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Situating realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and comparative political theory within the methodological turn in political theory

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Abstract

Contextualist and empirical analyses have recently become important tools in political theory due to a growing 'methodological turn' in the discipline. In this article I argue that realism, the ethnographic sensibility in political theory, and comparative political theory should be considered as part of this methodological turn. I show that they share its diagnosis of a gap between political theory and politics and its two principal motivations in closing it. However, I argue that the distinct contribution of realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and comparative political theory is that they highlight a challenge for the methodological turn in that attention to context may widen the distance between political theory and politics. I conclude by suggesting that this is not an insurmountable obstacle and that it in fact bolsters the evaluative function of methodological political theory, keeping it distinct from political science.

Keywords

comparative political theory, contextualism, ethnographic sensibility, housework, methodological turn, microwork, realism, work

Attention to context and the use of empirical detail have recently become important methodological tools in political theory. Those embracing these contextualist and empirical methods are concerned with whether their claims draw on accurate understandings of the contexts in which institutions and political agents operate (Baderin, 2014; de Shalit, 2020; Dowding, 2020; Floyd, 2017, 2022; Floyd and Stears, 2011; Perez, 2022, 2023). Theorists involved in this 'methodological moment' (Floyd, 2022) or 'methodological turn' (Křepelová, 2019) can be grouped together due to their perception of a gap that exists between political theory and the realities of politics. This concern is found across a

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number of positions: dissatisfaction with the abstraction of 'ideal theory' (Geuss, 2008; Mills, 2017; Williams, 2005), attempts to make normative theorising relevant to practical political policy (de Shalit, 2020; Floyd, 2022; Miller, 2013; Wolff, 2020; Wolff and de Shalit, 2007), adoption of methods from political science (Dowding, 2020; Perez, 2022, 2023), and 'grounded' normative theorising that pays attention to injustices that shape who is involved in theory making (Ackerly et al., 2024; Zacka et al., 2021: 401–406). What unites these disparate approaches is an attempt to produce political theory sensitive to real-world politics and that narrows the gap between the two. A political theory characterised by such a narrowed gap would meet two criteria: it would make theoretical judgements absent abstraction incompatible with political facts, and in doing so develop claims of practical use to those engaged in political action.

My contribution in this article is to situate one set of approaches within this turn. I argue that realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and comparative political theory (CPT) should be considered as part of the methodological turn as they follow the two criteria above.[1] Each addresses the distance between political theory and the contexts in which politics take place, but, more significantly, I also claim that they make a distinct contribution to the debates that characterise this methodological turn. They point out that attention to the contextual details of political cases may widen the distance the methodologically oriented theorist otherwise seeks to overcome. The problem is as follows: the focus on the empirical facts of cases may reveal a disjunction between them and the arguments developed by the theorist. This might undermine attempts to render theory more responsive to politics because the latter may be subject to fundamentally different categories, concepts, and assumptions. Attempts to align theory with real politics through attention to methodology must grapple with this potential incommensurability if they are to align theory with facts and provide judgements that are usefully action guiding. I claim that this issue is a significant concern held by realists, theorists of the ethnographic sensibility, and comparative political theorists that characterises their place within the methodological turn. I outline this shared apprehension not to reject the methodological turn but to sketch out one challenge it faces. Importantly, I conclude that this concern is far from fatal. Its upshot bolsters objections to the criticism that the turn to empirical methods collapses political theory and political science, which if not adequately responded to renders the former irrelevant.

For ease, across the following I group those who have turned to empirical and positivist methods in political theory under the label of the 'methodological turn', whereas I will refer collectively to realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT as 'contextualist'. Not all three schools of thought under discussion here are necessarily empirical in method, but they all share an orientation towards contextual political detail that also motivates the methodological turn. This division will help to distinguish between the general turn to methodological issues in political theory and the particular contextualism under examination here, but also folds in the fact that many of the authors I group under the labels realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT do not necessarily participate directly in debates concerning the nature and scope of the methodological turn. I also grant that there are significant differences within the general turn and the perspectives I group together. On the former, there are a range of approaches that are encompassed by the methodological turn, but they are all motivated by the closure of the gap between theory and politics. On the latter, realists deploy contextual evidence in their critique of ideal theory, thinkers within the ethnographic sensibility use empirical methods to ground normative claims, while comparativists seek to broaden the canon of political

thought. I group them together for two reasons. First, they all share the methodological turn's concern of narrowing the gap between theory and politics. Second, they all possess a tendency to complicate the goal of narrowing this gap by focusing on the conceptual distance that may separate the theorist from context. Therefore, the contextualism that I find in realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT has two, conflicting desiderata that must be held in tension: political theorists should use context to inform their understandings of politics, but they must also refuse to stipulate that theory exhausts variations in local constructions of political problems.

My argument, therefore, is that realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT should be considered as a contextualist 'wing' of the recent methodological turn, and that their distinct variation on the wider attempt to close the gap between theory and politics is a more measured form of the degree of success that may be obtained in this task. I begin by introducing what I am calling the methodological turn in political theory and define its pursuit of the closure of the gap between theory and politics. As I see it this consists of two goals, one epistemological and the other normative. These are, respectively, to develop theoretical claims that do not diverge from empirical detail, and to do so in a way that is practically relevant for political agents. The following two sections then demonstrate how the contextualism found across realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT holds to these aims. I then articulate how this contextualism questions the extent to which methodological tinkering can close the gap between theory and politics. I conclude that this is not a fatal flaw but a useful extension of some, nascent suspicion within the methodological turn that the gap between theory and politics is intractable. The significance of realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT is that together they turn this suspicion into a real methodological constraint that nevertheless maintains the integrity and value of political theory when attentive to the limits of empirical detail.

