

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

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

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This article argues that ethnographic methods, or an ethnographic sensibility more broadly speaking, can go some way to addressing a thorny issue of realism in political theory. Realists are committed to taking context seriously and to offering critique, but how can they do both? Based on a reconstruction of the main lines of inquiry and arguments of Bernardo Zacka's *When the State Meets the Street*, the article shows that an ethnographic sensibility is well suited to address the realist predicament because it combines two levels of interpretation. On one level, it seeks to reconstruct people's understanding of what they are doing and who they are. On a second level, ethnography seeks to interpret the larger ideational and material power relations that affect people's values and practices. The essay spells out how taking an ethnographic sensibility can enhance (realist) political theorists' understanding of the nature and limits of politics in a particular context, while at the same time providing a starting point for potentially transformative criticism from within this context.

Keywords: political theory, realism, ethnography, bureaucracy, Bernardo Zacka, methodology

Political theories should provide orientation. Thinkers as different as John Rawls and Raymond Geuss agree about the centrality of this task for political theory.<sup>1</sup> Agreement quickly dissolves when considering what constitutes an orientation, how theorists might reach orientation, and who the audience is for such orientation. Arguably, the task of orientation is one of the core issues in current debates between

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

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ideal theory, non-ideal theory, and realist approaches to political theory. A schematic and somewhat simplified account of the three forms of orientation found in these debates would run as follows: ideal theorists provide orientation by offering a polestar in the form of principles or institutional designs that rely considerably on idealizing assumptions. Here orientation consists of a destination, in the direction of which one shall travel. Non-ideal theorists focus on providing orientation in terms of laying out a pathway from the present to a destination that we can be confident of reaching from our non-idealized starting point. At the very least, any principles should be subject to feasibility constraints and sensitive to their context of application. In non-ideal theory,<sup>2</sup> orientation focuses on guidance for the journey and on identifying feasible journeys. Realists contend that the understanding of politics in ideal and non-ideal theory approaches is typically so detached from practice that such approaches do not, in fact, provide a reliable orientation. Unlike non-ideal theory, realist political theory does not focus on making its principles applicable to the present context, but rather on gaining an orientation from understanding political practice.<sup>3</sup> Any realist orientation must consider more closely how politics is practiced in the context in question. Besides these contentions, however, realists have yet to offer a distinctive pathway to providing an orientation.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Zofia Stemplowska and Adam Swift, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*, ed. David Estlund (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 273–91; Zofia Stemplowska, "What's Ideal about Ideal Theory?," *Social Theory and Practice* 34 (2008): 319–40; Jacob T. Levy, "There Is No Such Thing as Ideal Theory," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 33 (2016): 312–33; and A. John Simmons, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 38 (2010): 5–36. For recent discussions of non-ideal theory, see Matthew Adams, "An Ideology Critique of Nonideal Methodology," *European Journal of Political Theory*, July 8, 2019, at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885119858727>.

3. For the distinction between realism and non-ideal theory, see Matt Sleat, "Realism, Liberalism, and Non-Ideal Theory: Are There Two Ways to Do Realistic Political Theory," *Political Studies* 64 (2016): 27–41. For the mistaken conflation of realism and non-ideal theory, see Laura Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2012): 654–64.

4. Realism is a well-established branch of the history of political thought and in international relations theory; it emphasizes the importance of power relations, conflict, and the fallibility of human agents, as well as the tragic dimension of politics. While these traditions are connected to recent realism and much can be learned from them, as has been demonstrated, they do not provide solutions to this task. See, for example, Alison McQueen, "Political Realism and the Realist Tradition," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (2017): 296–313; Duncan Bell, "Political Realism and International Relations," *Philosophy Compass* 12 (2017), at <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12403>; and Matt Sleat, *Liberal Realism* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2013), ch. 2.

The shift from producing a mostly methodological and meta-theoretical critique of liberal-analytical political theory<sup>5</sup> to offering orientation is, however, proving to be a challenge for realists. Two of the most important challenges concern the way realists relate to “real politics” and how they can generate critical purchase. Attempts to develop realist approaches have thus far mainly relied on conceptual and ontological stipulations about the nature of politics. The lack of engagement with concrete social and political phenomena raises questions about how much weight realist theorizing can have for addressing social conflict and suffering, and about how key realist commitments (for instance the commitment to contextual judgment), can be operationalized.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the basis for any critical purchase of realist political theory, a key concern both for critics<sup>7</sup> and for proponents of realism,<sup>8</sup> remains unclear and has only recently started to receive more attention.<sup>9</sup> Realist approaches are often suspected of a bias toward the status quo, which they only overcome by drawing on the kinds of resources they claim to reject, such as idealization and external moral principles.<sup>10</sup> We might sum up these challenges as the “realist predicament”: Realists are committed to taking context seriously and to offering critique, but how can they do both? Does taking context seriously not expose the theorist to the risk of becoming caught in people’s own value systems? In order to offer critique, does the theorist not need to import values or preferences that betray her commitment to context?

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5. William A. Galston, “Realism in Political Theory,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010): 385–411; Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat, “Realism in Normative Political Theory,” *Philosophy Compass* 9 (2014): 1–13; Michael Freedon, “Interpretive and Prescriptive Realism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 17 (2012): 1–11; David Runciman, “What Is Realistic Political Philosophy?,” *Metaphilosophy* 43 (2012): 58–70; and Matt Sleat, ed., *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

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

7. For two very different ways to get to this question, see, Lorna Finlayson, “With Radicals Like These Who Needs Conservatives? Doom, Gloom and Realism in Political Theory,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 16 (2017): 264–82; and Charles Larmore, “What Is Political Philosophy?,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10 (2013): 276–306.

