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James Tully's Agonistic Realism

Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears

Political theory is often charged with being too ahistorical, abstract and removed from the political realities theory is supposed to illuminate or change. Caught up in canonical texts, gripped by ideal questions never asked by real politicians, like 'what is justice?' or 'which is the best regime?' or 'how are subjects formed?' political theory is said to list too far to one side, becoming all theory, no politics. On the other hand, when political theorists correct the imbalance and turn to complex historical case studies or the practicalities of daily life, they are accused of abandoning the big questions and grand narratives that dignify their mode of inquiry and distinguish it from mere journalism. Both timeless and timebound, it sometimes seems that political theory can do no right.

In the 1970s, Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* was welcomed because it made the case for systematic political theorizing after decades of political theory's confinement to canonical textual interpretation or the small, seemingly soluble questions of analytic philosophy. But to everything there is a season. Within ten years of the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, political theorists had already begun to worry about the cost of such systematic approaches, citing in particular their remove from the real world of actual politics.

Two of the most recent efforts to move towards a more real or realist political theory come from Raymond Geuss and James Tully.¹

¹ Geuss develops his position on realism in a series of books. See R. Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; R. Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005; R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real*

These two thinkers do not have a lot in common. Geuss endorses the inescapability of violence in politics while Tully deplors it, warning that violence only begets violence. Rather than accept realist claims about the obvious ‘realities’ of politics, Tully seeks to make real that which is often cast as utopian and ideal: pacifism. He lends pacifism a certain reality by citing instances of its practice and success, mining the empirical record for worldly events that realism too often effaces.

In this chapter, we look at Geuss’s work, briefly, and then at Tully’s in more detail, to outline what we take to be the politics of realism and the real. From the vantage point of that politics it becomes clear how these two thinkers, opposed in many ways, both deploy rhetorically a factual real – as uncontested – to support their claims of political possibility and actuality. We argue that contestations of the real are themselves part of the practice of realism understood as agonistic realism. These contestations are ever more pressing these days as the lines between truth and falsity, the real and the unreal, are blurred, and not only by media empires, corporations and governments for whom ‘spin’ is the stuff of daily life.

For Geuss, philosophy has drawn political theory into analytic and systematic approaches that operate at some remove from historically situated realities, deride the art of the possible and promote abstract unrealities of reason, consensus or right while abjuring the study of power and violence. By contrast with such abstract approaches, says Geuss, a realist will ‘start from an account of our existing motivations and our political and social institutions (not from a set of abstract “rights” or from our intuitions).’² Those actually existing motivations, as Geuss sees them, are less than noble. Historical reflection on politics, he argues, demonstrates that people seek power and crave security. Power, decision, violence and the stabilizing influence of the state are

Politics, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. Other examples of realist objections to ideal, abstract or systematic theory come from I. Shapiro, *The Flight From Reality in the Social Sciences*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007; J. Issac, ‘The Strange Silence of Political Theory’, *Political Theory* 23 (4): 636–52, 1995.

² Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, p. 59.

key elements of political life. Guess's realism leads him to reject political theorists' longstanding quests for justice and to embrace in its place the less ambitious, supposedly more realistic end of *modus vivendi* arrangements, albeit dressed in the language of 'legitimacy'.

Having chastened the aspirations of political theory, Geuss endorses pessimism as a trait of historically informed realism: cooperation, solidarity, symbolization, hope and optimism are sidelined by Geuss, cast as 'unreal,' 'ideal' or hopelessly 'optimistic'. But, contra Geuss, realism need not necessarily be pessimistic. In this chapter, we argue that a realist account of politics may find in the experience of political action inspiration to fight for noble ideals, rather than set them aside. Realists may also find in history and experience reason to press beyond *modus vivendi* arrangements to legitimacy and justice. Closer attention to history and to politics teaches us we may be more, not less, ambitious in our politics, and more idealistic than Geussian realism allows. These possibilities become clearer when we read Guess in connection with James Tully. Taken together, in contestatory context, Geuss and Tully inspire an alternative realism – a truly new realism we call 'agonistic' realism.³

Tully does not call himself a realist but he, no less than Geuss, also calls for political theory to begin with history and the realities of political life. He too rejects the ahistorical abstractions of philosophical approaches and the high normativity of much deliberative democratic theory. He faults them not just for abstraction, however, but also for the power they exercise. 'Elite political theory', as Tully calls the various rational, universalist or abstract approaches he criticizes, mistrusts the plural *demos* of politics, seeks to constrain or inform or instruct popular will rather than attend to it and argues deductively in a way quite removed from the daily realities of lived experience, rather than

³ In an earlier version of this chapter, which has since been much revised, we looked as well at the work of Bernard Williams, which Geuss appropriates for his realism but which we consider closer to Tully's position and which we dub agonistic realism. See B. Honig and M. Stears, 'The New Realism: From *Modus Vivendi* to Justice', in J. Floyd and M. Stears, eds, *Political Philosophy versus History?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

inductively and in touch with political realities. Worse yet, abstractions like ‘rights’ and ‘sovereignty’ serve the interests of hegemony when they fold citizen-subjects into (post)colonial prioritizations of order over freedom, state institutional stability over self-governance.