Across my argument, I will draw on examples from recent political theory of work to demonstrate the value of the contextualism found within realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT. According to some, political theorists have neglected work despite it being the place where individuals most commonly experience the exercise of power (Anderson, 2017: 40; Turner and Van Milders, 2021; Weeks, 2011: 2). Work illustrates the value of contextualism because the latter provides tools for understanding how this experience of power is determined by the political dynamics of work, themselves shaped by local institutional demands, the content of work activities, and the interpersonal relations that workers engage in Dejours et al. (2018). It is fruitful, therefore, for those concerned with closing the gap between theory and politics to consider work as a space where this gap might be considerably wide. Equally, consideration of how employment practices constitute distinct contextual political spaces may emphasise how this detail might escape the existing assumptions of the theorist. Transformations of what counts as a political problem at work can be engendered by 'the activities of 'social movements' (Horgan, 2021: 1113) and the activities of firms as macro-level agents (Herzog, 2024). What is defined as work, and therefore its political status, depends upon the beliefs and behaviours of workers and employers who can exercise a kind of theoretical agency that diverges from abstract theoretical contemplation. I draw on two examples in the following, the growth of 'microwork' and disputes over the political nature of housework, and I suggest that these cases demonstrate both the value of the methodological turn and the pressure that that attention to detail can place on the attempt to close the gap between theory and politics.

Motivations of the methodological turn

To begin with, I will define the goals that guide the methodological turn and which realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT are also motivated by. It is instructive to make a preliminary distinction between the approaches discussed here and context in the multiculturalist tradition. Multiculturalism is driven, primarily, by a claim about the value of culture. Culture does not just shape the beliefs of individuals; it is essential to human flourishing and carries significant normative weight (Turner, 2021). This entails something of a methodological commitment in the appeal to facts to underpin judgements about cases (Lægaard, 2019: 954), which is 'a kind of stylistic choice' that privileges political circumstance over thought experiments or abstraction from real cases (Levy, 2007: 177). It is this 'stylistic choice' that has developed into a fully fledged set of approaches guided by empirical data drawn from context, but that are not principally motivated by a normative claim about the value of culture.

These approaches are unified by the claim that, as it is generally practised within the Anglo-American and analytic traditions, political theory hews too closely to moral philosophy at a remove from the empirical realities of politics and the findings of political scientists. Nahshon Perez (2023: 619) describes this turn as follows:

> Recent work in political theory has demonstrated a unified interest – even while working under different labels such as 'contextual', 'political' or 'positive' – in studying existing political institutions and behaviour as a way of distancing the discipline from ideal theory and moral philosophy.

In the interest of brevity, and despite the variation encompassed by the labels contextual, political, and positive political theory, I follow Perez and others like Jonathan Floyd (2022) in collapsing this variation under a single label. I adopt Floyd's language of the methodological turn rather than empirical political theory, as realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT are characterised by their 'unified interest' in closing the gap between theory and politics but are not necessarily explicitly empirical in their methods. Instead, they are concerned with the broader question of the appropriate methodological orientation of political theory, which supports but does not necessarily entail direct engagement in empirical research in all cases. The methodological turn encompasses the empirically driven work of those like Keith Dowding (2020), Perez (2022, 2023, 2024), and Floyd (2017) and also those who are more concerned with attention to context and practical relevance over classically empiricist concerns regarding methodological operationalisation. These more contextually and practically oriented figures include Adrian Blau (2015), Joseph Carens (2004), Avnir de Shalit (2020), David Miller (2013), Jeremy Waldron (2016), and Jonathan Wolff (2020) and those who have collectively developed the concept of grounded normative theory (Ackerly et al., 2024). I collapse empirically, contextually, and practically minded wings of the methodological turn under a single label from this point on, in order to more clearly indicate where I am referring to the specific contextualism of realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT.

The primary characteristic of the wider methodological turn, then, is not a necessary turn to empiricism, although for many it entails it. Instead, it is the identification and amelioration of a 'detachment', 'gap', or 'moving apart' between theorists and political scientists or real politics (Baderin, 2014; de Shalit, 2020: 4–5; Dowding, 2020: 432). For those associated with the methodological turn, pursuit of the closure of this gap is characterised by two goals. The first is epistemological: that political phenomena, broadly understood, should be theorised in light of how they actually exist as opposed to how they should ideally be in

abstraction from context, as is typically practised in ideal theory.[2] For methodologically minded theorists, to make adequate claims about political concepts requires one to ensure that they are not at odds with political reality. This approach draws political theory closer to political science by considering causal evidence regarding political behaviour, political beliefs, and the nature of political institutions (Dowding, 2020; Floyd, 2017; Perez, 2023; Shapiro, 2002). It also demands a systematic approach to politics that draws on a wide range of empirical material, including data from other fields, to develop an informed picture of how political phenomena actually operate. First and foremost, to close the gap between theory and politics is to be empirically informed about the latter.

The second goal is normative. Methodologically oriented political theorists maintain the distinctiveness of political theory and avoid collapsing it into either political science or applied moral philosophy by retaining an evaluative function that is relevant to political agents. The argument with respect to moral philosophy is well established in critiques of ideal theory, to which we will return to below. This holds that there is a necessary cleavage between moral speculation and the distinct motivations and goals that guide political behaviour (e.g. Baderin, 2014; Mills, 2017; Valentini, 2012). With respect to political scientists, empirical political theorists seek to maintain a more active evaluative, rather than descriptive, role (Perez, 2023: 618–619). The turn to empirical methods to develop evaluative theories of political behaviour and institutions helps ensure that they are useful for those engaged in politics (Floyd, 2022; Miller, 2013; Wolff, 2020; Wolff and de Shalit, 2007) and grounded in active engagement with public arguments about the political (de Shalit, 2020). In contrast to the multiculturalist focus on context *qua* culture for reasons regarding the inherent value of the latter, these normative payoffs are downstream from a prior epistemological adjustment that concerns the foundations necessary for political theory to act as a practical and engaged discipline. The second sense in which empirical political theorists seek to close the gap between theory and politics is to do good on this promise.

In short, closing the gap between theory and politics entails conducting theoretical work responsive to actual, and not ideal, conditions of political institutions, behaviours, and events, which is also practically relevant for addressing and solving the concerns and problems of political agents. Closing this gap rests on the enrichment of the activity of the theorist with an appropriate stance towards empirical detail, if not outright engagement in empirical research, drawn from appropriate work in political science and cognate disciplines. Realists, theorists of the ethnographic sensibility, and comparative political theorists are similarly driven by the alignment of theory with politics and the production of claims more sensitive to the needs of political practice. While they are fellow travellers, they also more clearly pose the question of whether attention to context can in fact widen the gap between existing theoretical assumptions and politics. It is the pressure that they put on this assumption that I develop as their signature contribution to the methodological turn. To move towards this contribution, the following two sections outline why the contextualists discussed here should be considered as part of the methodological turn, before moving to explore their distinct contribution to it.

