# THE IDEOLOGICAL RISK OF ANTI-IDEALISM

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# Introduction

The main aim of this thesis is to contribute to the debate between ideal and non-ideal theory by exploring the ideological risks involved in restricting political philosophy to one specific methodology while dismissing the other as intrinsically flawed or defective. Given that Charles Mills has done significant work exploring the ideological risks of focusing exclusively on ideal theory, it is important also to explore the ideological risks associated with focusing exclusively on the non-ideal methodology. This thesis does not advocate for the rejection of non-ideal theorizing; rather, it seeks to articulate the stance of certain non-ideal theorists, namely the anti-idealist stance, which holds that ideal theory is intrinsically flawed and defective. From this perspective, political philosophy must avoid the resources provided by ideal theorizing in order to be more accurate and effective in addressing existing political problems.

The anti-idealist stance is the main target of my critique. Rather than considering non-ideal theory in general as potentially ideological, I will highlight that it is the anti-idealist stance that presents the problematic position. To do this, the thesis will undertake a dialectical exploration in which I argue that the anti-idealist position involves at least three features embraced by different non-ideal theorists: the dispensability of ideal models, reliance exclusively on internal normative standards to evaluate political improvements, and the anti-utopian outlook. These features conduce to a political philosophy that produces a short-range social criticism and introduces a bias toward reformist change over revolutionary change. I will argue that both implications lead to a political philosophy that reflects and perpetuates illicit social privileges, thus making this kind of theorizing ideological according to Mills's criteria.

I have structured the thesis as follows: Chapter 1 aims to explain the debate between ideal and non-ideal theory. This explanation will clarify the relevance of Mills's ideological critique and outline the conditions under which a theory may be considered objectionably ideological. Once this task is accomplished, I will synthesize the anti-idealist stance by examining the work of non-ideal theorists who actively argue against ideal theory, such as Amartya Sen, Gerald Gaus, Michael Huemer, and others. In light of their arguments against ideal theorizing, I will identify the core elements of the anti-idealist stance.

The second chapter aims to lay the groundwork for the ideological critique. It involves an exploration of the normativity of revolutionary change and how it differs from reformist change. I will defend Luxemburg's perspective on the distinction between these two political strategies for achieving political transformation and explain why there are certain oppressions or injustices that cannot be addressed through reformist change. This consideration is particularly relevant to my thesis because, if revolution is the only way to overcome certain injustices and oppressions, a political theory that recommends reform to the exclusion of revolution ignores or fails to challenge these injustices and oppressions. Finally, the chapter will discuss the relevance of the notion of revolutionary consciousness as a necessary condition for the occurrence of revolutionary struggle. In this context, I will explore the importance of considering alternative political arrangements as normative goals that the revolutionary struggle seeks to attain.

The third chapter will elaborate in detail the ideological critique of anti-idealism as a form of theorizing that reflects and perpetuates illicit social privileges. I will first present how anti-idealism reflects illicit social privileges. This occurs because anti-idealism constrains theorizing to a form of short-range social criticism, given its reliance on internal normative standards. These standards must be drawn either from what Michael Huemer has called uncontroversial shared normative intuitions or from an independently developed social theory.

If based on uncontroversial shared normative intuitions, the evaluation of injustice is limited in scope, leaving deeply contested forms of illicit social privilege unaddressed. If based on a broader social theory, the anti-idealist faces a dilemma in building the theory: either the theory must appeal again to uncontroversial shared normative intuitions, reproducing the same limitations, or it must adopt a more substantive normative framework. However, given anti-idealism's rejection of ideal theorizing, it cannot draw from theories developed through that methodology. As a result, the only available option is to ground social theory in uncontroversial shared normative intuitions, ultimately leading back to the charge of short-range social criticism. Anti-idealism perpetuates illicit social privileges because short-range social criticism favors reformist or incremental change over revolutionary action. I will explain, following Rosa Luxemburg, why the incremental or reformist alternative is incapable of eliminating some illicit social privileges that can only be removed by revolution, and instead of contributing to their elimination, it helps preserve them. Furthermore, the lack of engagement with ideal models of a fully just society reduces the perspective of political change to what is feasible within the current political structure, excluding radical political change exemplified by revolutionary struggle. The development of revolutionary consciousness requires not only an account of current injustices embedded in the structure of society but also a normative political alternative that represents an overcoming of that political structure. I will show that this normative alternative necessarily requires some level of idealization.

**Chapter One: The Ideology Critique of Ideal Theory and the Anti-Idealist Stance**

This chapter aims to explain how to understand the anti-idealist stance within the general debate between ideal and non-ideal theory. For this reason, the chapter is divided as follows: The first section presents the debate between ideal and non-ideal theory and the philosophical implications of the preference for one methodology over the other. The second section presents Charles Mills's critique of ideal theory as ideology, which is relevant for understanding the conditions a theory must satisfy to be qualified as ideological, and why this charge may apply to ideal theory. Finally, I present the anti-idealist stance as a particular position held by certain non-ideal theorists who consider ideal theory irrelevant or counterproductive, and I outline the commitments a political theory must embrace to avoid ideal theorization in political philosophy.

**1.1 The Debate Between Ideal and Nonideal Theory**

The notion of ideal theory, traceable to Plato's exploration of a just polis, has fueled extensive discussion since John Rawls expanded upon it in *A Theory of Justice*. In this work, Rawls introduces the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory, sparking debates not only about how justice but also other normative values should be theorized. This debate has led to inquiries into the scope of political philosophy and the relevance of using ideal methodologies to devise institutional designs that best reflect the normative principles developed under ideal conditions. Given Rawls' significance in contemporary discussions on this distinction, it is pertinent to present how he articulates it in *A Theory of Justice* to provide a clear overview of the dimensions of the debate.

According to Rawls, developing a theory of justice involves two distinct stages. The first stage evaluates the principles of justice that would govern a well-ordered society, in which "(1) everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice, and (2) the basic social institutions generally satisfy and are generally known to satisfy these principles" (Rawls 1999, 4). In such a society, all members "act justly and do their part in upholding just institutions" (Rawls 1999, 8). This stage assumes that adequate natural and social conditions allow everyone to fulfill their obligations to these principles of justice. This assumption is crucial because, without adequate conditions, it is unreasonable to expect that all individuals will fulfill their respective parts in upholding justice.