8. Matt Sleat, “Legitimacy in Realist Thought: Between Moralism and Realpolitik,” *Political Theory* 42 (2014): 314–37.

9. Janosch Prinz and Enzo Rossi, “Realism as Ideology Critique,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (2017): 348–65; and Mathias Thaler, “Hope Abjuring Hope: On the Place of Utopia in Realist Political Thought,” *Political Theory* 46 (2018): 671–97.

10. See Larmore, “What Is Political Philosophy?” (see note 7 above); for critical discussion, see Finlayson, “With Radicals Like These” (see note 7 above); and Prinz and Rossi, “Realism as Ideology Critique” (see previous note).

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

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

After a brief discussion of relevant distinctions within recent realist thought and an overview of the general contributions an ethnographic sensibility can make to political inquiry, I will turn to a reconstruction of the main lines of inquiry and arguments of Bernardo Zacka's *When the State Meets the Street*. As a new monograph that seeks to use ethnographic methods not just to reach substantive findings, but also to present a methodological challenge and alternative in political theory, it provides an example of how to connect ethnographic sensibility and realist political theory.<sup>11</sup> I then offer a discussion of the value of ethnographic sensibility for realist political theory in conjunction with a critical assessment of the monograph's contributions.

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

*Which Realism?*

Apart from a basic commitment to take seriously the realities of politics, which are typically viewed as characterized by the pervasiveness of power, historicity, and the potential for conflict, realism in political theory is rife with internal divisions. I will only dwell on such divisions in order to clarify which approaches to realism seek to establish a distinctive form of orientation (rather than try to expand existing taxonomies).<sup>12</sup> I view two pairs of opposition within realist theorizing—which are admittedly painted in broad brush here—as particularly helpful in this regard: First, the opposition between revisionist and radical forms of realism, and second the division between prescriptive and interpretive forms of realism.<sup>13</sup> The first opposition is between those who are looking for more realistic recommendations (e.g., on principles or institutions) for, and justifications of, liberal democratic states<sup>14</sup> and those who take the turn to realism to require a more profound change of focus toward the criticism of power relations in contemporary societies.<sup>15</sup> Revisionist realists often combine a commitment to finding a more robust basis for justifying liberal states with a retention of the basic building blocks of normative analytical political theory, such as the foundational role of principles in providing an orientation to political life. Radical realists, by contrast, focus their energy on efforts to understand, interpret, and criticize conceptual schemes and practices that are crucial for the power structures in contemporary societies. Radical realists look to understand how people make sense of politics to provide orientation by starting from within people’s already existing lifeworlds to identify tensions they then hope to use as catalysts for questioning currently held views and perspectives.<sup>16</sup>

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12. See note 3 above.

13. This is a distinction I borrow from Michael Freedman, in his “Interpretive and Prescriptive Realism” (see note 5 above).

14. Galston, “Realism in Political Theory” (see note 5 above); Sleat, *Liberal Realism* (see note 4 above); and Jeremy Waldron, *Political Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

15. Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); *A World without Why* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014); *Reality and Its Dreams* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016); and “Realism, Wishful Thinking, Utopia,” in *Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives*, ed. S. D. Chrostowska and James D. Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 233–47; see also Lorna Finlayson, “With Radicals Like These” (see note 7 above); Paul Raekstad, “Realism, Utopianism, and Radical Values,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 26 (2018): 145–68; Janosch Prinz, “Raymond Geuss’ Radicalization of Realism in Political Theory,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42 (2016): 777–96; and Enzo Rossi, “Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible,” *Constellations* (2019), at doi:10.1111/1467-8675.12446.

16. This division is not neat, and the work of individual thinkers often crosses the divide. The writings of a key inspiration to many realists, Bernard Williams, on moral philosophy (e.g.,

The second opposition pits prescriptive forms of realism, which seek to retain the structure and purpose of “normative theory,” against interpretive forms of realism. The distinction hinges on different understandings of the tasks of political theory and philosophy. While Michael Freedden sees “prescriptive realism” as essentially a vehicle to retain (rather than to rethink) political theory as a form of “ethico-political” theorizing that prescribes to political actors and the general public what they should do or think, “interpretive realism” is the study of politics, in particular political ideologies, in action.<sup>17</sup> This form of inquiry is political in a different sense, namely in terms of interpreting the political realm through rhetorical practice and the politicization of concepts in everyday speech. On John Horton’s view, interpretive realism is mainly driven by the aim of understanding, not just of “the fundamental concepts of political discourse and argument and at elucidating the structures of different ways of thinking about politics,”<sup>18</sup> but also of “the place of leadership, the role of contingency, the idea of political judgement and the meaning of political possibility.”<sup>19</sup> While Freedden’s interpretive realism leads to a division of labor between the interpretive study of political language and rhetoric and normative theorizing, Horton expands the interpretive purview and emphasizes that normative considerations are inescapable when working to understand politics.<sup>20</sup> Horton’s interpretive realism thus points toward the importance of reflexivity about how normative considerations enter and influence any interpretive study of politics.

Radical and interpretive understandings of realism break more substantially with ideal and non-ideal theory than their counterparts insofar as they prioritize the task of diagnosis and seek to conduct it as self-reflexive participants within the social order. The form of orientation these understandings might provide would combine commitments to the study of power, historicity, and context while embedding social criticism in interpretive inquiry. Theoretical arguments for more interpretation have already been presented in focal areas of realist thought, including the understanding

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*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), may be viewed as rather radical, whereas his more political works, such as *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005) may be viewed as closer to revisionist realism. Compare the discussion of Williams in Sleat’s *Liberal Realism* (see note 4 above) with Ben Cross, “Radicalizing Realist Legitimacy,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, online publication, June 12, 2019, at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719857129>.