Realism, the ethnographic sensibility, CPT, and the epistemological motivation of the methodological turn

How are realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT aligned with the first goal of the methodological turn, bringing theory closer to politics? This is most apparent within realism's critique of ideal theory. Realists accuse what they call ideal theory, moralism, or

ethics-first philosophy of focusing on the abstract moral principles of just political institutions to the neglect of the real conditions of politics. By prioritising such principles, ideal theorists conflate morality and politics (Hall, 2020: 9–10; Rossi and Sleat, 2014: 690), and fail to consider how context shapes the problems that exercise political agents. This critique takes the form of an epistemic correction centred around 'modesty' (McQueen, 2017: 298). Moral concepts are unable to capture the messy reality of political disagreement about the values, beliefs, and motivations of political actors. As Edward Hall clarifies, this modesty represents more than 'feasibility constraints' upon our ideals. It stems from a deeper epistemological claim that ideal theory cannot 'provide a serviceable account of such ideals in the first place' (Hall, 2017: 292). Here, we see the first indication that for realists context may make it difficult to close the gap between theory and politics, for context is constituted by irreducible contests over political ideals. Nevertheless, this issue is perceived because realists attempt to narrow the distance between politics and context-less approaches characteristic of moralism.

To engage in this task realists commit themselves to contextualism for three reasons. Political problems must be understood with reference to motives endogenous to their contexts, that one can access those motives through the tools of historical and genealogical analysis, and that such motives are not reducible to generalizable universals (McQueen, 2017: 303). Political problems are formed within contexts that are shifting and changing, and therefore justifications of actions that respond to those problems cannot be reduced to first principles exogenous to them (Prinz, 2016: 782; Sleat, 2010: 488). This is because, in Raymond Geuss' (2008: 13) words, 'politics is historically located: it has to do with humans interacting in institutional contexts that change over time'. Here I take Geuss to be using history in a loose sense, disconnected from a particular nation, group, or period of time. History simply refers to the contingency of the facts that characterise politics. Context provides realists with a tool for closing the gap between theory and the contingency of real-world politics characteristic of post-Rawlsian tradition of ideal theory. It is worth noting here that most work within realism to date has been concerned with the scope and practice of political theory, rather than with the deployment of empirical data for theoretical ends. It is for this reason that I see realists as sitting within the contextualist wing of the wider methodological turn.

However, some realists have turned to ethnographic methods to facilitate their contextualism. For Janosch Prinz (2020: 87), for example, ethnography provides a set of methodological tools for understanding how 'normative landscapes are constituted in a particular context' which are consistent with challenges to ideal theory. This appeal is part of a wider turn to an 'ethnographic sensibility' beyond realism. Within this perspective, ethnographic methods facilitate engagement with the details of cases as they are lived by individuals, allowing theorists to render 'familiar political phenomena' anew, refine existing concepts so that they reflect the values of political agents, and reveal harms obscured by ideal methods (Longo and Zacka, 2019: 1067). While some might engage directly in fieldwork to reach these goals, the ethnographic sensibility does not necessitate such practice. It is a 'frame of mind' that requires the researcher to take seriously the meanings embedded in materials such as interviews, archives, or ethnographies (Herzog and Zacka, 2019: 764). Understood in this way, the ethnographic sensibility is less a criticism of ideal theory and more a prescription of the methods and materials that political theorists should engage with.

It is clear from how its methodological choices are described that closure of the gap between theory and politics is a central concern of the ethnographic turn. These materials should be chosen to enable 'proximity with the subjects of study' so that we might

perceive the 'features of others experiences' that textual methods cannot capture (Longo and Zacka, 2019: 1069). By highlighting these experiences, ethnographic approaches facilitate a form of access missing from political theory that does not draw upon context to understand the beliefs and intentions of agents. Ethnographies show that the practice of making sense of political problems is not unique to political theorists, that theorising can occur in novel and unexpected ways, and that thick description can produce new insights by engaging with these activities (Herzog and Zacka, 2019; 765; Zacka et al., 2021: 386). In the interest of deriving normative claims from these insights, advocates of 'grounded normative theory' have argued that the ethnographic sensibility lacks the required methodological tools for rigorously revising moral commitments and challenging epistemic oppression due to its focus on the materials that underpin political analysis (Zacka et al., 2021: 401–406). However, for my purposes the ethnographic sensibility fits the characteristics of the methodological turn as I define them. It both identifies a gap between political theory and real politics, and attempts to ameliorate that gap. Moreover, it sets its sights on a wider set of issues than those that are solely normative. Insights derived from ethnographic context may also be methodological, ontological, or metaphysical. While I will return to the normative motivations of contextualism, here I use this contrast to highlight that the ethnographic sensibility begins from epistemological motivations that situate it clearly within the methodological turn. In this sense the ethnographic sensibility sits more firmly within it than realism, as the latter is more concerned with the broad scope and direction of the discipline rather than the methods through which the gap between it and the real world is closed. But, like realism, it is nevertheless broad enough in its approach to ethnographic material that it does not place demands on the theorist that they engage in direct empirical work themselves, just that they take ethnographic detail seriously. Hence, I group the ethnographic sensibility with realism as a kind contextualism that shares the wider concerns of the methodological turn.