For Tully, justice, freedom and self-governance are not abstractions and they are no mere ideals: that we may think they are is testimony to the sad success of elite political theory and of realists, who often cast freedom and true self-governance as chaotic and dangerous or unlikely and ‘ideal’. In fact, Tully insists, practices of freedom and justice are a lived reality, often autonomous and stable. The realities of freedom are more visible when we build our theoretical positions inductively rather than deductively and attend to what Tully calls the ‘rough ground’ of politics, where we see not just violence, self-interest, political chicanery and instability but also action in concert, mutuality and non-violence. The latter are no less real than the so-called realities to which realists like Geuss seek to confine our attention. If realism means a commitment to describing what we see, then surely realists must concede that politics includes violence and consensus, agreement and strife, murderousness and reasonableness. Real politics shows we are incited by political engagement into rationality and violence, practicality and fantasy, war and solidarity. And if we attend to these realities, we may find ourselves inspired to strive for more than the *modus vivendi* style of politics that Geuss endorses. We may seek freedom and justice and insist that our actions in political life be oriented by fidelity to those ideals and illuminated by those aspirations. In short, Tully invites us to ask: why allow the so-called real to make us settle, when we instead we can unsettle the ‘real’?

Tully does not call himself a realist but, once we see him as one, we can see that his work offers a way out of the paradox of politics, that difficult problem – so well articulated by Rousseau – of how to found anew given that we need good men to make good law but also need good law to make good men, as it were.⁴ This problem of how to

⁴ For analysis of the paradox, see B. Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, and Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

break the circle of chicken and egg is dismissed by realists like Geuss who claim that the goodness of law and men is simply of no particular interest in politics, except insofar as these get in the way of what needs to be done. Others, working in the area of normative theory, seek to solve the paradox by providing the norms whose absence they see as the cause of the problem: but normative theory's norms are often, as Geuss says, at quite a distance from the realities of political life and (at the same time even if paradoxically so) the unself-conscious carriers of some of those realities, as Tully argues, when he points to the uncomfortable continuities between their universalism and imperialism. A third way is offered by Tully, we argue. Tully sees in the elucidation and documentation of actually existing pacifism and freedom an important tactic whereby political theory can break the hold of realism's diminished expectations, while enlisting the traction of the real world of political experience. His examples provide orienting norms and ideals now harder to dismiss out of hand, because they are real and less violent than the norms of theorists whose universalism seems to him complicit with a history of first-world imposition.

Tully not only documents the realities of political idealism, seeking to infuse twenty-first-century politics with the hopes and aspirations of movements too long discounted as unserious, he also calls on political actors to act 'as if' they have already achieved the world that they seek to build together. With these two tactics, empirical documentation and imaginative leaping forward, with the 'here and now' and the 'as if', we conclude, Tully enters into the paradox of politics and breaks its spell. When he makes us alive to a possibility as an actuality, he incites us to actualize the possibility.

1. Raymond Geuss's realism

Politics, Raymond Geuss argues, is about power, 'its acquisition, distribution and use'.⁵ Without direct attention to power and its

⁵ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, pp. 96–7, 25 and 90.

distribution – what Geuss describes as the Leninist question of ‘who, whom?’ – political theory can offer little guidance to those who need it. Geuss’s essential objective is to restore the tradition of ideology critique in which the task is to use historical reflection to demonstrate how all political practices, including the practice of political philosophy itself, are always inherently in the service of power. To ‘think politically’ should always be ‘to think about agency, power, and interests, and the relations among these’ and ‘a theoretical approach with no place for a theory of power is not merely deeply deficient but actively pernicious, because mystifying.’⁶

Thus, politics is not only violence. It involves ‘attempts to provide legitimacy not simply for acts of violence, but for any kinds of collective action, such as deciding voluntarily to build a new road or change to a new unit of measurement (as was done during the French Revolution), or for that matter for any arrangements that could be seen as capable of being changed, controlled, modified or influenced by human action.’⁷ All politics, in other words, requires its ‘legitimatory mechanisms’, which include ‘mechanisms for changing beliefs, or generating new ones’, for without those mechanisms, and without the stories of legitimation they convey, it would be impossible for political agents to act in concert let alone to sustain their achievements across time.⁸

Attempts to demonstrate the ‘legitimacy’ of particular courses of action are ‘a part of real history, like most of the rest of life’ and so stories of legitimacy, as Geuss calls them, necessarily differ radically across time and space depending on the contours of the precise struggle for power of which they are a part. Put another way, aspirations towards, or stories about, legitimacy, never solely assess or evaluate power, or seek its reform or restraint: they are always just another way to procure power.

The vast majority of political philosophers today miss this central point, Geuss contends, and as a result find themselves entangled in ever

⁶ Ibid., 94.

⁷ See R. Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, pp. 31–42.