Once we establish the first stage and envision a fully just society, we can then evaluate how to address actual injustices in the real world. This includes dealing with situations where members of society fail to comply with the principles of justice or where conditions hinder individuals from fulfilling their obligations. Rawls lists several issues under this heading, including:

> Such topics as the theory of punishment, the doctrine of just war, and the justification of the various ways of opposing unjust regimes, ranging from civil disobedience and conscientious objection to militant resistance and revolution. Also included here are questions of compensatory justice and of weighing one form of institutional injustice against another (Rawls 1999, 8).

Rawls refers to these two stages as strict compliance theory and partial compliance theory. He assigns priority to strict compliance theory, arguing that it provides a systematic foundation for addressing the problems that partial compliance theory must confront (Rawls 1999, 8).

An important consideration in Rawls' distinction between strict and partial compliance is that he characterizes ideal theory as strict compliance theory and non-ideal theory as partial

compliance theory. This characterization may suggest that the distinction focuses exclusively on compliance. However, the structure of Rawls' theory, alongside the critiques and defenses it has generated since *A Theory of Justice*, reveals that other dimensions are entangled in the ideal/non-ideal theory distinction. These aspects risk being overlooked if we view the distinction solely through the lens of compliance.

Laura Valentini provides a conceptual map for understanding the debate between ideal and non-ideal theory. For her, beyond the contrast between strict and partial compliance, two additional dimensions are relevant: utopian versus realistic theories and end-state versus transitional theories (Valentini 2012, 1). Let us briefly consider these dimensions.

According to Valentini, much of the debate surrounding ideal theory focuses on the feasibility constraints shaping principles of justice (Valentini 2012, 4). She argues that these constraints distinguish ideal theorists from non-ideal theorists, framing the distinction as one between utopian and realistic theories. Rather than a binary classification, this contrast is best understood as a continuum, ranging from fully utopian to highly realistic theories. In this framework, a fully utopian theory, when formulating principles of justice, disregards feasibility constraints, while a highly realistic approach incorporates substantial real-world constraints in developing its principles (Valentini 2012, 4). Thus, a fully utopian theory represents one extreme of ideal theory, while a highly realistic theory embodies an extreme of non-ideal theory.

This contrast is intriguing because it defies a clear-cut boundary between ideal and non-ideal theories. Valentini addresses this ambiguity by positioning Rawls' theory at this boundary, as it attracts critiques from theorists who consider it either too realistic or too utopian. An example of a more utopian ideal theory is G.A. Cohen's account, which holds that principles of justice are fact-insensitive and thus not subject to factual constraints. This contrasts with

Rawls's approach, which considers certain constraints based on reasonable assumptions about human interaction, such as moderate scarcity, limited altruism, and agents' rationality.

From a realist perspective, critiques of Rawls' approach can take two forms. First, while justice is crucial in political philosophy, other relevant social ideals—such as legitimacy, democracy, and peace—must also be considered. For instance, Waldron argues that Rawlsian theory should address the "circumstances of politics," which include the possibility of disagreement over fair terms of cooperation and individuals' willingness to accept particular criteria of justice (Valentini 2012, 6). This realist approach incorporates facts about people's dispositions toward justice, which Rawls' acknowledgment of pluralism does not fully address.

Secondly, some critiques argue that theorizing principles of justice requires consideration of real-world factors like selfishness, corruptibility, and the influence of power structures on views of justice (Valentini 2012, 7). According to this critique, taking these factors seriously enables principles of justice that are more effective in guiding action and more likely to motivate people to pursue justice (Valentini 2012, 7).

The final dimension, the contrast between end-state and transitional theories, builds on Rawls' concept of a fully just social structure as a long-term goal achievable from our present political reality (Valentini 2012, 8). In this framework, we evaluate each step by how closely it brings us toward this ultimate goal, classifying these steps as transitional states. Rawls emphasizes that this overarching objective should guide our immediate efforts to improve the real world. Thus, end-state theory aligns with ideal theory, while transitional theory corresponds to non-ideal theory.

Having presented these dimensions, I offer two further remarks. First, Huemer observes that, although ideal and non-ideal theory are primarily contrasted in the context of theorizing justice, we can apply this framework to other normative values (Huemer 2016, 215). Huemer

suggests that we can use scenarios of strict compliance to test various normative principles, while scenarios of partial compliance allow us to evaluate how society might address the violation of those principles.

The second remark concerns a complication in using the distinction between end-state and transitional theories to illustrate the contrast between ideal and non-ideal theory. Valentini's exposition implies that non-ideal theorists must necessarily be transitional theorists. Yet the example Valentini provides—Sen—emphasizes justice improvements without endorsing any end-state ideal (Valentini 2012, 9). Thus, classifying Sen's approach as "transitional" is misleading, as it lacks a defined endpoint for transition. In this regard, it may be more accurate to characterize ideal theory as one that incorporates both end-state and transitional stages, while non-ideal theory disregards this two-stage structure.

At this point, we can postulate that ideal theory theorizes from scenarios of strict compliance to determine fundamental normative principles. It considers these principles a prerequisite for addressing scenarios of partial compliance, disregarding feasibility constraints related to undesirable facts about current human behavior to varying degrees, which makes it more or less utopian. Finally, it embraces the distinction between end-state and transitional states to evaluate societal justice improvements.

It is now time to supplement this account with overlooked elements that merit consideration. Ideal theory, in seeking to identify the fundamental principles of justice under strict compliance, also employs these principles to design institutions that best embody them. This combination of normative principles and institutional arrangements results in an idealized model of justice.

The idealized model serves two distinct functions. First, it operates as a top-down framework for assessing injustices and oppressions in actual society. This model must be

defined initially to enable evaluations of how current society diverges from it, thereby identifying normative principles applicable under non-ideal conditions (Adams 2019, 3). Second, in relation to end-state and transitional theories, the idealized model functions as a long-term political goal relevant to efforts aimed at transforming political realities. This aspect of ideal theory may correspond to what Amy Allen terms a forward-looking notion of progress, where a normative goal guides and advances political actions. In contrast, a backward-looking notion of progress lacks a specific goal, instead evaluating progress by society's internal standards (Allen 2016, 11-12). This latter perspective aligns more closely with certain non-ideal approaches to justice, which I will discuss next.