17. Freedden, “Interpretive and Prescriptive Realism” (see note 5 above).

18. John Horton, “What Might It Mean for a Political Theory to Be More Realistic?,” *Philosophia* 45 (2017): 487–501, at 499.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 499–500.

of politics<sup>21</sup> and of reality.<sup>22</sup> However, these arguments have not yet led to a change in how realist political theory is practiced. I contend that ethnographic methods are conducive to the intensive attention to context and to power relations that is central to radical realism. The proximity between the commitments of radical and interpretative realism and ethnographic methods makes the latter look promising for contributing to a distinctive realist form of orientation. Before turning to *When the State Meets the Street* as a showpiece of this potential, I will first give a brief overview about ethnography in (recent) political inquiry.

### Ethnography in Political Inquiry

Ethnography is classically associated with the method of participant observation.<sup>23</sup> One of the distinctive aims of the approach, at least in anthropology, is to capture the “irreducibility of human experience”<sup>24</sup> through immersion in strange or familiar cultures and/or groups (“fieldwork”). While participant observation is still the paradigmatic approach for ethnographic research, other, less time-intensive ways of studying people and power have recently become more frequent. This includes forms of non-participant observation, multi-sited fieldwork, interpretation of second-hand fieldwork data, or in-depth interviews.<sup>25</sup> To distinguish such methods from qualitative methods more generally, they are often described as driven by an “ethnographic sensibility”<sup>26</sup> that conveys a commitment to proximity or immersion without necessarily involving long-term participant observation.<sup>27</sup>

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21. McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political*, 5–20 (see note 6 above).

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

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

24. Paul Willis and Mats Trondman, “Manifesto for Ethnography,” *Ethnography* 1 (2000): 5–16, at 5.

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

26. Edward Schatz, “Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics,” in *Political Ethnography*, ed. Schatz, 1–22 (see note 23 above); and Karen O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods* (London: Routledge, 2014).

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

This sensibility relies on a bottom-up approach, which seeks to take people seriously in their complexity<sup>28</sup> and seeks to give them as much authority as possible over the framework through which they are interpreted.<sup>29</sup> The concern with lived experience may also open new and different perspectives: “Rather than beginning by specifying variables of interest and excluding others, ethnographic methods provide a means to reach beyond assumptions about what matters and discover the previously unknown and unexpected.”<sup>30</sup> The bottom-up approach and elicitation of new perspectives are directly related to the potential critical purchase of ethnographic methods. It is important to note, though, that ethnographic methods do not necessarily facilitate criticism. Rather, they can be equally useful, and have historically been used, for exercising oppressive power. Despite the self-reflexive turn since the 1980s<sup>31</sup> and current scholarship on the dynamics of positionality and power involved in ethnographic research (at home and abroad),<sup>32</sup> ethnographies continue to directly serve oppressive powers, as exemplified by the “Human Terrain System” approach that formed part of the counterinsurgency campaign by the U.S. military in Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup>

If they have critical ambitions *and* are sufficiently self-reflexive about their positionality and the power dynamics involved in the fieldwork encounter, political ethnographers are well-placed to elucidate how certain terms of debate or certain practices or social identity constructions either reproduce “dominant social arrangements,” serve as examples of the transformation of these arrangements, or help highlight “contradictory practices that paradoxically both reproduce and potentially subvert [dominant sociopolitical] arrangements.”<sup>34</sup> An ethnographic sensibility could perform a “disruptive engagement with power,”<sup>35</sup> through the

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

29. Harri Englund and James Leach, “Ethnography and the Meta-Narrative of Modernity,” *Current Anthropology* 41 (2000): 225–48.

30. Evelyn Z. Brodtkin, “The Ethnographic Turn in Political Science: Reflections on the State of the Art,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* (2017): 131–34, at 132.

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

32. See, for example, Audra Simpson, “On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, ‘Voice’ and Colonial Citizenship,” *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 9 (2007): 67–80; and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

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

34. M. David Forrest, “Engaging and Disrupting Power: The Public Value of Political Ethnography,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* (2017): 109–13, at 111.

35. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

publication of marginalized views, which could lead to the questioning of the terms of debate and dominant sociopolitical arrangements. In many contexts, the publication of marginalized views comes with the criticism of elite justifications for their terms of rule, as well as the development of a dissident perspective (by the ethnographer, co-produced with the people living in the context studied), which may have a democratizing effect.<sup>36</sup>

Political theory focused on the study of power relations has successfully drawn on this critical potential of ethnography. Such works have tended to locate themselves within critical theory and typically have not used their approach and/or findings to challenge the methodologies of analytical normative political theory.<sup>37</sup> This, however, might be changing. Increased consideration of ethnography as a method of political theory, as practiced and advocated in *When the State Meets the Street* (and other works of Bernardo Zacka),<sup>38</sup> raises questions about the aptitude of prevalent methods for giving an account of politics in political theory, such as thought experiments, intuition, rational reconstruction, or findings from quantitative social science.