⁸ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, p. 35.

more abstract and idealistic discussions of the 'true' nature of legitimacy and how best to achieve it. This leads in part to a simple waste of time. Worse still, Geuss charges that in practice those who fail to see how legitimacy serves and does not check power enable the worst excesses of politics. Here Geuss connects together such otherwise dissimilar historical events as the French revolution, Soviet communism and Nazism.⁹ Although Geuss was a critical theorist before he was a realist, here the echo is more to Popper than to Adorno.¹⁰

The only proper question for political theory then, is that of how human beings are capable of living together in a relatively orderly and peaceful way despite their instincts to control and dominate each other. Realists, he explains, should cleave to the 'basically Hobbesian insight' that 'political philosophy' is at its best when it concentrates on the 'variety of ways in which people can structure and organise their action so as to limit and control forms of disorder that they might find excessive or intolerable'.¹¹ Because conflict, disorder and competition for dominance are the essence of human interaction, political thinking should always focus on the avoidance of the dangers that follow from these features. There is, of course, a paradox here. For Geuss, politics is partly understood as simple competition for power, often in its crudest, most dominative form, but he prizes a particular kind of politics – state politics – as the means by which humans create order out of the most unlikely of material. This is the Hobbesian project, in other words, whereby the horrors of anarchy are avoided through a particularly limited kind of political aspiration focused largely on the controlling power of the modern state.

Thus it comes as no surprise to find Geuss enlisting the 'steely realism' of Thucydides. In *Outside Ethics*, Geuss argues that Thucydides showed us that 'hope' in politics is 'almost inevitably deluding and its power

⁹ Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, p. 13.

¹⁰ On the varieties of post-war realism, see M. Stears, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, chapter 4.

¹¹ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, p. 22.

overwhelmingly destructive.’¹² Indeed, it is this very argument which Geuss takes as evidence that Thucydides’s history is ‘realistic, values truthfulness, and is lacking the shallow optimism of later philosophy’, notwithstanding other contending readings of Thucydides.¹³ At other times, Geuss makes the argument in his own voice, as when he says ‘Rites, rituals, and ceremonies’, can be *mis*interpreted as being part of the very stuff of politics, their content revealing the intentions, aspirations, beliefs and commitments of those who practice them. Properly interpreted, however, they can be seen to be ‘attempts to deal practically with phenomena that are the locus of extreme states of anxiety’ about questions of power and powerlessness.¹⁴ Religion too is firmly rejected as somehow ‘unreal’, belonging essentially to the past. It is true, Geuss admits, that some religious longing still finds political expression in even the most ‘modern’ of societies, but, he continues, ‘there seems little to congratulate . . . on this.’ ‘Religious belief,’ he concludes, ‘would have to be even more wilfully obscurantist [in 2005] than it was in 1805 because it requires active suppression of so much of humanity’s active stock of knowledge.’¹⁵

Thus, Geuss’s ‘realism’ is at some distance from the rich texture of the actual lived experience of real citizens and of the historical record of such experiences, both of which Geuss claims to wish to reconnect with political philosophy. Which is more ‘real?’ To treat aspirations towards legitimacy as mere mechanisms for domination? Or to see in them ongoing struggles for improvement within political life? Or both? If the last, we may grant that such struggles are always contingent, and contested, but still see in them evidence that the mere maintenance of peaceful order is not the only good to which politics is or should be directed. In sum, if Geuss usefully reorients political theory towards the practices of political life, his realism also leads us away from the accounts that practitioners of politics give of their own efforts and

¹² Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, pp. 221 and 224.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

activities. The real it turns out, for Geuss, emerges only by abstracting rather severely from . . . the real.

The importance of this point can be underlined this way: what traits would a pacifist movement have to have for Geuss to accept it as un-illusory? Our sense is that no movement could clear this bar – all would be found illusory – and this suggests that for Geuss, realism and its commitments trump the real on which realism is supposedly based and from which its credibility is drawn. By contrast, James Tully seeks to elevate to the real those actions, movements and orientations that do exist but are rendered marginal, unreal or utopian by the now-entrenched demand that politics be realistic. In particular, Tully's commitment to pacifism in politics issues a precise challenge to Geussian realism and to political actors more generally. For Tully, political ideals are powerful and welcome elements of political life, not part of a threatening or foolishly unrealistic 'idealism' or utopianism in politics.¹⁶ And there is nothing unreal nor unrealistic about pacifism in politics.¹⁷

2. James Tully's realism

As we have just seen, Geuss's realism is resolutely anti-utopian, measured rather than expansive or ambitious. The world of politics

¹⁶ It should be noted, of course, that utopianism is properly a subject for realists as well. On the real impact of utopianism in politics see D. Leopold, 'Socialism and Utopia', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12 (3): 219–37, 2007.