We should clarify why nonideal theory prioritizes partial compliance scenarios over strict compliance scenarios. Nonideal theorists argue that while principles of justice developed under strict compliance conditions may be useful for identifying injustices, they often fail to provide clear guidance on what to do in cases of partial compliance (Valentini 2012, 2). Valentini draws on David Miller's challenge,[1] which goes as follows: principles of justice, when designed under the assumption of strict compliance, imply that individuals are bound to fulfill their fair share according to these principles. However, in cases of partial compliance, where some individuals do not fulfill their roles, the question arises of whether others should perform their fair share, do more than their fair share, or perhaps even less (Valentini 2012, 3-4).

Consider, for example, poverty alleviation. If circumstances allow one to contribute more than what strict compliance would demand, it may seem fair to do so, suggesting that fairness could require going beyond strict compliance. Valentini also discusses Miller's example, where doing less than one's fair share can still intuitively seem fair. Take the case of

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[1] See, Miller, D. (2013).

an unjust arrest of a political activist: ideally, the public would have a duty to protest for the activist's release. Yet, knowing that no one else will protest, your obligation to participate becomes unclear. Protesting in a way that neither aids the activist nor protects you from personal risk may not constitute a fair duty. Non-ideal theory, therefore, highlights the limitations of principles crafted solely for strict compliance cases, as they often fail to provide clear guidance on how to act in partial compliance scenarios. For these reasons, it is unreasonable to insist that an ideal theory be fully developed prior to engaging in non-ideal theorizing, since ideal theory does not, by itself, guarantee practical guidance under nonideal conditions.

As noted, Valentini's nonideal theorist argues that adequate theorizing about justice—or any normative value—must incorporate all relevant facts about human behavior, including insights into human nature and the real ways power relations shape behavior and influence our understanding of these values (Valentini 2012, 6-7). Nonideal theory brings a critical edge, countering the common critique that its principles are less demanding than those developed under ideal conditions. Charles Mills highlights this issue, asserting that nonideal theory's strength lies in beginning with specific societal problems, identifying their core features, and mapping how these issues persist (Mills 2005, 169). Both ideal and nonideal theories use abstractions, but nonideal theory employs them to clarify structural issues like sexism, racism, and classism by removing irrelevant complexities. In contrast, ideal theory constructs abstractions that assume scenarios detached from present realities, focusing on how people should behave rather than on how they actually behave (Stahl 2022, 6). By understanding why people behave as they do within particular social structures, nonideal theory can trace the sources of oppressive behavior, guiding critique aimed at removing, replacing, or modifying these sources. This approach aligns with nonideal theory's broader goal: to develop a "workable plan to ameliorate prevailing social injustices" (Talisse 2017, 60).

Following Mills, we can add two further considerations regarding Valentini's portrayal of nonideal theory as realist: its contrast with ideal theory's commitment to an idealized social ontology and an idealized cognitive sphere (Mills 2005, 168–169). The first issue concerns ideal theory's assumption of an atomistic social ontology, a starting point that some ethical theories[2], such as care ethics, criticize for implying specific commitments to liberal political theory (Mills 2005, 168). The second issue highlights that, for nonideal theory, it is essential to account for the ways in which systems of domination produce epistemic distortions in the perception of current oppressions (Mills 2005, 174). Thus, for authors like Mills, nonideal theory must critically explore the normative concepts that shape our understanding of social reality and assess how these concepts are structured to reproduce relations of domination.

Regarding the contrast presented by Valentini between end-state and transitional theories: even though nonideal theory is not committed to the consideration of end-states as a normative goal that society must pursue, it does not completely reject the idea of striving to achieve the ideal scenario as a future outcome of confronting injustice and oppression. As Mills states:

> A nonideal approach is also superior to an ideal approach in being better able to realize the ideals, by virtue of realistically recognizing the obstacles to their acceptance and implementation. […] Ideal theory, by contrast, too often simply disregards such problems altogether or, ignoring the power relations involved, assumes it is just a matter of coming up with better arguments. Summing it all up, then, one could say epigrammatically that the best way to bring about the ideal is by recognizing the nonideal, and that by assuming the ideal or the near-ideal, one is only guaranteeing the perpetuation of the nonideal (Mills 2005, 181-182).

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[2] For a good explanation of how care ethics aligns more closely with a relational social ontology, see Held (2005).

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This perspective adds a new dimension to our understanding of the role of non-ideal theory. While Sen maintains that end states play a minimal role in theorizing social improvements, Mills advocates for a view that treats ideal scenarios as end states emerging from the confrontation of real-world injustices. This implies that idealized models, rather than serving as goals for society to pursue, are abstract outcomes that evolve as we address current injustices and oppression. Although compatible with Sen's account, this view significantly reverses the order of analysis. Even if ideal scenarios are seen as desirable outcomes, their role in addressing current injustices remains secondary. Given Mills's arguments about the ideological character of ideal theory, which I will develop in the next section, it is preferable to avoid ideal theorizing as an initial step when theorizing justice and other normative values.

Finally, it is crucial to consider the distinction between end-state and transitional theories in light of a specific understanding of progress. While the primacy of end-states in ideal theory compromises this form of theorizing by linking it to a notion of moral progress toward that ideal and justifying any transitional state that leades society to this goal, nonideal theorizing adopts a more cautious stance regarding the role of progress in political philosophy. Within nonideal theorizing, two perspectives emerge: the first is skeptical of the ideal of progress, while the second argues that progress must be understood differently from how it is conceived in ideal theory.

The first perspective, exemplified by postcolonial theory, contends that the discourse of progress functions as a defense of a normative goal presented as universal and neutral, yet ultimately reflects the particular values of Western societies that have historically colonized others. In this view, more advanced societies justify their interventions in the political and social lives of colonized regions as a means of guiding them toward the ideal society. However, such narratives primarily serve to consolidate the supremacy of Western societies. Therefore,

we should reject or at least set aside notions of progress to mitigate the risks of perpetuating colonial power relations (McCarthy 2009; Quijano 2020).