While this brief introduction to ethnography already provides a sense of how it might be valuable to (radical and interpretative strands in) realist political theory, a more detailed discussion is needed to further concretize this potential. To this end, I will turn to Zacka's *When the State Meets the Street*, which explores the moral agency of the bureaucrats responsible for the most common interactions between the state and its inhabitants. Showing the normative importance of such moral agency for the exercise of bureaucratic discretion, the monograph offers an interpretation of the dispositions of street-level bureaucrats such as teachers, police officers, and social workers. While this topic may seem to appeal primarily to scholars of public administration, *When the State Meets the Street* is an innovative contribution to current debates about how to do political theory. In contrast to most contributions to the methodology of political theory, it shows by way of example how to practice an approach to political theory that is closer to the experience of the relevant agents—in this case through the combination of ethnographic fieldwork with the study of secondary empirical and theoretical literatures. In contrast to other incisive examples

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36. *Ibid.*, 111–12.

37. See, for example, Clarissa Hayward, *De-Facing Power* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

38. Lisa Herzog and Bernardo Zacka, "Fieldwork in Political Theory: Five Arguments for an Ethnographic Sensibility," *British Journal of Political Science* 49 (2010): 764–83. In this essay, Zacka more explicitly engages with the recent debates about realism.

of political ethnography, it explicitly locates itself in political theory and reflects on the challenge that the use of ethnography presents to the dominant methodologies in the sub-discipline. I will first offer a reconstruction of its main lines of inquiry and arguments before considering criticisms of the book and its contribution to realist political theory.

### *When the State Meets the Street*

#### *Street-Level Bureaucratic Discretion*

Starting from the observation that political theorists have had comparatively little to say about the most common, bureaucratic interactions people have with the state, *When the State Meets the Street* unfolds as an attempt to address this lacuna. The introduction sets up the conceptual, substantive, normative, and methodological questions and problems, focusing on the discretion that is so central to street-level bureaucracy in practice, but the normative standing of which is doubtful in prevalent accounts of bureaucracy. In these accounts, street-level bureaucrats typically appear as executors of political decisions with at most technical discretion.<sup>39</sup> Zacka's analysis of political theory treatments of bureaucracy finds them wanting when applied to street-level bureaucrats who are characterized by occupying the lowest hierarchical ranks, having direct contact with clients, and needing to exercise discretion in view of underdetermined public policy.<sup>40</sup> Not only are the conclusions of these accounts usually directed at high-level bureaucrats, their concern with bureaucrats acting in bad faith (as manifest in corruption, misuse of authority, etc.) also cannot clarify what we should think about bureaucrats wielding discretion *in good faith* under the circumstances of increasingly pressured public (or quasi-public) services.<sup>41</sup>

Once the importance of discretion for evaluating street-level bureaucrats as agents of the state has been established, Zacka turns to the normatively interesting

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39. Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 37–40 (see note 11 above).

40. *Ibid.*, 23–25.

41. *Ibid.*, 33–48. Bureaucratic discretion is of heightened interest in current U.S. politics in view of recent resistance efforts to Donald Trump's policies by employees of government agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); see, for example, the collection of documents obtained via Freedom of Information Act requests at the EPA, at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/15/us/politics/epa-foia-requests.html>. While many of the resistance efforts covered in the press fall outside the remit of Zacka's study, because they come from managers or are about fundamental disagreements at the policy level, Zacka's framework might still prove useful for studying how moral dispositions relate to resistance efforts and how the latter affect the exercise of discretion further down the ranks.

aspects of such discretion, in particular its relationship to the goals of street-level bureaucracy. These goals—to treat clients fairly, efficiently, respectfully, and responsibly—may easily or even typically conflict.<sup>42</sup> Based on his own participant observation—he served for eight months as a receptionist at a publicly funded non-state nonprofit organization (called NCDI) that functioned as the official antipoverty agency for a city in the Northeastern United States<sup>43</sup>—and on similar ethnographic studies as well as his readings of political and social theories, Zacka develops an interpretive perspective on discretionary practices.<sup>44</sup> This perspective is centered on the concept of the moral dispositions of street-level bureaucrats that, Zacka suggests, are key for understanding how they manage to navigate the demands of competing goals under conditions of constrained resources. The notion of a “moral disposition,” valuable in providing more depth to the interpretation of bureaucratic systems beyond the singular moment of decision, is informed both by work in moral and political philosophy and by Zacka’s own ethnographic fieldwork. While the former, particularly if one draws on a post-Wittgensteinian outlook,<sup>45</sup> presents arguments for why dispositions are as important as decisions (or actions) for understanding the normative relationships between people,<sup>46</sup> the latter prompts a search for a framework that can make sense of the intricacies of street-level discretion based on contextual judgment rather than universal principles.

Zacka identifies three layers that make up the moral dispositions of street-level bureaucrats: a hermeneutic grid that clarifies their context, an affective attunement responsible for the (re)construction of their clients as persons, and a normative sensibility that guides their prioritization of goals.<sup>47</sup> Moral dispositions are the higher-level result from the ongoing interaction between the role conceptions street-level bureaucrats may profess and their more ad hoc tendencies (“modes of appraisal”) to relate to clients and to process information.<sup>48</sup> In short, they considerably influence how street-level bureaucrats will interact with clients along dimensions

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42. Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 48–65 (see note 11 above).

43. Longer vignettes from this participant observation appear in *When the State Meets the Street*, at 111–12, 146–48, 152–53, 184–92, and 212–16 (see note 11 above). While Zacka gives sustained attention to his participant observation, the process of the development of his interpretive lenses from these observations (or how much they mattered) receives surprisingly little attention.

44. Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, *ibid.*, 29–31.

45. See, for example, Cora Diamond, “Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value,” in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 79–109.

46. Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 14, 66–67, 87, 110 (see note 11 above).

47. *Ibid.*, 85–86.

