Political Theory* 37 (2009): 323-350.
- ⁶⁷ Carole Pateman, "Participatory Democracy Revisited," *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2012): 7-19, p. 7.
- ⁶⁸ Jürg Steiner, "Concept Stretching: The Case of Deliberation," *European Political Science* 7 (2008): 186-190.
- ⁶⁹ Robert Dahl, *After the Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 67-8; John Parkinson, *Deliberating in the Real World: Problems of Legitimacy in Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 4-5.
- ⁷⁰ Graham Smith, *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 23.
- ⁷¹ Parkinson, *Deliberating in the Real World*, p. 8.
- ⁷² See e.g. Jon Elster, "Introduction," in *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 5-6.
- ⁷³ Cf. Jane Mansbridge with James Bohman, Simone Chambers, David Estlund, Andreas Føllesdal, Archon Fung, Cristina Lafont, Bernard Manin and José Luis Martí, "The Place of Self-Interest and the Role of Power in Deliberative Democracy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18 (2010): 64-100, pp. 68, 82.
- ⁷⁴ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, pp. 228-30.
- ⁷⁵ Christian F. Rostbøll, "Dissent, criticism, and transformative political action in deliberative democracy," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 12 (2009): 19-36; Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy*, pp. 36-7.
- ⁷⁶ Rostbøll, "Dissent, criticism, and transformative political action," p. 21.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁸ See e.g. Archon Fung and Erik O. Wright, "Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance," *Politics & Society* 29 (2001): 5-41; Robert E. Goodin and John S. Dryzek, "Deliberative Impacts: The Macro-Political Uptake of Mini-Publics," *Politics & Society* 34 (2006): 219-244.
- ⁷⁹ Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers*, p. 9.
- ⁸⁰ John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (eds.), *Deliberative Systems. Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers*.
- ⁸¹ John Parkinson, "Democratizing deliberative systems," in *Deliberative Systems. Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, ed. John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 153.
- ⁸² Sargent, "Authority and Utopia," p. 571.
- ⁸³ Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left. Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 261.