Conversely, the second understanding of progress aligns with a more nuanced conception that identifies progress not as a definitive goal but in relation to how our currently accepted values are embedded within societal structures and institutions. If our society genuinely recognizes that all members deserve equal treatment under the law, instances of discrimination signify a violation of our accepted normative principles. Thus, our current normative standards can guide us in pursuing improvements within society. This perspective relies on the assumption that our existing normative standards are correct, which remains contestable. If those standards are entangled with power relations, as non-ideal theory highlights, then applying them without revision is at least problematic. Therefore, for instance, authors of the Frankfurt School assert that critical theory must focus on refining these normative standards to overcome this risk (Honneth 2009; Jaeggi 2018)[3].

Given this characterization of both approaches, theorists may find one methodology more compelling and adopt it while drawing on elements of the other to enrich their accounts. Some critics of ideal theory argue that it cannot provide an adequate normative framework on its own and must be supplemented by non-ideal considerations. More radical critics, however, contend that ideal theory is fundamentally flawed and should be set aside entirely, with theorizing focused solely on non-ideal theory. Robert Talisse refers to this stance as "anti-idealism" (Talisse, 2017, p. 61). Thus, we can define anti-idealism as follows:

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[3] I consider the Frankfurt School critical theory a form of non-ideal theorizing, given its clear rejection of appeals to ideal models for theorizing justice and its focus on elaborating an analysis of how oppression and injustice are articulated in society. Although this methodology connects with other non-ideal theorists in the Anglo-American tradition, it has a particular emphasis on tracing the historical development of rationality as a collective project, which allows for the refinement of normative standards (Honneth 2009). However, this project, while attractive, faces many problems that I will discuss in the final chapter of the thesis.

**Anti-idealism:** The position that political philosophy must reject ideal theory, viewing it as either useless or counterproductive.

In the following section, I will present a prominent argument for anti-idealism, which claims that ideal theory is counterproductive because it is ideological. After presenting this argument, I will examine additional anti-idealist considerations to identify certain commitments that the anti-idealist stance must embrace.

## 1.2 Ideal theory as Ideology

In his seminal paper "Ideal Theory as Ideology," Mills develops two key theses regarding the contrast between ideal and non-ideal theory. First, he argues that non-ideal theory maintains a universalist scope, applying to the experiences of various oppressed groups without lapsing into particularism or relativism. Second and most relevant to this discussion, Mills contends that ideal theory is ideological in a pejorative sense. Given that there are many ways in which ideology could be understood, it is pertinent to consider what Mills actually presents as ideology in the context of his paper[4]:

> I will argue that the so-called ideal theory more dominant in mainstream ethics is in crucial respects obfuscatory, and can indeed be thought of as in part ideological, in the pejorative sense of a set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege (Mills 2005, 166).

Given the previous quotation it is possible to articulate the following conditions for a theory to qualify as ideological:

**Ideological theory**: A theory is ideological if it reflects or perpetuates illicit social privileges (Mills 2005, 178)

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[4] For more information about other uses of the term 'ideology' see Eagleton, T. (1991).

I will articulate Mills's ideological critique of ideal theory in two stages. The first concerns the way in which ideal theory reflects illicit social privileges; the second concerns the way in which it perpetuates them. Though analytically distinct, these stages are closely connected.

For explaining how ideal theory reflects illicit social privileges, Mills starts with a sociological observation about the composition of academy (Mills 2005, 172). Specifically, he notes that academic philosophy is dominated by individuals who are members of privileged groups, groups that are not directly affected by current forms of injustice or oppression in the same way that marginalized groups are (Mills 2005, 175). Due to their relative insulation from these injustices, these privileged theorists are less motivated to view addressing such issues as an immediate concern. Consequently, they are more likely to adopt theoretical methodologies, such as ideal theory, that abstract away from the urgent realities of injustice.[5] These theorists further rationalize their lack of engagement with these problems by appealing to the notion that their theoretical frameworks are intended to be neutral and comprehensive, claiming that such models will eventually address issues of injustice once fully developed. However, Mills argues that this abstraction is not a sign of theoretical neutrality, but rather a reflection of the privileged theorists' reduced sensitivity to the significance of these real-world problems (Mills 2005, 172; Stahl 2022, 9).

How does ideal theory actively contribute to the perpetuation of these illicit social privileges[6]? There are two main processes through which this perpetuation may occur. The first

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[5] Mills supports this idea by appealing to a weaker version of standpoint theory, claiming that certain realities are more clearly seen from the perspective of oppressed groups. This view has drawn particular attention in the feminist tradition, as Harding (2003) highlights, and Fricker (2007) further develops it with her notion of hermeneutical injustice. Fricker argues that certain groups face epistemic injustice when they lack the conceptual tools necessary to articulate an adequate account of their oppression. It is therefore crucial to pay special attention to their experiences and to provide spaces where they can develop the new concepts needed to express their oppression. If they are limited to using only existing conceptual resources—resources not originally developed to address these experiences—they risk failing to fully articulate their own reality.

[6] It is important to clarify that by "illicit social privileges," I mean privileges that are morally objectionable, such as white privilege or male privilege. While many privileges fall into this category, we must also leave room for certain privileges that are not morally objectionable, such as having a preferential parking spot.

lies in the ideal theorist's assumption that theorizing about justice in non-ideal conditions must wait until the idealized model is fully developed. However, given that idealized models are themselves subjects of deep controversy, even among ideal theorists, the project of justice becomes ensnared in protracted debates over which idealized model to adopt. As a result, ideal theorists endlessly postpone the engagement with justice under non-ideal conditions (Mills 2005, 179).

Mills strengthens this point by highlighting how scholars in the traditions of Rawls and Nozick frequently avoid confronting issues such as race, gender, class, and colonialism (Mills 2005, 179). These are not peripheral issues but central injustices in the real world. Yet, they remain unexplored as the focus remains on abstract debates. In this way, ideal theory, by delaying the engagement with pressing injustices, unwittingly functions to preserve the very social privileges it ought to dismantle. Thus, the preservation of privilege is not a byproduct of ideal theory but an effect of its own procedural commitments.

The second process involves ideal theorists crafting what is purported to be a comprehensive and neutral account of justice, which they present as the ideal model toward which society should aspire. However, by overlooking pressing contemporary injustices, theorists risk embedding elements of the status quo within this seemingly neutral framework (Mills 2005, 175). These elements, while appearing innocuous or impartial, are in fact deeply contentious. This risk is particularly salient because the ideal theorist's detachment from current injustices often reflects a failure to address the underlying causes and effects of oppression (Mills 2005, 168-169). Consequently, what ideal theorists present as neutral may actually perpetuate problematic values and structures, thereby reinforcing existing social privileges rather than challenging them.