48. *Ibid.*, 88–95; see also Figure 3 on p. 95.

of extent and mode of involvement.<sup>49</sup> Zacka argues that one of the most pressing challenges for street-level bureaucrats lies in avoiding all-too-common reductive moral dispositions, which are often not due to bad faith but are caused by the conflict within and between the normative criteria of public service (efficiency, responsiveness, fairness, and respect) and constrained means. He develops three ideal types—indifference, caregiving, and enforcement—which characterize extreme positions on axes of extent of engagement (from withdrawn and overinvolved) and mode of engagement (from regulating to serving people).<sup>50</sup>

Indifferent street-level bureaucrats view themselves as processing people; they score highly in terms of efficiency and impartiality-based fairness because of their withdrawn relation to clients and their reliance on the letter of directives and targets. These strengths, however, are outweighed by the lack of responsiveness their approach allows (which may also compromise respect for individuals) and by their inability to cultivate a sense of responsibility for their discretion. Due to the unquestioning reliance on directives and targets, indifferent bureaucrats have difficulty grasping the importance of discretion.<sup>51</sup>

Caregivers, by contrast, seek to establish a personal, warm relationship with their clients. While caregivers excel at responsiveness, they often fall short of achieving high levels of efficiency and fairness and of supporting self-respect. In terms of the latter, their tendency to gravitate toward those most visibly in need may provide false incentives to their clients to present themselves as minimally capable, which in turn may undermine their self-respect and may entrench the bureaucrat's paternalistic attitudes.<sup>52</sup>

Enforcers view themselves not as personal caregivers but as agents of the state and focus on fairness and respect in the sense of concentrating on distinguishing deserving clients from free-riders. They thereby seek to bolster respect and trust for public services. Enforcers tend to view clients through a prism of suspicion, which opens the ground for the unchecked influence of discriminatory attitudes and thus undermines the enforcers' claims to fairness and respect. Their motivation to identify all those who abuse the system makes them less willing to compromise, which reduces their ability to work efficiently.<sup>53</sup>

The reductive ideal types of dispositions all prioritize one element of the normative goals of public service at the expense of others and thus leave practitioners

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49. *Ibid.*, 88; see below for a description of the dimensions of extent and mode of involvement.

50. *Ibid.*, 95–110.

51. *Ibid.*, 101–04.

52. *Ibid.*, 104–06.

53. *Ibid.*, 106–09.

unable to approach cases openly.<sup>54</sup> Zacka argues that in response to the threat of reductive dispositions, public service agencies should cultivate a combination of indifference, caregiving, and enforcement in order to meet the widest range of the normative goals of street-level bureaucracy. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of *When the State Meets the Street* offer responses to the pitfalls of reductive dispositions on the individual, community of practice, and managerial levels respectively.<sup>55</sup>

At the individual level, Zacka shows—drawing on examples from secondary fieldwork—that discretion is normatively problematic for street-level bureaucrats if they develop reductive understandings of their role (as described above). They either fall short of their duties to their clients in several ways, and/or become emotionally overinvolved and “burn out.” In response, Zacka suggests *gymnastics of the self*, a notion that draws on the practices of the self from the late writings of Michel Foucault. Such gymnastics center on self-examination of, or self-reflection on, bureaucrats’ adopted role conceptions, the “calibration” of their level of involvement, and the “modulation” of the way they engage clients.<sup>56</sup> They seek to develop greater self-awareness about their own inclinations and their interaction with an adopted role conception that, in turn, enables increased scrutiny of their level of emotional involvement with clients (“calibration”). Such scrutiny may bring up the need for reestablishing boundaries between personal and professional spheres—as one of Zacka’s co-workers relayed—the success of which in turn may depend on the third dimension of the gymnastics, which is changing the mode of involvement as well (“modulation”).<sup>57</sup> If taken together, these gymnastics should enable street-level bureaucrats to revisit the relation between their role conception, the goals of public service, and their own self.

At the level of communities of practice, Zacka explores the value of informal taxonomies shared between colleagues. These taxonomies may allow them to judge cases on the basis of their collective experience, thus superseding or further concretizing directives and rules.<sup>58</sup> Zacka calls this form of judgment “institutional phronesis” and argues that its contextual embeddedness makes it well suited to realize many of the normative goals of public service at the same time. He discusses the example of how his co-workers at NCDI categorize clients and situations when “the guidance provided by the rules that street-level bureaucrats inherit effectively

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54. *Ibid.*, 12–13, 20–22.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, 135–50; also consider the figures on pp. 88 and 145.

57. *Ibid.*, 146–48.

58. *Ibid.*, 157–67.

runs out”<sup>59</sup> by collectively developing an informal taxonomy based on assessing whether clients had an emergent “situation,” a structural “issue,” or an “attitude,” and adapting their responses accordingly.<sup>60</sup> While such informal taxonomies may appear non-transparent from the outside (and to clients), Zacka argues that this disadvantage is sometimes outweighed by their ability to permit casuistic reasoning, which is often required to deal with complex cases responsively and yet efficiently.<sup>61</sup>

At the managerial level, Zacka argues that discretion can be granted to street-level bureaucrats with desirable results by recruiting people with varied role conceptions and encouraging practices of constructive peer evaluation and self-care. Another important task at the managerial level consists of avoiding pushing workers into impossible situations in which they are structurally forced to experience conflict between their instructions and the self-understanding they have learned as moral agents on the frontlines of public service.<sup>62</sup> In response to impossible situations, managers should enable “voice” as an option for their employees (which is more likely to contribute to realizing normative goals of public service than the alternatives of “exit” or “loyalty”). For voice to be a viable response to impossible situations, managers need to work toward establishing communicative channels that reach all the way from the street level to the policymaking level, so that the implementation process can be treated “as a valuable source of feedback.”<sup>63</sup> Insofar as Zacka offers advice to managers, his book is open to being used as a resource within existing governance frameworks and power relations—for example, to improve performance indicators. Its findings are, however, at least equally addressed to street-level bureaucrats as to managers and policy-makers, and indeed one of the book’s virtues is the attention it devotes to a sympathetic yet critical rendering of the experiences of lower-rank workers who do not have access to the reins of power within their own organizations.