¹⁷ On this, see S. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology*, London: Verso, 2012, championing not just pacifism as realist but also small departures from it too: 'As is evidenced by Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, but also by the violence of colonization and decolonization and the multiple wars of the present and recent past, violence exerts a repetition effect from which subjects cannot seem to free themselves. We are caught ineluctably in a loop of violence and counter-violence, of justification and counterjustification. The world is cut in two by a violence that is in the very air we breathe and whose unforgiving political, mythic, and legal logic is cold, bloody, and irrefutable. In such a world, the platitudes of realpolitik will always appear reasonable. All that we have is the folly of a plumb line of nonviolence, a set of exceptional circumstances and a political struggle in which we wrestle with the infinite ethical demand. Such wrestling requires the virtues of tact, prudence, and a concrete understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves, combined with a stubborn – at times, indeed, belligerent – faith in what appears at each and every moment impossible: another, nonviolent way of conceiving the social relations amongst human beings', chapter 5.

is not the world of theory, he insists. Things go wrong, contingencies abound, practices are plural, fraught, contested. It is (sometimes) best to do least, or at least to do less than a theorist or idealist might advocate doing. For Geuss, any alternative approach to political life threatens to expand the ambit of politics dangerously and unreasonably; it invites the passion of the fanatic.

James Tully's perspective is almost entirely other. Unlike Geuss, Tully's historically grounded alternative does *not* see politics as the sole property of the state. As he contracts political theory's focus on the state's ambit, he makes room to attend to other scenes of politics, often squeezed out or marginalized as unimportant by political theorists on opposed sides of every other issue: liberals, deliberativist universalists and realists.

At first, Tully's approach as outlined in *Public Philosophy in a New Key* appears to place him not far from Geuss. Just as Geuss seeks to revive the tradition of ideology critique, revealing the power interests lurking behind high-sounding appeals to legitimacy, so *defamiliarization* and *expose* are Tully's preferred approach. Tully sees power and inequality as intimately involved in the maintenance of the apparently safe, secure and familiar political institutional arrangements that other theorists simply assume are stable and well-ordered.

Like Geuss, Tully is particularly critical of putatively universal theories of legitimacy which, he argues, disguise particular, partisan projects. Since the Enlightenment, Tully insists, it has been 'assumed that there [is] some definitive ordering of legitimate political associations' and that, consequently, the 'role of political philosophy' is to work out the 'definitive theory of justice or the definitive democratic procedures of legitimation in which citizens themselves could reach final agreements on the just ordering of their associations'.¹⁸ Such accounts, however, deny the inevitability of ongoing disagreement and dispute which are, in fact, constant and crucial elements of political life.¹⁹ Nor is the

¹⁸ J. Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, Two Volumes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, Volume II, p. 97.

¹⁹ Tully, *Public Philosophy* II, p. 97.

denial without consequences: Claims to universality, certainty and immutability have been powerful weapons in the hands of some, and especially in the hands of the colonializing peoples and states who came to North America equipped with stories of the inevitability and universal desirability of a very particular kind of legitimate political life. Those stories helped to promote and legitimate brutal, exclusionary and dominating patterns of political rule and genocide.²⁰

Despite these apparent similarities with Geuss's realism, however, the more optimistic nature of Tully's historically grounded realism emerges when Tully turns to offer potential solutions to the dangers that politics presents. Tully seeks to defamiliarize established habits of thought *not* in order to resist the siren call of aspiration – as with Geuss – but precisely in order to press upon us the need to find new and unsettling ways of thinking and acting. When Tully criticizes universalist aspirations to legitimacy, he does so to undo their depoliticizing effects and to motivate alternative practices of freedom that unsettle the normal order rather than guarantee its stability. For Tully, the focus on stability in political theory and practice displaces politics and serves to guard privilege and maintain injustice. By contrast with Geuss, who prizes stability as a bulwark against the harms of conflict, Tully is struck by the harms of stability itself. Tully does not allow the reality of conflict to force him to relinquish more aspirational aims. He seeks *more* than mere stability or even legitimation. He seeks 'just agreement'.²¹ His aim is to promote an ongoing, transformative dialogue of equal parties in contention with each other. He wants those parties to recognize that they are bound by a sense of shared fate, mutual respect and common future and a shared past that is marred but not exhausted by relations of domination and acts of injustice.

Tully, too, turns to history to make his case. But whereas history offers constraint for Geuss, it offers promise to Tully. In the work on intercultural dialogue between Euro-Canadians and Canadian

²⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 16–42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Aboriginals, for example, Tully sees not only genocide and domination but also a history of *mutuality* has been deliberately erased from Euro-Canadians' cultural memory as part of the colonial project. That mutuality, he argues, however, is no less real than the violence and domination on which we have since come to focus. For Tully, therefore, efforts to create intercultural dialogue today could learn from the first contact between Europeans and Aborigines. Lines of power and dependence were murkier then than in the later colonizing period – without the hospitality of the Aborigines the Europeans might not have survived – and the treaties that resulted promised a politics of almost unparalleled equality and common interest. Canada, he concludes, was founded on 'an act of sharing that is almost unimaginable in its generosity'.²² Making the generosity unimaginable has been the task of decades of official history and elite political theory. Making it *reimaginable* is the task of Tully's new realism.

Tully's counternarration of Aboriginal and Canadian history is, therefore, descriptive – as always called for by realism – but Tully finds in the historical account an alternative to the domination and raw power politics that later intervened in the colonizing period and that realists tend to assume characterized the whole of the first people's/settler relationship. Tully's nascent new realism is therefore committed to politics as the art of the possible but it is not degraded by that commitment because the possible is immense. That is why Tully can be both a realist and full of gratitude, optimistic and with a sense of possibility and renewal even though he is intent on identifying and responding to sedimented injustices that he knows can be only, at best, alleviated or recognized but never fully repaired.