Mills reinforces this critique by examining normative concepts like purity, autonomy, and freedom. Though these concepts may initially appear neutral, their historical applications reveal how they have reinforced oppressive narratives. For instance, purity has been used to justify racial and sexual segregation, promoting racial separation and fueling misogynistic attitudes toward female sexuality. Autonomy has often been invoked in ways that devalue caregiving relationships—relationships that acknowledge human dependence and have predominantly involved women as primary caregivers. Similarly, freedom has been treated as a nominal value under capitalism, used to legitimize the subordination of the proletariat, with agreements between employer and worker deemed morally acceptable despite the worker's disadvantaged position in negotiating the terms (Mills 2005, 176-177).

Finally, because the ideal model is intended as a benchmark for assessing current injustices, its potential incorporation of elements that perpetuate oppression, while being presented as neutral, can result in a complacent evaluation of contemporary injustices. This failure in critical scrutiny permits the preservation of illicit social privileges. Moreover, by relegating non-ideal theorizing to a secondary role, ideal theorists diminish their ability to address and rectify these ideological blind spots effectively, thus reinforcing the very injustices they purportedly seek to challenge (Mills 2005, 178).

Some clarifications are necessary. Mills's reasoning is speculative, inferring consequences that do not necessarily follow and relying on the potential risks of focusing on ideal theory while neglecting non-ideal theory. However, one could argue, as Estlund does, that Mills ultimately invites the ideal theorist to engage more seriously with non-ideal theorizing. This engagement ensures that, in the process of developing a comprehensive account of justice, the normative concepts employed are rigorously tested to minimize the risk of them becoming ideological (Estlund 2020, 18). But even if I agree with Estlund's point, it is important to recognize that Mills's critique goes further than simply advising caution in ideal theory. It

positions non-ideal theory as a superior alternative. If non-ideal theory offers a more reliable path toward understanding justice, while ideal theory carries the inherent risk of ideological distortion, then the case for continuing to pursue ideal theory becomes weak. If one method is demonstrably better at addressing real injustices, and the other risks becoming ideological, there seems little reason to persist with the latter.

At this point, ideal theorists can offer three possible responses. The first is to reject Mills's argument entirely, asserting that ideal theory poses no significant risk of ideological distortion, or, at worst, only a negligible one. The second is to acknowledge the risk but claim that ideal theory still provides indispensable insights that non-ideal theory cannot offer on its own (Talisse, 2017). The third, and the position I will defend, is that the risk of ideological distortion exists in both ideal and non-ideal theories (Adams, 2019).[7]

The first option is untenable, as it necessitates dismissing the ideological critique wholesale, a critique that, as I shall argue, demands serious attention. The second, while offering valuable insights, overlooks the fact that non-ideal theory is equally susceptible to the risk of ideological distortion. Recognizing this shared vulnerability allows us to address the problem of ideological distortion across both frameworks (Adams 2019, 16).

## 1.3 The Anti-idealist Stance

The anti-idealist stance is not merely a rejection of ideal theory; it also includes substantive critiques of what makes such theories flawed. In this sense, non-ideal theory, as elaborated by anti-idealists, must include certain features that distinguish it from alternatives that regard both modes of theorizing as valuable and potentially complementary in achieving a

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[7] Adams advances an argument similar to mine, but his approach is to claim that the rejection of ideal theory arises from the pervasive influence of capitalism and managerialism, which impose a demand for immediate, practical solutions within the academy. In this process, the academic field—once critical of capitalism—gradually conforms to the very logic of the capitalist system, reshaping its internal dynamics to align with the imperatives of efficiency and expediency, thus reinforcing the rejection of ideal theory. (Adams 2019, 9 – 10)

deeper understanding of what justice demands. In this thesis, I identify at least three features that the anti-idealist stance must embrace, as presented by different non-ideal theorists who criticize ideal theory. These three features are the dispensability of the ideal, reliance on internal standards for political improvement, and the anti-utopian outlook.

## a) Dispensability of the ideal

The dispensability of the ideal is a feature highlighted in several accounts that reject ideal theory, arguing that ideal models are unnecessary for theorizing about justice or other normative values (Sen 2006; Huemer 2016; Wiens 2017; Gaus 2016). According to this view, both ideal and non-ideal theories aim to address and overcome current injustices and oppressions, seeking real-world improvements. However, ideal theory requires constructing an ideal model of a completely just society before identifying injustices and oppressions, a step anti-idealist theorists argue is not necessary for addressing these issues (Sen 2006; Huemer 2016; Wiens 2017). For anti-ideal theorists, an ideal model of a completely just society is unnecessary for effecting social change in the present context, as it is possible to identify and address current grievances directly, based on the actual complaints of oppressed groups (Sen 2006, 218). Alternatively, it is intuitively possible to identify ways in which the current world could be improved, without considering how it could be a completely just society (Huemer 2016, 232-233)[8].

Two interesting examples of this idea are presented by Sen and Huemer. In Sen's case, the idea is that it is possible to improve current society by comparing the actual state with another state that either lacks or possesses a particular characteristic. He compares this to the

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[8] Huemer provides an example of how intuitions can guide us in addressing issues of justice without the need for deep theoretical analysis. He compares the case of someone attempting to access a marketplace where they can obtain the food necessary for survival, asserting that it is intuitively wrong to deny that person entry. Similarly, Huemer argues that opposing immigration unjustly deprives people of the opportunity to engage in voluntary exchanges with those willing to trade goods (Huemer 2016, 231). This example is significant, and I will discuss it in detail in the third chapter.

task of comparing mountains and identifying which is taller. According to Sen, any consideration of the tallest mountain is irrelevant for making that comparison. Similarly, when considering injustices and oppression, one can identify a better state of affairs by simply considering a state in which certain injustices or oppressions are not present (Sen 2006)[9]. Huemer makes a similar point using an example of facing a problem with your car while driving. After a quick inspection, you determine that the issue is with one of the tires, and the solution is to replace it. In the process of identifying the problem and solving it, there is no consideration of what a perfect car would look like (Huemer 2016, 214-215).