Epistemic access to the metaphysical and ontological underpinnings of political problems also motivates CPT. Comparative political theorists pursue the distinct goal of closing the gap between theory as a practice and the diversity of traditions in which politics takes place. As such, CPT does not necessarily involve direct comparison – it may also involve in-depth study of a single context, tradition, or set of thinkers that have been neglected by Western political theory, for example. It does, however, necessitate active reflection on the methods and practice of political theory based on a consideration of non-canonical theoretical assumptions that form the scaffolding for politics in distinct contexts (Ackerly and Bajpai, 2017: 272–273). This reflection facilitates the perception of interrelations between concepts that shape action within context, and the practical and material conditions that underpin the genesis of those concepts (Little, 2018). Leveraging these two components of context, comparative political theorists argue that epistemological criteria, strategies, and principles are not 'irreducibly embedded in particular, individual minds, but are publicly accessible and collectively tractable, subject to ongoing amendment and participation by many different people over time' (Jenco, 2015: 12). The epistemological payoff of contextualism in CPT is the recognition that the conceptual and epistemic categories that guide agents' responses to political problems within their context are subject to scrutiny and contestation by those very agents. Attention to context closes the gap between theory and these processes.

For CPT, like the ethnographic sensibility, this gap may concern issues that are not immediately normative, nor necessarily empirical. As Chris Goto-Jones (2011: 89) argues, 'CPT is political thought that is conscious of (and engaged in the interpretation of) metaphysical and cosmological issues qua politics'. Detail on these concerns may be

found in canonical texts of political thought found in understudied traditions and not just in empirical analysis. For CPT, the value of context lies in the development of our understanding of how political problems rest on specific ways of carving reality at its joints, however that is achieved. This attention to understudied traditions in political thought presumes that they may operate through conceptual and methodological categories irreducible to those held by the theorist (e.g. Godrej, 2009; Goto-Jones, 2011; Hassanzadeh, 2015; Jenco, 2007; Rollo, 2021). Consequently, existing assumptions may need to be altered to do justice to intellectual accounts of political problems within other traditions. Not only is the gap that CPT seeks to close global, but it is also formed by a plurality of issues that range from the descriptive to the methodological to the metaphysical. In this sense, it follows similar motivations to the wider methodological turn but is also characterised by the contextualism I identify in realism and the ethnographic sensibility. CPT encompasses work that may not go beyond textual analysis and is therefore not strictly empirical (although it may be), but is nevertheless concerned with adding additional contexts to our understanding of the nature of politics, thereby narrowing the gap between theory and reality.

The growth of microwork exemplifies the benefits of this attempt to close the gap between theory and politics through a focus on context. A subcategory of work performed within the gig-economy, microwork consists of work allocated through online platforms to workers located across the globe and who are remunerated at the level of the individual task (Altenried, 2020; Berg and Rani, 2018; Jones, 2021; Tubaro et al., 2020; Webster, 2016). Microwork transcends the confines of both geographic location and individual employers (Webster, 2016: 58–59), but merits attention as a locality because labour structured by platforms constitutes a distinct context of practice. It consists of tasks distributed through online platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Clickworker, or Crowdflower. These tasks often include those that are not currently automatable but crucial to social media platforms and developments in artificial intelligence, such as moderating extreme or inappropriate content, labelling images for processing by machine learning algorithms, transcribing audio, or sourcing information unreadable by automated means (Jones, 2021: 15–16; Tubaro et al., 2020). Those undertaking microwork are not employed in any substantial way by either platform or task-setter. Contractual agreements exist at the level of the individual task, work takes place wherever the worker is based, and the worker holds little in the way of power to negotiate rates of reward or to challenge decisions regarding the quality of work performed. Workers may have no knowledge of who has set the task they are performing, what larger objectives it contributes to, or who else is working on the same project. Despite this veil existing between employer and 'employee', microwork constitutes a distinct context precisely because of the shared problems faced by those practicing it.

It is for this reason that microwork provides a stark example of where contextualist approaches might find political problems where ideal conceptions of politics might not. The distinction between employment and unemployment does not necessarily capture the difficulty of those undertaking microwork that are neither employed nor unemployed (Berg and Rani, 2018: 13–14; Jones, 2021: 97). Ideal discussions of whether the state should promote a perfectionist standard of meaningful work or categorise the level of meaningful working conditions as a matter of individual preference (e.g. Yeoman, 2014) do little to address the practical political problem of work not characterised by recognisable forms of employment. Moreover, attempts to remedy the ills of microwork come up against the fact that workers are not related to a workplace and inhabit a context that unites microworkers, tasksetters, and platform owners who are geographically remote from one another. Microwork occurs

close to the Western companies who typically crowdsource labour, but it is also common within informal labour sectors across the Global South (Altenried, 2020: 153; Jones, 2021: 4; Webster, 2016: 59). As a particular practice, therefore, microwork constitutes a distinct context spread across multiple localities, and any attempt to theorise its politics requires attention to overlaps between distinct contexts, new types of work that challenge existing conceptions of labour and employment, and distinct regulatory and governmental environments. Realist and ethnographic approaches might better capture the problems that arise from these conditions that elude standard employment practice, whereas comparative methods might grasp the diverse localities shaping microwork practice as a single, but dispersed, locality. Contextualism promises one way to close the gap between theory and the reality of microwork as a political problem that is spread across distinct geographic localities but that nevertheless forms a single context.

Realism, the ethnographic sensibility, CPT, and the normative motivation of the methodological turn

In addition to their alignment with the epistemological goal of the wider methodological turn, each of the three approaches considered here also shares its normative motivation that theory should be brought closer to the practical concerns of real politics. While each has a different sense of what a practically relevant political theory might look like, all three are united by a desire to examine normative concerns in a way that draws on their use, deployment, and contestation in particular contexts. While realists are critical of the conflation of morality and politics found within ideal theory, they do not reject normativity as such. Instead, they reject misled assumptions which render ideal theory 'unable to appreciate the complexity of the causal and normative relationship between morality and politics' (Rossi and Sleat, 2014: 690). While critical accounts of realism have suggested its pessimism about ideal theory is a barrier to social change (e.g. Finlayson, 2017), those within the tradition insist on the necessity of the appeal to context to articulate meaningful critiques of, and alternatives to, existing forms of legitimacy and normativity (Rossi, 2019; Sleat, 2014). The practical relevance of realism, therefore, is found in its development of a version of ideology critique. Realist ideology critique demonstrates a commitment to epistemic clarification and normative rectification by using 'a contextualist, immanent perspective' that maintains 'critical purchase' because it allows an entry point into the flaws of ideological points of view (Prinz and Rossi, 2017: 361). These might concern epistemic norms that guide our legitimation practices (Aytac and Rossi, 2023) or our understanding of property relations (Rossi and Argenton, 2021). In these cases, and others, realists attempt to develop normative claims that might have greater purchase for those engaged in politics by enabling a more effective form of ideology criticism.