A similar strategy was on display in *Strange Multiplicity* where what we might take to be instruments of domination – treaties – turn out in Tully's treatment, in a rather Hegelian way, to have an empowering dimension for those who were supposed to be subjugated by them.

²² Tully, *Public Philosophy* I, pp. 244–5.

The reality of the treaty is said to be something other than subjugation (regardless of intent) and this attention to its performative power rather than, say, its illocutionary force, opens up an alternative that otherwise might not exist. The strategy is rather like perspectival seeing, as in Wittgenstein's example of the duck-rabbit. Once you see things otherwise, it is hard to go back. Wittgenstein calls this seeing as, and it is [arguably connected to – and may even be] the necessary condition of – Tully's recommendation to act as if the world we seek is already here, following Gandhi, that we should 'Be the change we want to see,' to which we return shortly.

First, it is important to note that there remain grave difficulties here, however. Tully is persuasive when he portrays the practices of early Canadian treaty-making on which he pins so much hope, drawing our attention to their mutuality, generosity and creativity. But it remains arguable that such treaties were also instruments of domination, as Geuss would surely have it, even European lures into the colonizers' net. At the very least, there were surely elements of both power *and* mutuality, reciprocity *and* suspicion, pragmatism *and* domination at work in the actual practices that led up to the signing of treaties and then in the work those treaties did in solidifying intercultural relations into settled patterns of (in)equality.

Taiaiake Alfred argues the point in exactly this way, even casting the Nisga'as' Final Agreement of 1998 as 'a strategy of assimilation,' as Tully himself points out.²³ But although Tully cites Alfred, he does not pursue the point further. When Tully focuses on the treaty and not the violence, on the mutuality and not the instrumentalization, he may inspire, he narrates and emplots in a certain partial and contestable way, no less than Geuss does. Tully draws our attention to some elements rather than others, seeking to avoid the pessimism to which realist political theory seems to gravitate almost inexorably. When Tully theorizes intercultural dialogue in Canadian politics, he

²³ Tully, *Public Philosophy* I, p. 275, citing T. Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

may even direct our attention away from some of the actualities to which he says he is committed.²⁴

Tully seems also to assume as a condition of negotiation the very thing we cannot assume in real politics: the mutual respect whose absence is the reason we need negotiation in the first place. Perhaps Tully's point is that if we adopt the manners specified by respect and recognition, we may come to experience more authentically the trust and civility whose absence the principles are designed to redress. This is the power of the 'as if'. However, when Tully says that, with recognition and then dialogue, 'consent can *replace* coercion and conflict', he seems to be a bit dazzled by his own ideal.²⁵ The risk here is that Tully ends up normativizing the real, presuming that the ideal standards to which he rightly aspires can be found and drawn upon in the 'real' world. In this, he mirrors Geuss's realism rather than interrupting it.

Tully addresses these very concerns at the conclusion of his *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, when he turns to what he believes history tells us of the possibility of citizen transformation even in the face of grave injustice and inequality. Through individual and collective effort, he insists, it is possible to glimpse a political life that might otherwise escape us.²⁶ Citizens should strive to model themselves on those who have best represented the ideals of dialogue and equal interaction with others in the past. If they do that, he implores, then history tells us that

²⁴ Notably, Tully does insist that intercultural dialogue is not an ideal speech situation (Tully, *Public Philosophy I*, p. 240), but he also develops his account of recognition obligations out of what he claims are implicit recognitions already granted (234) and in so doing seems to follow Habermas' strategy of identifying immanent norms from our communicative practice. Both of them are drawing on S. E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958 and noting that what you say involves commitments and entailments to which you can be held accountable – although it must be stressed that Tully rejects Habermas' strong quasi-transcendental thesis here, for a clear statement see the essay 'To Think and Act Otherwise', in *Public Philosophy I*.

²⁵ Tully, *Public Philosophy I*, p. 239. For the inspiration behind this idea, see L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, pp. 81 and 104.

²⁶ In this way, if not in others, Tully's work echoes Kant, who insisted that the gap between ideal and reality, or theory and practice, can best be rectified by better aligning practice – the real – with the demands of theory rather than by abandoning theoretically valid ideals. See I. Kant, *Kant: Political Writings*, H. S. Reiss, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

they will – or at least might – succeed; they might recapture the spirit of inclusive dialogue, however elusive it may appear to be.