In both examples, the process of normative theorizing must begin with a situation marked by a specific form of oppression or injustice, O. Once O is identified, it becomes clear that a state of affairs without O is preferable and should be pursued, even without the guidance of an ideal model. Anti-idealist theorists thus reject the view that social change must be directed toward achieving a state that aligns entirely with an idealized model. Instead, they regard social transformation as valuable in itself, independent of any consideration of an ideal model.

**b) Reliance on internal standards for political improvement**

One feature of anti-idealism stems from a critique that assumes ideal theory offers no distinctive insights for theorizing about justice or other normative values that non-ideal theory might provide. Another feature arises from a critique that confronts ideal theory directly, viewing it as counterproductive. Unlike Mills's ideological critique, however, this critique

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[9] The following quotation exemplifies Sen's idea: "I now take up the second question, concerning the hypothesis that the identification of the best is necessary, even if not sufficient, to rank any two alternatives in terms of justice. In the usual sense of necessity, this would be a somewhat odd possibility. In the discipline of comparative judgments in any field, the relative assessment of two alternatives tends in general to be a matter between them, without there being the necessity of beseeching the help of a third—'irrelevant'—alternative. Indeed, it is not at all obvious why, in making the judgment that some social arrangement x is better than an alternative arrangement y, we have to invoke the identification that some quite different alternative z is the 'best' or the 'right' social arrangement. In arguing for a Picasso over a Dali, we do not need to get steamed up about identifying the perfect picture in the world, which would beat the Picassos and the Dalis and all other paintings in the world" (Sen 2006, 222).

targets the problems in setting an ideal model as a goal toward which society must advance to improve the status quo. Gerald Gaus exemplifies this critique: ideal theory, he argues, is committed to constructing an ideal model that guides us toward a perfectly just society. However, fixating on this ideal can lead us to overlook more achievable improvements, as we risk pursuing the distant goal of a fully just society while missing opportunities for feasible progress. In this sense, the ideal model "tyrannizes over our thinking, preventing us from discovering more just social conditions" (Gaus 2016, xix).

Gaus develops his critique using the concept of "neighborhoods" (Gaus 2016, 187–188). These neighborhoods represent the set of possible states of the world that can be reached, given the current social structure. Based on the characteristics of the present world, certain accessible transformations can lead to new social states, which can then be evaluated according to their justice relative to the other states within our neighborhood.[10] The point is that, within the status quo, some scenarios are clearly better or worse under these criteria. Ideal theories, however, attempt to establish models of perfectly just societies that are far removed from our neighborhood, owing to the significant differences between our current social structure and the idealized model.

Ideal theory proposes that this idealized model should guide the transformation of society by tracing a path toward the ideal, but the more perfect the ideal, the more substantial the modifications required to achieve it. As a result, the social structures along this route will become increasingly different from our current structure. For Gaus, this presents two major problems.

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[10] These criteria are built in light of the current structure of the society and its possible variations. Given that our neighborhood is a set of similar structure societies, the evaluation criteria might vary given specific changes in some institutions. However, the change is not such that the criterion becomes unrecognizable.

First, there is no guarantee that the path mapped out by the ideal model will actually lead to the ideal scenario. As we progress toward the ideal, each successive social structure becomes increasingly distant from what we know. We cannot foresee all the consequences of these changes, as these new structures have never been implemented. Thus, it is possible that, after altering the social structure, we may find ourselves unable to proceed toward the ideal, having realized too late that the path is impassable. Gaus argues that there is no value in pursuing an ideal if it is not achievable (Gaus 2016, 73).

Second, the ideal model may direct us away from a clearly preferable situation. Imagine three worlds—A, B, and C—each belonging to the same neighborhood, meaning we can predict the outcomes of moving from one to the other with reasonable confidence. Suppose we currently inhabit world B, and world A is clearly better than B according to their inherent justice criteria. On the other hand, world C lies on the path toward a perfectly just society but represents a worsening of conditions for those in world B.[11] Given this, it is rational to choose world A over C, not only because it offers immediate improvement but also because we cannot be certain that moving to C will eventually lead to a just society (Gaus 2016, 142). Given these prior issues, in striving to achieve the ideal, we risk not only worsening our current situation but also discovering that, upon transitioning to the new scenario, it cannot be reached through the chosen path. Gaus's argument thus boils down to two key insights: the more idealized the model, the more uncertain the path to realizing it; and it is unjustifiable to sacrifice the welfare of individuals in pursuit of a goal with an uncertain chance of success.

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[11] For a better understanding of this, imagine that we have a normative model in which the right of private ownership of the means of production is eliminated. To aim for this state of affairs may be counterproductive in the face of the foreseeable political reactions of the owners of the means of production, who precisely find different advantages in owning those means of production. These reactions may result in a worse situation that affects different members of society. For example, society embraces the project to overcome the capitalist system and displays policies to convert private property into collective property. In the face of that, the capitalist class actively seeks international political sanctions against the government to boycott the government project. These sanctions may produce a lack of access to different goods, putting people in a worse situation.

Gaus's argument ultimately supports political improvements that are predictable according to current standards of justice. This claim does not imply that some downgrades in justice within the current society are impossible, but such downgrades must be justified in light of the evidence concerning the likelihood of achieving eventual improvements in justice. However, these improvements must still align with the actual standards of justice accepted by society.

**c) Anti-utopian outlook**

In my examination of the realist perspective within the contrast between ideal and non-ideal theory, I suggest that non-ideal theory is appealing because it pays closer attention to relevant aspects of society and human nature, incorporating these elements to create action-guiding normative standards. The problem with ideal theory, on this view, is that while it theorizes about justice or other normative values, it raises the normative threshold so high that people are unlikely to fulfill their duties. Huemer articulates this critique by arguing that ideal theorists construct models that impose unattainably high standards, both for assessing society and judging individual behavior (Huemer 2016, 228). Huemer explains this in the following way:

> Ideal theorists are therefore tempted to posit an extreme version of altruism as the moral ideal, one in which an agent has no more concern for himself than he has for a person completely unknown to him. I think that is a mistake. It is not just that I think we cannot make people be that way; I do not think that such a person would be an ideal human being. Rather, such a person would be crazy (Huemer 2016, 228).