### *Meta-Theoretical and Methodological Contributions*

In his conclusion, Zacka provides a methodological and meta-theoretical framing of the arguments and conceptual elucidations offered in the substantive chapters. Without claiming to fully develop a distinctive approach to political theory, Zacka invites the reader to view his book as a primer in the political theory of implementation. Implementation for Zacka should not be understood as the application of

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59. *Ibid.*, 159.

60. *Ibid.*, 158–67.

61. *Ibid.*, 197–209.

62. *Ibid.*, 230–40.

63. *Ibid.*, 234.

principles but rather as the development of contextual judgment from the ground up. To make sense of complexity on the ground, Zacka suggests, political theorists should develop an ethnographic sensibility.<sup>64</sup> This sensibility would allow them to detect that street-level bureaucrats are engaged in a kind of “institutional phronesis”<sup>65</sup> rather than the application of standard operating procedures, let alone principles. The recourse to such phronesis, Zacka suggests, may be key to the resilience of the state by replacing its distinctive logics of simplification<sup>66</sup> with a form of judgment closer to the everyday experience of its inhabitants.<sup>67</sup> Further benefits of this form of judgment—if derived from ethnographically studying experiments in living, which show what our values, once practiced, lead to—include the ability to address the disagreements arising from the implementation of laws that are typically underdetermined.<sup>68</sup>

It is important to note that *When the State Meets the Street* does not use an ethnographic sensibility to produce a piece of evidence to validate normative stipulations, but rather lets that sensibility guide the normative inquiry, by “open[ing] ourselves up to the possibility that we may have something to learn *from*, not simply *about*, how [ordinary people] answer [normative] questions” such as “what we have reason to value, what we owe to each other, and what kind of persons we should aspire to be.”<sup>69</sup> This openness is one more reason why the book may be recommended not just to students of politics—political and social theorists in particular, as well as moral philosophers—but also to practitioners of street-level bureaucracy. The framework Zacka offers struck me—and I am somewhat of an informed outsider as the child of two street-level social workers—as close enough to their experience to resonate and yet distanced enough to offer them new tools for reflection.

### Realism, Politics, and Ethnographic Sensibility

Political theorists may at this point ask whether *When the State Meets the Street* is at all about politics, even broadly construed. After all, it focuses on the moral agency

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64. Zacka has developed elsewhere, in more detail, a breakdown of the different aspects of the value of ethnographic sensibility for a more orthodox understanding of “normative political theory”; see Lisa Herzog and Bernardo Zacka, “Fieldwork in Political Theory,” 766 (see note 38 above).

65. Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 248–50 (see note 11 above).

66. James R. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Some Schemes for Improving the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

67. Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 248–53 (see note 11 above).

68. *Ibid.*, 257.

69. *Ibid.*, 258.

of street-level bureaucrats. I will address this concern through a discussion that both clarifies its potential contributions to the current debate about realism in political theory and reveals certain weaknesses of the book. Its potential contributions include helping realists avoid overly narrow understandings of morality and the autonomy of politics. The weakness, to which I will draw attention, is the limited place of politics in *When the State Meets the Street*.

### *Moral Agency and the Autonomy of Politics*

In view of the substance of, and self-reflection on, its methodological contributions alone, *When the State Meets the Street* should be read as a contribution, and a challenge, to recent debates about the nature of political theory, in particular realism and non-ideal theory (even if the explicit engagement with realism and non-ideal theory is limited to a passing remark).<sup>70</sup> For this claim to fully make sense, it is important to address the objection that Zacka is primarily concerned with the *moral* agency of street-level bureaucrats.<sup>71</sup>

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

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70. *Ibid.*, 28.

71. After all, a focus on administration would seem to be a core target of realist criticism against de-politicized political theory. I would like to suggest that such criticism is mostly directed against high-level public administration that functions according to the theories of bureaucracy, ones that Zacka shows do not apply to the street level. Once these are cast aside, realists should be open to considering the political-moral dimensions of street-level bureaucratic administration.

For realists in political theory, Zacka's interpretations of the moral agency of bureaucrats can serve as a much-needed reminder that they should avoid two related mistakes: They should not rule out moral philosophy as potentially helpful for making sense of real politics and they should not equate moral concerns with universalist moral theories. I will briefly address both in turn. The approaches to moral philosophy that might be most congenial to Zacka's emphasis on moral dispositions and his view of them as embedded in wider social and political structures would be contextualist and non-prescriptive, as for example found in Bernard Williams's explorations of the phenomena of ethical life<sup>72</sup> and in the post-Wittgensteinian writings of Cora Diamond.<sup>73</sup> Realists may consider this as an argument for taking a renewed interest in moral philosophy for making sense of politics in the broadest sense.

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

Realists may then look to the book for inspiration in finding an alternative to the concept of the autonomy of politics. This alternative would involve a concentration on the mediatedness of politics. The concept of mediatedness focuses on how a value, a justification attempt, the prioritization of certain goals over others, or a way to appraise other groups or individuals has become meaningful as political action in the context at hand. More precisely, it opens consideration for politics as a construction made of multiple perspectives, which is often in flux, by focusing on how something is made (un)available for politics—in other words, (de)politicized—and what

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72. See, for example, Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and his *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002). At times Zacka's approach could be viewed as a more empirically informed continuation of Williams's explorations.