Theorists of the ethnographic sensibility are motivated by practical normative concerns as far as they are interested in the tight connection between context and the commitments of political agents. Most simply, the ethnographic sensibility requires the theorist to engage with empirical details to properly represent how agents within context are guided by normative scaffolds that are crucial to explanatory work in political thought (Herzog and Zacka, 2019: 764; Longo and Zacka, 2019: 1076–1078). However, given that the methodological turn wants to retain political theory's evaluative function, those working within this sensibility focus on problems that undermine the distinction between facts and normative values. Matthew Longo and Bernardo Zacka propose that ethnographic approaches focus on second-order political and moral problems closely related to the 'facts' of action, distinguished from first-order questions of 'what one should do'

abstracted from the contexts in which principles are applied. Second-order questions admit of the complex relationship between social life and moral agency, where 'particular social arrangements . . . distort or muddle how we conduct ourselves' (Zacka et al., 2021: 396). Put otherwise, a first-order problem concerns universal, or at the very least very general, conceptual issues, whereas second-order problems concern the difficulties that present themselves when we try to apply these concepts. Trying to understand normative issues at a first-order level without investigating what 'Ordinary people . . . think seriously about what we have reason to value, what we owe to each other, and what kind of persons we should aspire to be' is to miss a crucial dimension of how they operate (Zacka, 2017: 258). In this sense the ethnographic sensibility follows the wider normative motivations of the methodological turn: to engage in theoretical work in such a way that interfaces with normative arguments occurring within real politics, and consequently to make its claims more relevant to political agents.

Where the ethnographic sensibility directs our attention towards second-order questions within context, CPT engages directly with the relationship between context and first-order normative questions by provincialising them. Its practical normative concerns, therefore, concern the scope and focus of political theory as a discipline rather than direct political agency as such. For some comparative political theorists, detailed and comparative attention to context provides material for answering first-order normative questions which persist regardless of contextual differences in how they may be answered (Black, 2011; March, 2009; Williams and Warren, 2014). Others are more sceptical regarding the existence of universal, first-order normative problems. For this second set of comparative approaches, ensuring that justice is done to the diversity of normative questions requires rethinking what counts as part of the canon of political theory (Hassanzadeh, 2015), what methods shape responses to its problems (Jenco, 2007), or even what passes as an acceptable theoretical problem to begin with (Godrej, 2009). Answering these questions, for comparative political theorists, 'can help us do political theory better' (Ackerly and Bajpai, 2017: 292), where 'better' refers to a version of political theory that takes cultural insularity as a pressing normative problem. Thus, CPT is divided between those concerned with normativity understood as universal yet enriched by context, and those concerned with closing the gap between theory and politics by taking an approach to normativity that is pluralist in terms of questions and problems and not just answers (Fumagalli, 2021; Kapust and Kinsella, 2017; Von Vacano, 2015). However, in each case there is a concern for closing the gap between theory and reality by making normative concerns more sensitive to the facts of politics, whether that be by enriching first-order questions with empirical detail from a range of contexts or by undermining the universality of those questions. The practical normative motivation of CPT, then, is directed towards political theory as a discipline in order to develop its sensitivity towards differing conceptions of politics.

Disputes regarding the status of domestic labour within the political theory of work demonstrate the importance of the link between context and the normative frames in which political problems are posed and resolved. The international Wages for Housework movement that began in the 1970s challenged the exclusion of domestic labour from Marxist discussions of capitalist production (Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Federici, 1975; Toupin, 2018). At stake in the ensuing domestic labour debate was the normative and political status of housework and care work, which itself arose from a metaphysical dispute about the nature of productivity (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2020). The matter of whether such labour was productive would have a direct impact on how gendered

concerns informed the normative claims of workers' struggles more widely. To generate such influence, activists drew attention to the distinct political problems of the contexts in which household labour took place to render visible work that had previously been obscured (Pettinger, 2019: 52–54). While housework did not end up being waged, it became a pressing normative and political problem because of this shift.

By making care work visible the Wages for Housework and related movements demonstrated epistemic agency regarding first-order normative problems by redefining the boundaries of the political problem of work. Two elements of this shift illustrate the potential of the contextualism found in realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT. First, salient features of normative problems are only fully visible when considered within appropriate contexts, including the home and other spaces in which care work takes place (Horgan, 2021: 1115). Both first-order (what moral principles apply to work) and second-order (how those principles are applied within a political locality) normative problems are directly linked to these disputes. When taken together realists, theorists of the ethnographic sensibility, and comparative political theorists demonstrate the importance of context for determining the nature of first- and second-order normative problems. Explicating the significance of future shifts in the nature and status of domestic and care labour for political theory may benefit from the realist's focus on contextual ideology critique, the ethnographic sensibility's focus on the tight connection between norms and practical concerns, and the comparativist's attention to how issues like the political status of housework might differ across contexts.

The second important element of context here is that shifts in normative demands were generated by activists operating within non-academic localities and using non-academic practices. In her account of the Wages for Housework movement, Katrina Forrester (2022) demonstrates how activists engaged in conceptual innovation by disclosing the conditions particular to domestic labour, built awareness of those conditions among those engaging in this work, and generated demands that might reshape them through community activism. Wages for Housework activists engaged in theoretical innovation regarding the moral significance of work by utilising methods outside of academic intellectual production in such a way that challenged the basic theoretical assumptions that guided political theory, Marxist and socialist thought in particular (Forrester, 2022: 1282–1285). Crucially, these methods intertwined descriptive claims with practical normative concerns. As contextualists, realists, theorists of the ethnographic sensibility, and comparative political theorists are well placed to draw conclusions from these disputes because they take local agents to be authors of problems of normative import. Their contextualism, therefore, tracks the wider methodological turn's goal of rendering theory more responsive to the issues faced by political agents of various kinds, retaining its evaluative function in a more active form than approaches that are at a remove from contextual detail.