It is to Mahatma Gandhi that Tully turns to make this argument. Gandhi's politics, Tully argues, offered a form of 'civic organization and uncompromising non-violent confrontation and negotiation with those responsible for imperial relationships' and it did so not with the intention of securing a simply stable *modus vivendi* but rather 'with the aim of *converting* them to non-violent, democratic and peaceful relationships'. Gandhi and his followers did this by conducting themselves 'constructively'. They sought to live *as if* they already existed in the 'alternative world' that they wanted to 'bring about', eschewing violence, coercion, domination and power, and offering instead a 'singular style of civic life' in 'personal practices of self-awareness and self-formation'. This 'as if' solves the paradox of politics in which we can bring about change only by living as if we have already brought it about when we have not yet done so.²⁷ 'These are the daily practices of becoming an exemplary citizen', Tully concludes, and by focusing on their performance in real history we should learn to have optimism, even faith, in the possibilities of a new politics.²⁸ History's exemplarity is brought in to alleviate the paradox of the present moment.²⁹

With this argument, Tully mobilizes a certain contestable account of Gandhi to inspire actors on the contemporary scene. But attention to other elements of Gandhi's politics presses us in a different direction, towards a more radical or more fully agonistic realism than that developed by Tully. Crucially, key elements of Gandhi's politics are missing in Tully's account. These concern most of all the nature of the opponent and of the circumstances in which the struggle for justice always – or at least often – takes place. Gandhi was well aware that particular kinds of action were more appropriate in the face of some

²⁷ For critical commentary on this move, see Stears, *Demanding Democracy*.

²⁸ Tully, *Public Philosophy* II, p. 308.

²⁹ For more on the idea of exemplars, see Melissa Lane: For example, M. Lane, 'Constraint, freedom, and exemplar', in J. Floyd and M. Stears, eds, *Political Philosophy versus History?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

challenges rather than others, both in strategic and principled terms. Of the Palestinians, for example, he wrote in 1947/8: 'I wish they had chosen the way of non-violence in resisting what they rightly regarded an unwarrantable encroachment on their country' but 'nothing can be said against [their] resistance in the face of overwhelming odds.'³⁰ For Gandhi, it was necessary sometimes just to *oppose*, and not to seek to mend or convert. Sometimes, it is simply not appropriate to ask that we see the question from the other's point-of-view. Sometimes, non-violence is not apt. Simon Critchley provides a useful example here, that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was 'eventually driven to drop the pacifism he adopted in the 1930s and participate in the attempted tyrannicide of Hitler and failed *coup d'état* against the National Socialist regime that led to his brutal execution in 1945, shortly before the end of the war. Bonhoeffer's ethics,' Critchley notes, 'does not rest on absolute, law-like principles, but on a freely assumed responsibility that, in extreme situations and as a last resort, is willing to act violently.' For Bonhoeffer, 'Responsible action involves . . . a "willingness to become guilty" (*Bereitschaft zur Schuldübernahme*): this is the price one pays for freedom.'³¹

Similarly, modes of personal transformation that were available to those engaged in the just struggle themselves were also always, in Gandhi's view, affected by the nature of the injustice to which they were addressed. The fight against colonialism, Gandhi thus believed, required not just training in openmindedness, generosity of spirit and a capacity for dialogue, it also demanded a relentless fearlessness and a sense of the profound dangers that politics presented. It was only by developing a deep-rooted *courage*, for example, that one could face-up to, and then begin to resist, the degradations and symbolic violence

³⁰ M. K. Gandhi, 'A Non-Violent Look at Conflict and Violence', *Harijan*, 26 November 1938.

³¹ 'The extreme necessities of a critical situation, Bonhoeffer writes, "appeal directly to the free responsibility of the one who acts, a responsibility not bound by any law." Critchley asks: 'Would such a strategy of resistance have been successful? In Bonhoeffer's case, we know that the attempted tyrannicide failed. But the point here is that I am not preaching nonviolence in all political cases, and no more am I arguing for some easy "clean hands" retreat from the state.' On the contrary.

constantly perpetuated by the false universalisms of the occupier.³² Yet this courage is a crucially different – even contrasting – characteristic to those that might be demanded at another moment, a moment when the most horrific of political evils had been overcome and new political possibilities presented themselves.³³

The picture Tully paints – a picture that prioritizes the possibilities of dialogue, of reason and of a coercion-free politics – may leave us unprepared for other dimensions of political struggles that Tully himself recognizes are ongoing. ‘Be the change you want to be’ is sometimes excellent political advice but, as Gandhi knew, a contextual political judgement may direct us to act otherwise. Tully’s departure from other realists’ faux minimalism (their assumptions about rationality, interest and conflict are, rather, maximal) essentially consists in dedicating himself to the preparation and training on which good democratic politics always depends, as when Tully notes, for example, that a certain ‘kind of respect needs to be cultivated’ among parties to the intercultural dialogue.³⁴ Such training may meet the needs of intercultural dialogue, in which the terrain of mutuality and respect is already mapped out, even if not fully actualized. But sometimes justice and equality must be fought for in ways for which Tully’s respectful subjects of mutuality, trained for intercultural dialogue, may find themselves woefully unready.

³² See M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Boston: Beacon, 1957. We thank Brandon Terry for this point.