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

mode of politics is at issue. To give an example of the different modes of politics, we might consider the difference between the considerations that feed into devising policy and the considerations that drive public debate. And yet both are typically recognized as core parts of politics. The ethnographic emphasis on the importance of the creation and organization of meaning generates questions about politics as the institutionalization (and/or policing) of meanings, and as the process of reinforcing, subverting, or overturning meanings. It also generates questions about how these processes are shaped by forces deemed to be outside politics and vice versa.<sup>74</sup> The questions that the ethnographic emphasis on meaning production helps realists ask are then self-reflexive ones about the constitution and mediation of reality and of politics.<sup>75</sup> This emphasis fosters appreciation of how at any one time politics may feature clashes between different substantive value judgments and between different understanding of politics and reality. Zacka raises these concerns for the moral dispositions of street-level bureaucrats and their differing conceptions of public service. If realists integrated the analysis of different modes of politics with the interpretation of meaning production, the orientation they could provide could be distinctively sensitive to the mediatedness of politics. Realists would then be well-placed to investigate how politics is constructed and demarcated in heavily polarized polities. In the present case of the United Kingdom, differing and clashing conceptions of politics co-exist, which means that further interpretation is required when reference to “politics” is made. Realists with an ethnographic sensibility would be able build their normative judgments and recommendations on a refined account of these conceptions of politics that would include insights into how they are mediated—for example, through an economic rationality of individual interest maximization, through an authoritarian personality, or through a cosmopolitan morality.

#### *A Realist Basis for Critique (Which Addresses the Realist Predicament)*

The way Zacka makes use of an ethnographic sensibility is not only relevant for the understanding of politics and the place of moral agency in realist thought but is also relevant to another central concern for developing a distinctively realist form of orientation, namely the basis of realist criticism of political practices and power relations. Zacka offers two main lines of criticism, with the first directed at political theorists for their methodological and substantive shortcomings in making sense of

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74. Kari Palonen, in “Four Times of Politics: Policy, Polity, Politicking, and Politicization,” *Alternatives* 28 (2003): 17–86, distinguishes four times or dimensions of politics: policy is about regulation; polity is about the imagination of what is possible (and what is not); politicking is about performance; and politicization opens something to any of the first three dimensions.

75. See Little, Finlayson, and Tormey, “Reconstituting Realism,” 276–313 (see note 22 above).

street-level bureaucracy. As my interest here is in criticism as an element of providing substantive orientation, we will leave this meta-theoretical line of criticism aside. The other line of criticism concerns approaches to public management and austerity regimes. This line of criticism starts from the suffering of bureaucratic agents and is of interest for exploring how Zacka may provide inspiration for a realist basis of criticism. Their suffering appears in the form of inter- and intra-personal pressures, which he contrasts with the co-realization of the normative goals of public service (i.e., responsive, fair, respectful, and efficient treatment of clients). On the surface, Zacka's approach looks like a form of interpretation-based internal criticism. The co-realization of the normative goals of public service provides the standard to be restored in the practices of street-level bureaucrats. However, instead of leaving these goals untouched, Zacka transforms the understanding of this set of goals by considering the tensions between them and (tentatively) their relationship to wider social and political dynamics. As far as these goals are values, they become problematized: why is it that they cannot be co-realized? What might one do in view of this challenge: demand different working conditions or settle for reductive dispositions?

This problematization points to the transformation of the original set of goals from exclusively moral values to political values that are embedded in complex relations of power. More concretely, this problematization may focus on discussion of the conflict between the goals of street-level bureaucrats and the goals of senior public managers, and how the priority given to goals of the latter leads to the suffering of the former. Alternatively, it may focus on how street-level bureaucrats operate to navigate these tensions without, however, being able to resolve them. Comparing self-interpretations of values and practices to the power relations that directly impinge on them—in this case the current ideology of public management—likely brings to the fore misalignments, tensions, gaps, or contradictions between them.<sup>76</sup> The understanding of criticism Zacka employs might then be better understood as immanent and non-teleological rather than as internal. This means that while criticism starts via engagement with the specificities of the context rather than via detachment, it seeks to identify potentials for transformation without working toward a previously set end goal. This understanding of criticism provides a starting point for developing a realist basis of critical purchase, because it begins from actual practices and values and works up a perspective for their transformation from within this

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76. Zacka performs this comparative task imaginatively for the reader (rather than for or with the people he observed), thus lifting it from its context to make it an example of wider tendencies in public service. See Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street* (see note 11 above).

material. It connects well to the recent interest in the ethics of realism, and to efforts to explore what it means for values to be political (as against moral values applied to politics) and to specify their conceptualization in particular contexts.<sup>77</sup>

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

### The Place of Politics in *When the State Meets the Street*

Despite these various contributions to the development of realism (and beyond), *When the State Meets the Street* does not sufficiently connect its account of street-level bureaucracy as a site of politics to wider political dynamics in the society in question. There is a gap between the politics of the moral agency of street-level bureaucrats and accounts that make sense of these wider political dynamics. Such accounts are about how people see the current big political picture and would contain subjective evaluations about which political ideologies and policy programs are currently prevalent and ascending. Street-level bureaucrats (and everyone else) may use such accounts as heuristics that impinge on their self-understanding, which in turn may affect their exercise of discretion. They may for example feel emboldened to double down on their reductionist understanding of their role because it aligns