Contextualist scepticism towards the task of narrowing of the gap between theory and politics

In the previous two sections I have demonstrated how the contextualism of realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT aligns with epistemological and normative goals of the wider methodological turn. In this respect, even though they are not necessarily as empirically focused as some proponents of this turn, they share the methodological concern of an accurate and politically relevant version of political theory. I now turn to consider their distinct contribution to methodological turn; a questioning of the extent to which

attention to context necessarily narrows the gap between theory and politics. Each of these three approaches harbours a degree of scepticism over the extent to which the gap between theory and politics can be closed. This is an implication of their reason for turning to context: it is a rich and active source of detail on what exactly motivates and informs the actions of political agents. Because of this, it is also a constantly shifting target that theorists will always be approximating despite their methodological stance.

It is worth highlighting here that thinkers within the wider methodological turn have expressed similar concerns. Given the danger of collapsing of political theory with political science, they retain the evaluative function of political theory (e.g. Perez, 2023, 2024), and therefore on some level assume that this gap will never fully be closed. For instance, Avner de Shalit (2020: 13) advocates for the political theorist staying open to 'being persuaded' by those they engage with, implying that their judgement will never be final. Floyd (2017) goes as far as suggesting that it is impossible for political philosophy to solve its organising question of 'how should we live'. The driving assumption here, however, is that an appropriate methodological stance will narrow this gap, even if asymptotically. The view I now draw out from realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT is a moderated stance on this trajectory; that there is an irreducible tendency for empirical detail to undermine existing assumptions about the nature of politics, thereby potentially widening the gap between theory and politics.

This dimension of all three approaches can be seen by reading them within an understanding of context taken from Leigh Jenco's distinctive approach to CPT. She develops a difference between the concepts of culture and locality that is instructive for bringing out the distinctive features of the contextualism discussed here. Conceptions of culture, according to Jenco, typically present it as a 'permanent . . . dwelling place that persists in shaping the entirety of its residents' theorizations'. Locality, in contrast, is 'a concentrated site of audiences, sympathies, and standards that generate particular kinds of reflections and render them viable in local (but possibly broader) contexts' (Jenco, 2011: 38). Agents' views and beliefs are not conditioned by a cultural straitjacket but granted viability by local forms of verification. Locality encompasses practices, audiences, and intellectual standards that determine not what individuals think but how their claims are ascribed legitimacy. These epistemic standards are constructed, contested, and made political by those who engage with them (even if this is unintentional) (Jenco, 2015: 12). It is by acting in a way that reinforces or pushes at these boundaries that agents constitute and transform the conception of political problems active within particular contexts. For Jenco, contextualism is not merely a clear understanding of the facts in the case at hand. It requires active recognition of, and engagement with, the intellectual agency behind practices that determine the scope of political problems within a distinct locality.

Two ramifications of this conception of context are worth drawing out. The first is that it entails a commitment to the conceptualisation of political problems with reference to the practices and criteria that determine the viability of understandings of, and responses to, those problems within a distinct locality. A concept's explanatory value lies in its capacity to scaffold the theorist's explication and systematisation of what is taken to be a significant political problem within a particular context. The second is the view that contexts must not be understood as moulds which imprint beliefs upon individuals but as dynamic localities, constituted by practices that structure the intellectual framing of political problems. Arguments that mobilise context must consider how claims are generated within distinct localities to more closely track the presuppositions that shape what is deemed to be a political problem within them, in a way that accords with the self-understanding of those

agents. Both ramifications imply that as one tracks the types of practices that shape political problems and the arguments that arise from them, one may in fact discover that existing conceptual resources are inadequate for this task. While both ramifications are consistent with the wider methodological turn, they also imply that context is always constituted by a kind of theoretical agency that is underplayed by understandings of contexts that simply present it as a source of empirical data.

On the face of it, realists seem less open to this diversity of political problems given that they have been accused of status quo bias, and therefore are perceived as less able to find a gap between their ideas and theory in the first place (Finlayson, 2017). The realist response to this accusation lies primarily in the attention to contextual reasons for the beliefs of political agents that allows them to articulate normative claims that draw on local conditions of intelligibility while also undermining them where they are inconsistent (Prinz and Rossi, 2017: 359). This requires critical engagement with what counts as a political problem within context and with the appropriateness of the theorists' own conception of the limits of politics to that problem. It is in this sense that realism is 'politically indeterminate' (Rossi and Sleat, 2014: 695), and open to revising its judgements due to encounters with locality. Crucially, this commitment to political indeterminacy distinguishes this tendency in realism from the wider methodological turn. It is not simply that realists seek to improve the purchase of normative claims upon political reality, but that politics always poses the possibility of undermining the wider frameworks in which those claims are developed and situated.

Bernard Williams' basic legitimation demand (BLD) exemplifies this idea. The BLD stipulates that the justification of order must be made within the conditions of acceptability within a particular context and therefore 'does not represent morality prior to politics' (Williams, 2005: 7). Ultimately, what 'makes sense' as a form of legitimation will differ according to the context (Williams, 2005: 11). Attention to what makes sense within context poses the possibility to not just refine our conception of legitimacy, but also to radically undermine it. The degree to which realists are committed to the revision of these normative frameworks varies, however. For example, the BLD stipulates that politics within those contexts is still reducible to security and legitimacy *despite* what agents may say to the contrary. While morality does not take lexical priority over political concerns, it is nevertheless the case that for Williams order presents a perennial problem for politics that cannot be displaced (Aytac, 2022). In this sense, there is variation in the extent to which realists fully commit to the idea that attention to context will widen the gap between it and our theoretical expectations.