It is possible to consider the previous quotation more as a strawman than a genuine critique of a specific ideal theorist, as it is unclear whether any author in the ideal theory tradition has proposed such an idea. Unfortunately, Huemer does not mention any ideal theorists who come

close to this position.[12] To preserve the general point Huemer made, let's grant that it is theoretically possible for an ideal theorist to elaborate such a model. Altruistic behavior is possible and does occur around the world; if one person can behave in this way, it is not impossible for another to do the same. Therefore, considering the principle that ought implies can, and provided there is no violation of that principle, an ideal theorist could develop a model of an altruistic society.

Given that ideal theory can accommodate such normative models, it is understandable why the standards set by idealized conceptions, as Huemer contends, are unlikely to be realized. Ideal theorists often overlook the motivational systems that actually drive human beings (Huemer 2016, 229). For example, an ideal theory might propose a society in which individuals are fully impartial, consistently prioritizing the welfare of strangers as highly as that of their own family. Even if this represents a morally desirable state, it disregards the deeply ingrained partiality of human motivations, making the model practically irrelevant. According to Huemer, if this partiality is natural, then an ideal theory that demands the eradication of all partiality ignores fundamental aspects of human psychology. Furthermore, ideal theory promotes a sense of self-condemnation that renders the pursuit of justice a futile project (Huemer 2016, 229).

For instance, by measuring themselves against the elevated standards of ideal theory, individuals may come to regard their ordinary moral failings such as prioritizing the well-being of their loved ones over that of distant strangers as profound ethical defects. This sense of moral

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[12] An ideal model in which extreme altruism is the core value diverges significantly from Rawls's perspective, as Rawls begins with the assumption of rational agents who accept principles of justice not out of altruism, but because rational individuals, under the veil of ignorance, would choose principles that minimize the risk of ending up in society's worst position (Rawls 1999, 68). Perhaps the theorist Huemer has in mind is G.A. Cohen, with his defense of a normative model that reconciles freedom, equality, and efficiency under an ethos motivating people to contribute freely according to their abilities in the most efficient way, without expecting incentives that might lead to inequality (Cohen 2008, 184, 203). However, this also does not align with Huemer's observation of extreme altruism. Cohen does not assert that people would act in an extremely altruistic manner; rather, he suggests that individuals might value contributing to society's well-being without expecting this to grant them a privileged position—a concept that does not seem far-fetched.

inadequacy fosters a demoralizing self-contempt that makes the pursuit of justice feel hopeless. The persistent failure to live up to an ideal that requires the renunciation of key features of human motivation can lead individuals to see their own moral efforts as hollow or insincere. Moreover, the psychological cost of aspiring to such implausible moral standards may foster disillusionment or apathy. Rather than motivating people to strive for meaningful improvements, ideal theory can instead promote the perception that the pursuit of justice is so far beyond reach that it loses its practical relevance.

Thus, even if ideal theory offers an account of justice, it is one suited to beings other than humans. It demands motivations and dispositions that real-world individuals cannot consistently exhibit. As a result, ideal theory risks framing human nature itself as an obstacle to justice, leading us to see our humanity as an inherent source of failure (Huemer 2016, 229). In this way, rather than inspiring hope or practical engagement, ideal theory may cultivate a sense of despair regarding the very achievement of justice it seeks to promote.

**Chapter Two: Reform and Revolutionary Change**

One of the central aims of both ideal and non-ideal theory is to promote political changes that improve the current socio-political status quo, thereby advancing toward a more just society. For this reason, the aim of understanding how the anti-idealist stance may lead the theorist toward an ideological position requires an exploration of two forms of political change: reformist and revolutionary change. The main task of this chapter is to prepare the ground for the next, which involves, first, an analysis of the concept of revolutionary change and its normative implications; second, a presentation of Luxemburg's argument against the possibility of achieving revolutionary outcomes through reformist strategies; and, finally, an outline of the notion of revolutionary consciousness and its connection to the envisioning of an alternative socio-political arrangement needed to replace an unjust and oppressive status quo.

**2.1 Normativity of Revolutionary Change**

According to Patric Taylor Smith, the concept of political revolution can be articulated as follows:

**Political revolution**: A form of collective political action that employs illegal, extraconstitutional, or violent means to seize and wield political power with the aim of restructuring the political and legal relationships and institutions of a society (Smith 2018, 200).

For Smith, this definition has the advantage of clearly distinguishing revolution from other forms of political action. Political reform, for example, may also aim to restructure the political and legal relationships and institutions of a society but does so within legal and nonviolent boundaries. Similarly, revolution is distinct from civil disobedience, which consists

of collective political action that employs illegal means to achieve political aims but does not seek to seize power. Finally, the definition separates revolution from political coups and other forms of elite power transitions, which may also be illegal or extralegal but lack the broader transformative ambitions characteristic of revolution (Smith 2018, 200).

The distinction between coups and revolutions, as articulated by Smith, remains insufficiently clear. Smith provides the example of a royal family member assassinating a king to seize power, which he categorizes as a non-revolutionary act. By contrast, the assassination of a king that transitions a monarchy into a republic exemplifies revolutionary change (Smith 2018, 200). However, this distinction is problematic. According to Smith's view, even when a coup brings about significant changes in the socio-political structure, it would not qualify as revolutionary. This interpretation conflicts with cases where the overthrow of a government by military forces is followed by structural reforms that dismantle and reconfigure the existing political order. In this sense, a coup may evolve into a revolutionary act, much like a civil disobedience movement, if it initiates transformative changes that fundamentally alter the socio-political structure of society.

It is important to consider a fundamental element regarding revolutions: their justification. Three possible perspectives can be identified on this issue: revolutions are never justified, revolutions are sometimes justified, and revolutions are always justified. To clarify what may justify revolutionary movements, I will evaluate these perspectives, beginning with the first and third positions and concluding with the second. The first position, which asserts that revolutions are never justified, is famously defended by Kant in *The Metaphysics of Morals* and *On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice*. Kant's argument rests on the denial of the existence of a right to revolution, highlighting the inherent contradiction between revolutionary action and the juridical framework that underpins political authority (Kant 1999, 298, 463). Kant's general argument could be formulated as

follows, following Mathew Noah Smith's reading of it: Moral rights are guaranteed only within a juridical system. The existence of a legal right to revolution undermines the very foundation of such a system. If a juridical system includes a legal right to revolution, it does not guarantee all the moral rights it entails. Therefore, if a juridical system includes a legal right to revolution that purports to guarantee a moral right to revolution, this legal system fails to guarantee the moral right to revolution (Smith, M.N. 2008, 416).