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77. See, for example, Edward Hall, "How To Do Realistic Political Theory (and Why You Might Want To)," *European Journal of Political Theory* 16 (2017): 283–303; and Matt Sleat and Edward Hall, "Ethics, Morality and the Case for Realist Political Theory," *Critical Review in International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (2017): 278–95. Shalini Satkunanandan's *Extraordinary Responsibility: Politics Beyond the Moral Calculus* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2016) might perform a similar role in the way it weighs the claims of moralistic reasoning against the demands of political responsibility.

with positions taken by public figures. The wider political context Zacka does refer to seems extraneous to the ethnography and mostly limited to austerity regimes in public service provision. And while street-level bureaucrats are mostly dealing with the implementation of policy, their political relevance may well go beyond the level of implementation. They may affect their clients' understanding of the social order, and in turn their practices may feed into their clients' understanding of the wider macropolitical moment. Zacka seems to understand these ramifications, but they do not lead him to consider street-level bureaucrats simultaneously as moral and as political agents.<sup>78</sup> When he writes that he “attempted to assess how well their actions and dispositions measure up against the normative values that lie at the heart of our democratic political culture,”<sup>79</sup> he depoliticizes these values as static rather than considering them as constantly being modified, contested, or reproduced (e.g., at the sites of street-level bureaucracy).

More concretely, more attention might have been paid to how the ways street-level bureaucrats exercise discretion relate to their own political leanings and, more importantly, to their ways of evaluating their wider political and social order. Considering their interpretations of the macropolitical backdrop would add to the comprehensiveness of our understanding of street-level bureaucrats and could help view the particular dispositions of street-level bureaucrats not as drawn from general human possibilities, but as arising and playing out against that backdrop, which could be transformed.<sup>80</sup> To take an example from the book: When a police officer concentrates on arrest metrics and hence on “law enforcement” rather than on “maintaining order,” he positions himself not just in terms of role conception but also in relation to larger political struggles.<sup>81</sup> It would further be important to consider whether this stance-taking is explicit and hence potentially a form of politicization.<sup>82</sup> As much as interpretations of the wider political developments may differ between individuals, in the case of street-level bureaucracy their professional interaction may require establishing a somewhat shared account of this macropolitical backdrop to their practices. Further, their interactions may involve attempts to review this account, which may in turn feed back into their moral

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78. Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 252 (see note 17 above).

79. *Ibid.*, 240.

80. Bringing the macropolitical dimension in may also strengthen the claim of a political theory of implementation to be capable of evaluating the macropolitical backdrop in question.

81. Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 203–04 (see note 11 above).

82. See Thomas Fossen, “Politicizing Brandom’s Pragmatism: Normativity and the Agonal Character of Social Practice,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 22 (2014): 371–95; and Fossen, “Language and Legitimacy: Is Pragmatist Political Theory Fallacious?” *European Journal of Political Theory* 18 (2019): 293–305.

dispositions. Even if the interactions Zacka witnessed did not in fact feature such discussion, it would have been useful if *When the State Meets the Street* had at least critically discussed this aspect of the relationship between moral agency and politics in the broader sense. This holds true as well with regard to the presentation of the gymnastics of the self. These gymnastics are presented as a coping mechanism for street-level bureaucrats. They may help individual street-level bureaucrats, but as a collective coping strategy they shift responsibility onto individual workers for navigating impossible demands whilst neglecting the causes of these demands. In this sense, the gymnastics show some similarity with the neoliberal ideas of individual responsabilization and resilience.<sup>83</sup> Therefore it would have been helpful if the gymnastics had been further contextualized in relation to, and distinguished from, such neoliberal ideas of performance management.

## Conclusion

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

The book showcases how an ethnographic sensibility could help develop a distinctively realist approach to political theory and offers inspiration for addressing what I have called the realist predicament. It investigates questions of political theory about what we should value and the conditions we should create for our collective exercise of values through an interdisciplinary perspective that starts from how we practice our values. Its arguments are the result of a reflection on observed practices and on interpretations and analyses of similar practices in philosophical and social scientific literatures. The perceptiveness and care with which it builds taxonomies for the intra- and interpersonal challenges involved in navigating the normative demands of street-level bureaucracy are an outstanding example of this approach. This perceptiveness and care allow Zacka to address several audiences differently, thus providing orientation for political theorists, for street-level practitioners and their managers, and for citizens dealing with public services. Each of

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83. See Dorothy Bottrell, "Responsibilised Resilience? Reworking Neoliberal Social Policy Texts," *M/C Journal* 16 (2013), at <http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/708>; and Margaret H. Vickers and Alexander Kouzmin, "'Resilience' in Organizational Actors and Rearticulating 'Voice': Towards a Humanistic Critique of New Public Management," *Public Management Review* 3 (2001): 95–119.

these audiences may come away with changed views on what their values are and should be and on how they instantiate them. While the different forms of orientation the book provides to these audiences are best read together, so that political theorists can grasp how this orientation is embedded in practice, they may be read separately, as a criticism of methods in political theory and theories of bureaucracy, as a critical interpretation of moral agency in street-level bureaucracy, and as social criticism of public service regimes.

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

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

Finally, the unlocking of a more complex relationship between theory and its social and political context via an ethnographic sensibility is key for addressing the realist predicament. Exploring the misalignments, tensions, and gaps between people's

self-interpretations and interpretations of the wider power relations and structures that impinge on them generates the starting spark for potentially transformative criticism from within. An ethnographic sensibility thus enables the realist political theorist to understand how normative landscapes are constituted in a particular context, while at the same time providing a starting point for their criticism.

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