The ethnographic sensibility is similar to realism in that it holds to the possibility of contextual variation undermining existing theoretical views, but with some degree of conservatism with respect to the extent to which this holds. Ethnographic approaches require a contextualism that allows us to 'de-familiarize ourselves with the ordinary so as to discern problems where there appear to be none' (Zacka et al., 2021: 393). De-familiarisation facilitates understanding of how moral and political dilemmas are articulated and dealt with in informal, practical, and impromptu ways (Zacka, 2017: 256–257). Crucially, much as context might reveal legitimacy claims that do not make sense to us but are otherwise accepted, the language of undermining the familiar implies that attention to the methodological value of context does not necessarily lead to the closure of the gap between theory and politics. Ethnographic detail may render our concepts unfamiliar to us. However, the ethnographic sensibility is also presented by Zacka, writing with Lisa Herzog, as following conceptions of normative political theory 'compatible

with the spirit of Rawls' project' (Herzog and Zacka, 2019: 764). I do not want to question the value of amending systematic conceptions of justice by drawing on ethnographic material. I do, however, want to suggest that the criterion of 'coherence' (Herzog and Zacka, 2019: 763) that is at the heart of the Rawlsian spirit curtails the problem posed by attention to ethnographic detail, which may 'raise questions about the very nature of our concepts' (Longo and Zacka, 2019: 1068). By framing the turn to ethnography in terms of normative coherence, we may miss that the challenge posed to the methods of the theorist by ethnographic detail may not be reducible to a coherent normative doctrine when considered within extant grounding theoretical assumptions. The real contribution to the methodological turn to be found within the ethnographic sensibility consists in the suggestion that standards like 'coherence' are undermined by appeal to agents' conceptions of what counts as a political problem as they may challenge the boundaries of what counts as a coherent political concept.

While this methodological problem is shied away from somewhat in realism and the ethnographic sensibility, it is a far more prominent concern within CPT. Jenco (2010: 10) defines CPT as 'an enterprise designed to acquire new conceptual and practical resources which can themselves prompt entirely unanticipated questions and answers'. Some of these unanticipated problems may be normative, particularly given that motivation for the turn to comparison stems from the liberal critique of metaphysical conceptions of the good (Euben, 1997: 29). Others concern a wider set of concepts, including metaphysical and ontological questions regarding the nature of politics (Goto-Jones, 2011: 104). In both cases, methodological tools like dialogue may not encapsulate differing senses of what counts as a political problem derived from non-verbal or non-textual sources (Jenco, 2007; Rollo, 2021; Shogimen, 2016). In each case, as Roxanne Euben (2008) argues, the concepts that mediate comparison across contexts and localities (such as 'non-Western' and the 'Western') constitute our sense of those localities in the first place. On this view of CPT, acts of comparison may undermine the methods by which they are pursued as well as our sense of who possesses the intellectual agency to frame political problems. There are some comparative political theorists who maintain the necessity of perennial problems as the subject of comparative analysis (Thomas, 2010: 666–667). In this vision, comparison strengthens liberal democratic politics and counters fears that a focus on particularity pushes out the universal (Black, 2011; March, 2009; Williams and Warren, 2014). Among those who do not fall into this camp, however, there is a wide and strong commitment to the idea that contextualism may widen rather than narrow the gap between theory and politics.

I do not mean to suggest that realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT can be collapsed into one view insofar as they share in their contribution a scepticism regarding the extent to which methodological turn can solve the issue of distance that it identifies. Moreover, in my account I am drawing out the features of these positions that emphasise the possible incommensurability that might separate contextual detail and extant concepts. I present them, therefore, as a loose family of views that express iterations of the concern for the widening of the gap between theory and politics when one pays attention to context. It is worth briefly nuancing this picture by highlighting some of the salient differences between each position, to better situate them within the wider methodological turn and vis-a-vis each other, before considering the consequences of their hesitations about the gap between theory and politics.

At the most general level, there are clear differences in how realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT regard the motivations behind the attempt to close the gap between

theory and politics. Both realists and thinkers of the ethnographic sensibility seek to close the gap between the judgements of political theorists and the context of political problems in a broad sense. Realists draw on context to better understand 'what might actually make sense to people here and now' (Hall, 2017: 296), and methods proposed by the ethnographic sensibility provide a rich picture of political problems at the 'meso-level' (Herzog, 2018). However, the ethnographic sensibility is more closely tied to the concerns of normative political theory more traditionally understood, using empirical data to bring 'coherence' to intuitions and convictions of the moral or political philosopher (Herzog and Zacka, 2019: 763), whereas realism takes an uncompromising stance regarding the limits of mainstream political theory. The ethnographic sensibility and realism can be further distinguished on methodological grounds as the former complements ideal theory, whereas the latter fundamentally challenges it. CPT is less stringent about its methodological commitments but has a more direct motivation behind it in the form of the pursuit of a broader and more inclusive form of political theory:

> It is best understood as the discursive space carved out by immanent/internal critiques of political theory's privileging of 'the West' and its marginalization of other archives – whether those archives are understood as constituted by traditions, practices, bodies of thought, or texts. (Jenco et al., 2020: 4)

The pluralism encompassed by these immanent critiques does not rule out ideal forms of theorising anathema to realists if they are grounded in other traditions. Close-textual analysis of neglected works of political theory, for example, might fall under CPT if it deepens our sense of what is a relevant context for political theorists.

A related set of differences concern the relationship between context and normativity in each approach. While realism is defined by its contrast with dominant forms of normative political theory, it is not against reasoning about norms and seeks to ground those judgements more substantively within the conditions in which political problems are posed (Leader Maynard and Worsnip, 2018; Rossi and Sleat, 2014). Ethnographic approaches may lean towards the realist critique of moralism, but might also hold to a stronger separation between first- and second-order normative problems that hews more closely to ideal theory. CPT, in contrast, is concerned with broadening what counts as an acceptable normative argument, but also with integrating the normative and the methodological as part of the provincialisation of Western political thought. Reflective methodologies are justified due to the desirability of this localisation of the first-order concerns of Western thought – an aim which is not necessarily shared by realism and the ethnographic sensibility.

Despite these differences, each of these approaches belongs within the methodological turn because they are motivated in some way by the gap between theory and politics. But, because they are all concerned with intellectual agency of individuals within contexts, they also foreground the possibility that attention to context may have a 'de-familiarising' effect on our existing concepts. Regardless of variation between, and internal to, these views, a shared line can be traced through all three: as much as it provides detail for sharpening theoretical claims and bolstering their relevance, contextualism can undermine existing presuppositions regarding political problems because it can unearth diverging assumptions about what is deemed to constitute a political issue, and an acceptable response to that issue. These conceptual 'asymmetries' provide unique opportunities for political theorists to reflect upon the situatedness of their work (Jenco et al., 2020: 7). The contextualism

analysed here is attentive to both the possibility for providing the epistemic purchase necessary for relevant normative judgements, and the possibility that context may also present a fundamentally different picture of what counts as a political problem and a set of intellectual practices not formally recognisable as 'theory'.