³³ Critchley cedes Gandhi to the other side too quickly but concludes rightly when he says: ‘There are contexts where a tenacious politics of nonviolence, such as Gandhi’s Kropotkinesque strategy of *Satyagraha*, can be highly effective. There are contexts where a *mimesis* of Gandhi’s tactics might also prove successful, as was the case for several years in the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s and in the words and deeds of Martin Luther King. There are contexts where techniques of direct action that David Graeber calls “non-violent warfare” may prove effective and timely. There are contexts where a difficult pacifism that negotiates the limits of violence might be enough. But – and this is the point gleaned from our reading of Benjamin – there are also contexts, multiple contexts, too depressingly many to mention, where nonviolent resistance is simply crushed by the forces of the state, the police, and the military. In such contexts, the line separating nonviolent warfare and violent action has to be crossed. Politics is always a question of local conditions, of local struggles and local victories. To judge the multiplicity of such struggles on the basis of an abstract conception of nonviolence is to risk dogmatic blindness.’ For example see, D. Graeber, ‘The New Anarchists’, *New Left Review* 13, January–February 2002.

³⁴ Tully, *Public Philosophy* I, p. 243.

There is no doubt that there is a risk in turning to violence and that is the risk that rightly worries Tully, as it did Hannah Arendt before him: ‘violence begets violence.’ But this worry too has a risk: that it establishes violence as brute facticity tethered to eternal returns of the same, rather than seeing it as a political vernacular itself subject to interruption, reinscription and contestation. The point is made by Robert Young when he says that violence is ‘a phenomenon that has a history’. In Simon Critchley’s parsing, violence ‘is never a question of a single act, but of one’s insertion into a historical process saturated by a cycle of violence and counter-violence. Violence is always a double-act “between human subjects, subjects whose experience of violence interpolates them in a repetition effect from which they cannot free themselves.”’

3. Agonistic realism

Realists reject the ahistorical, abstract, false universalisms of most contemporary political philosophy. But many, like Geuss, talk about the hard realities of history while finding in it remarkably abstract and universal trends and traits – like power, conflict and the quest for stability. For James Tully, in contrast, the history of colonialism reveals that, often, this search for stability masks dangers and coercions. Instead, we should be attentive to historical moments such as the first contacts between Europeans and Aborigines which demonstrate that contrasting groupings are capable of finding, and often have found, mutually satisfactory arrangements capable of actions in concert that are not exhaustively marked by injustice, and coercion. We can experience something similar now and not have to settle for either oppression or perpetual unceasing antagonism if only we practice citizenship and exchange in the right spirit.

Each of these pictures of the historical realities of politics is, of course, partial. Pictures always are. But in this case there is an irony, for the partiality of the political picture presented by these realists would leave citizens crucially unprepared for the real challenges of political life. Geuss’s citizens fail to aspire to (much less explore!) action in concert

that might be transformative. Tully's citizens are more hopeful but possibly less prepared for some of the harsher realities that await them in political life. At times, Tully writes as if he envisions a more mutualist politics in which communities give up on state-centred actions and simply decide to live otherwise, starting new communities, enacting self-governance to the extent they can. There is no doubt that for many, such experiments in living can be transformative, though even they will have their remainders, as we know from the experiences of many utopian communities. Moreover, it is surely the case that simply being the change you want to see is not adequate for those committed to more direct confrontational forms of resistance to injustice. Those seeking mutual dialogue, freedom and justice will certainly sometimes find themselves facing violence, resistance and rejection. Tully's theory and his examples cast little light on the particular strategies they might have to deploy, or on the qualities of character they might need to develop in order occasionally to *overcome or overpower* rather than to convert or transform their rivals.³⁵ Second, Tully fails to explore how even when some in struggle do develop exemplary qualities of character such as those that Tully demands – qualities of openness, mutuality, generosity and consensual exchange – they might nonetheless be parasitic for their success on those who do not. Might it not be the case that every Gandhi needs a Bhagat Singh, every Martin Luther King Jr a Malcolm X?

The struggle to build a more just order requires attention *both* to the aspirational politics of many-sided exchange, to which Tully is so well attuned, and the harsher politics of 'who, whom?' to which Geuss draws our attention. Diminishing coercion on behalf of a more just, inclusive, consensual practice is, it seems to us, clearly desirable but a politics that thinks it is possible to *replace* coercion with consent leaves those who seek justice and equality ill-prepared for (some of) the battles ahead.

This is why we need an alternative realism. That realism, which we call agonistic realism, shares with other realists a sensitivity to the lived experience of historically located political actors, the denial of the

³⁵ Chantal Mouffe offers one sort of analysis in C. Mouffe, *On the Political*, London: Routledge, 2005, and Stears offers another in Stears, *Demanding Democracy*, especially chapter 5.

usefulness of the abstract universal, the alertness to the politics of power and exclusion. But an agonistic realism also crucially differs on some key points. Maintaining the spirit of optimism, of aspiration and of justice evident in Tully, agonistic realism seeks to prepare subjects more fully for the often violent contestations of political life. Indeed, an agonistic realism notes with some concern the *absence* of such contestation: It might be a sign that real recognition and mutuality have been actualized or it might be a sign of successful hegemony by a partial and oppressive or limiting regime. How would we know? Here the 'real' is undecidable.