Consolations of methodological scepticism

Before concluding, I want to consider one objection and an upshot of this contribution to the debates of the methodological turn. Participants in this turn might feel that the scepticism outlined above begs an important question: why is this apparent undermining of extant concepts not soluble within appropriately revised hypotheses, attentive to the details of locality? For Perez (2023: 620, 2024), the adoption of empirical methods bolsters the evaluative function of political theory by bringing it in line with appropriate causal evidence. If that evidence undermines existing assumptions, then those assumptions simply need to be revised. This is evident for those that wish to use context to generate normative judgements that are more closely aligned with the needs of practical politics (de Shalit, 2020; Floyd, 2022; Miller, 2013; Wolff, 2020). I do not doubt that there are contexts where the gap between theory and politics can effectively be narrowed by appropriately revised theories, nor do I think contextualists should be pessimistic about their goals. I do not want to suggest, therefore, that all contexts present unsolvable problems for the theorist. What is at stake, however, is a permanent and irresolvable *possibility* that differences in context may challenge fundamental assumptions rather than the hypotheses that those assumptions support. In other words, there is a distinction between cases where the differences between theory and politics lie within an existing paradigm, or where the agency of those within context pushes in a different direction that cannot be easily adjusted for through appropriate methodological tinkering.

This distinction takes a slightly different form in each school of thought discussed here. For realists, it lies in the possibility of intractable disagreement about political ideals that cannot be reduced to abstract moral theories; for ethnographic political theorists within the intellectual agency attributed to political actors who might challenge, and not just inform, contextual reflection on theoretical claims; for comparative political theorists within fundamentally divergent sets of metaphysical and ontological assumptions about the nature of politics. Each of these schools of thought sets out to close the gap between theory and politics, but in doing so unearths the ever-present possibility that attention to context might widen it. I leave to future work the issue of figuring out precisely where the line lies between contexts that provide challenges that can be responded to by revising hypotheses and those that pose more fundamental questions for our underlying theoretical architectures. My purpose here is solely to indicate the importance of this distinction. This contribution has an important upshot for the wider methodological turn in that it helps clarify one aspect of the distinct role of political theory with respect to political science. The possibility of context widening the gap between theory and politics bolsters, rather than weakens, the evaluative function of methodological political theory. Empirical evidence alone cannot bridge the gap between radically divergent localities even if the study of both is contextually sensitive. A methodologically sensitive political theory, however, can play the distinct role of evaluating these gaps, and therefore of constructing bridges between them.

Both microwork and housework illustrate the value of such an approach, as the potential difficulty of inadvertently widening the gap between theory and politics is borne out

by both. Microwork is subject to competing views across and within microworkers, platform owners, and tasksetters, who all exhibit intellectual agency in shifting and shaping the definition of work it implies, resting on a range of assumptions about what counts as acceptable work. In this case, the possibility of closing the gap between theory and politics is made more demanding by the diversity of the shifting standards of evaluation of this kind of labour. The Wages for Housework movement demonstrates a variation on this intellectual agency. Activists' reconceptualisation of women's work within the home and care work in other private spaces as an important form of labour reframed the semantic space of work and denaturalised existing presuppositions about its scope (Forrester, 2022: 4; Horgan, 2021: 1115–1116). To see contextualist methods as simply closing the gap between theory and reality does not completely capture what is going on here, for Wages for Housework activists posed an explicit challenge to theories of the political value of work. It is not just normative claims about work that are misled, but the very foundations of dominant conceptions of work. The adjustment required to close the between theory and politics here is, therefore, more substantive than appropriate methods and hypotheses informed by empirical data. Instead, it necessitates a fundamental reconsideration of the concept of labour as a political category that has knock-on effects across the discipline.

In both cases, however, the tension between the shifting context of microwork or the intellectual agency of activists and the abstractions of the theorist also highlight the insolubility of political theory within political science. The lesson I want to take from realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT is that the possibility of widening the gap between theory and politics through attention to context maintains the central role of evaluation in methodologically inclined political theory. The category of microwork is itself to some extent a judgement that transcends particular contexts due to the differences between them. Similarly, Wages for Housework activists were acutely aware of the dissimilarities between women's circumstances. Abdicating the task of critical judgement here in favour of adjusting our hypotheses to solely match empirical data is to forget that some degree of abstraction is necessary to engage with context.

Conclusion: The value of political theory from the contextualist point of view

I conclude by returning to one of the central proponents of the methodological turn. Floyd (2017) suggests that the task of political philosophy is answering the question of how we should live, which ultimately we cannot answer for good. I have attempted to further the case for this gap without pouring scorn on the aims of the methodological turn. I have argued that realists, thinkers of the ethnographic sensibility, and comparative political theorists contribute a particular form of contextualism to this methodological turn. They share its epistemological and normative motivations for closing the gap between theory and politics, but also demonstrate that attention to context may widen it in a way that makes it difficult to properly close it. In this sense, my aim has been modest; I do not seek to overturn the methodological turn nor revolutionise it. I have simply sought to develop our understanding of its scope, including realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and CPT within it, and also to articulate one methodological challenge that arises from this inclusion. I do not think this difficulty is fatal for the methodological turn. Its upshot is an indication of the enduring role that political theorists can play in mediating between divergent contexts, while also not leaving more methodologically or empirically inclined analysis to others.

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Notes

1. I direct the reader elsewhere for extensive summaries of realism (Hall, 2017; McQueen, 2017), the ethnographic sensibility (Herzog and Zacka, 2019; Longo and Zacka, 2019), and comparative political theory (CPT; Ackerly and Bajpai, 2017; Jenco et al., 2020).
2. An all-encompassing overview of debates on the difference between ideal and non-ideal theory is beyond my purposes. For a summary, see the work of Laura Valentini (2012).

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