And here we have the final element of an agonistic realism; it takes nothing for granted, not even the 'real'. In other words, agonistic realism is committed to the essentially contested character of even the 'real' itself. Agonistic realism assumes the critique of realism in art, developed by Jean-Francois Lyotard, is applicable as well to realism in politics: According to Lyotard, the problem with aesthetic realism is that it reaffirms the illusion that we can seize hold of the real, that photographs or television or other media can be windows to the REAL world. But, Lyotard insists, the truth is that the real is itself often an effect. And for this reason we need continuing, perpetual artistic dissent and the promulgation of ever newer forms of artistic endeavour to avoid complacency and even terror.³⁶ As Catherine Belsey explains in her gloss on Lyotard, the problem is not just that the picture we get from realists is inaccurate, as if a better description of the real would suffice and correct our vision. It is rather that realism protects us from doubt. It offers a picture of the world that we seem to know and in the process confirms our status as knowing subjects by reaffirming that picture as true. In sum, art here is confirmatory. Its message is that things are as we think they are. And we are who we think we are.

When Belsey explains that realist art generates a sense of security precisely by scaring us, she provides tremendous insight into Geuss's

³⁶ J. Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', in I. Hassan and S. Hassan, eds, *Innovation/Renovation: New Perspectives on the Humanities*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983, pp. 329–41.

project, which seems so frightening but is nonetheless, attractive.³⁷ Such attraction, perversely, come from its capacity to frighten. What we fear feels more real than anything else and this, paradoxically, is reassuring, for in our fear we do not doubt, and this state of indubitability is reassuring even as what it portends is not.

Does this mean agonistic realism rejects the real it aims to encounter and mobilize, turning its back as it does so on the reassurances that others seem to crave? Not at all. It is not a question of being for or against the real. It is rather, as Jacques Derrida says, a matter of deconstructing the binary between artifice and actuality while nonetheless avoiding the fall into some sort of idealist rejection of the real. Such a rejection denies the actuality of 'violence and suffering, war and death' and casts these as 'constructed and fictive . . . so that nothing ever really happens, only images, simulacra and delusions'. Rather than partake in such denial, 'we must keep in mind,' said Derrida, 'that any coherent deconstruction is about singularity, about events and about what is ultimately irreducible in them.'³⁸ As we also know from Derrida, such singularity can be powerful in its impossible exemplarity for the future. As agonistic realists try to rebuild our futures together, we do well look to the events of history, and to the essentially contested realities of our own time in order to inaugurate or maintain futures worth having.

Doing so means taking up the storytelling imperative of past and future. That is to say, contra most realists, agonistic realists know the facts do not speak for themselves. They are disputed and framed and emplotted and sometimes hidden and disguised and obscured. They depend upon context which is always contestable, and upon practices of re-contextualization, which are always political. The real is not objective and it cannot stand on its own two feet. It needs care, nurturance, contestation and support. It is the public world on which politics depends and over which political battles occur. Although we have

³⁷ C. Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 101–2.

³⁸ See J. Derrida, 'The Deconstruction of Actuality', 1993 interview quoted in C. Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 59.

criticized Tully for sometimes telling only half the story – presenting treaties as transformative instruments of mutuality and not as, also and undecidably, mechanism of domination – that criticism is part of a contretemps over what stories are most empowering for dissidents and for their shared futures of co-governance, imagination of which often animates dissidents to risk their lives and futures when they act.

When Tully tells the stories of great pacifists and collective experiments in living, he seeks to make real something whose reality we cannot take for granted. In this, he follows in the wake of Hannah Arendt who was committed to telling stories of exemplary actions partly because oppressive powers are committed to effacing them, and even more so because of the reason for that: such stories have the power to incite or redeem others who are otherwise isolated by their ignorance of the courage or imagination of their fellows. Arendt wished for more stories like's, the World War II German soldier who enlisted military vehicles to smuggle Jews to safety and facilitated the efforts of the Jewish underground in Vilna. Such stories showed, Arendt argued, that 'nothing can ever be "practically useless"', not as long as someone can tell its story (EIJ 233). Looking for heroic, courageous acts as a resource of political life may seem idealistic, but it is not so, Arendt insisted. She cited a Talmudic story – of the 'thirty-six unknown righteous men who always exist and without whom the world would go to pieces' – to justify the place of 'quixotic morality in [realist] politics.' Those 36 men, as it were, are always there, their stories waiting to be told and released into the in-between of human affairs.³⁹ But we now know that they come in many guises, ethnicities, genders and dimensions. If we are too often unaware of them that is surely because they are all too often invisible in the public sphere for reasons that Tully has detailed and with his work seeks to rectify.

³⁹ One of them was, in her view: 'Judah Magnes whose seemingly idealistic support for Jewish-Arab cooperation and federation in Palestine (JW 445) was for Arendt entirely realistic.' For more on this see J. Ackerman and B. Honig, 'Un-Chosen: Judith Butler's Jewish Modernity', in I. Zyrtal, J. Picard, J. Revel and M. Steinberg, eds, *Thinking Jewish Modernity: Thinkers, Writers, Artists, Shapers of Jewish Identity*, forthcoming.