The previous argument leads to the problematic implication that individuals cannot rightfully revolt against clearly unjust governments or political structures. In this view, they must obey unjust laws, and even attempts to revolt in order to transform the socio-political structure into a more just one are rejected, even though revolution may be the only feasible means of achieving such transformation. This restriction significantly limits the possibility of opposing tyrannical governments. Moreover, according to this argument, any notion of legitimacy behind the origin of a government becomes irrelevant (Korsgaard 2008, 305).

There has been extensive discussion regarding the soundness of the previous argument, and the first premise of this argument proves problematic. Even if it were true that moral rights are granted only within a juridical system, it would not follow that all juridical systems grant all moral rights. In this sense, if a juridical system fails to guarantee the most relevant moral rights, endorsing that system to preserve moral rights becomes irrelevant. The conclusion that follows from Kant's argument, that people lack the right to revolt against tyrannical systems that systematically violate their moral rights, seems extremely unattractive.[13] For this reason, some qualification of Kant's reasoning against revolution is necessary to provide a more promising approach to revolutionary action. This qualification may involve particular instances

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[13] Ryan Davis develops an explanation in which he understands the political system not merely as imperfect regarding justice, but as a system that perverts justice, thereby creating some space to consider revolutionary struggle as at least tolerable (Davis 2004, 565).

in which legal systems, to some extent, preserve or at least acknowledge the most relevant moral rights of members of society. This leads to the perspective that revolutions may be justified in certain instances. However, before exploring this alternative, it is important to consider the possibility that all revolutions are justified.

The position that all revolutions are justified is not clearly defended by any particular author in the tradition of western political philosophy. However, Rousseau suggests that it is possible to articulate reasoning along these lines by considering scenarios in which sovereignty is constituted by force, akin to the imposition of an external political power on a society through conquest (Rousseau 2002, 126). Similarly, if an external power can impose itself on a society by force, it follows that an internal power may do the same within a society (Rousseau 2002, 126).

In this view, the justification for a revolution lies in its success in seizing political power. Rousseau reduces both scenarios, external conquest and internal revolution, to the notion of the "right of the strongest." Thus, a revolutionary movement is justified when it succeeds in achieving power, regardless of the specific justifications it might offer for its revolt.

There are, however, two significant problems with the implications of this perspective. First, even if this view provides a form of justification for all successful revolutions, it cannot account for the potential justifiability of failed revolutions, some of which might appear morally or politically justified despite their lack of success. Second, and more importantly, this approach renders the legitimacy of any resultant government contingent on its ability to maintain power. If a subsequent revolt successfully seizes political power, the legitimacy of the prior government is immediately undermined. This creates a problematic framework in which legitimacy hinges entirely on the ongoing preservation of power.

On this point, Rousseau asserts:

The insurrection, which ends in the death or deposition of a sultan, is as juridical an act as any by which the day before he disposed of the lives and fortunes of his subjects. Force alone upheld him, force alone overturns him. Thus all things take place and succeed in their natural order; and whatever may be the upshot of these hasty and frequent revolutions, no one man has reason to complain of another's injustice, but only of his own indiscretion or bad fortune (Rousseau 2002, 136).

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau goes deeper into this reasoning and explains that the mere existence of force is not sufficient to ground any duty, nor is it capable of legitimizing any government. This is because the source of legitimacy may contradict itself (Rousseau 2002, 158).

In general, most approaches to revolution acknowledge that there are cases in which it is justified. The justification of revolution can be divided into two main approaches: a rights-based approach and an interest-based approach.[14] The rights-based approach holds that revolution is justified when a government violates a specific set of rights it is obligated to guarantee. One of the most influential theories of revolution within this framework is articulated by Locke in *The Second Treatise of Government*. Locke's central argument appeals to the idea that governments are instituted to guarantee the natural rights of individuals, including life, liberty, and property. If a government acts in violation of these rights, it undermines the very foundation of its legitimacy (Locke 2010, 78). According to Locke, when a government violates the rights of its people, it enters a "state of war with the people" (Locke 2010, 80). A government that violates the rights of the people in order to benefit their members

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[14] It is possible to provide a utilitarian justification for revolution, but given the complications that this approach presents in defending or rejecting revolution, I have decided to ignore it. For more information about the limits of this perspective, see Smith, M.N. 2008, 411.

becomes a tyranny (Locke 2010, 101), and the people have the right to replace it and establish a new government.

There are additional considerations that are important to Locke's theory of revolution. These considerations involve two dimensions. The first concerns whether all violations of natural rights justify the people in revolting against a government. The second addresses the extent to which such violations must occur to warrant a revolutionary act. Regarding the first, Locke suggests that revolutions do not arise from management failures or even from great mistakes made by the government (Locke 2010, 113). In that sense, the failure of the government to protect the rights of the people must be intentional and motivated by the systematic pursuit of personal advantage through the violation of the people's rights (Locke 2010, 113). This leads to considerations about how the perception of these violations may be seen by a majority of the people, even if the violations directly affect only a small group (since these violations may eventually affect the majority). Consequently, revolutions are highly probable under such conditions (Locke 2010, 106).

It is important to highlight that, according to Locke, the failure of the government to protect natural rights must stem from the government's clear intention to benefit from the violation of those rights. Generally, Locke argues that cases where such failures arise from mere neglect by the government are insufficient to justify a revolution. Furthermore, Locke suggests that the violation of rights must be perceived by a majority of the people in order to lead to a successful revolution.

Besides the significant relevance of Locke's approach to justifying revolution in light of the protection of natural rights, the emergence of different forms of resistance and protest to safeguard rights presents an additional challenge. It compels theorists to be more cautious about the scenarios in which defending our rights might involve challenging existing political power.

Such a challenge often entails violating laws and potentially infringing upon the rights of other members of society during a revolt (Finlay 2015, 58).

Given this consideration, authors such as Allen Buchanan argue that, due to the similarities between war and revolution, the framework of just war theory provides a useful blueprint for theorizing about revolution. One of the principles of just war theory, which also appears in Locke and other rights-based approaches to revolution, is the requirement of a just cause (Buchanan 2013, 294). According to Buchanan, the clearest case in which a revolution meets this requirement is when it targets what he calls "resolute severe tyrannies." These tyrannies, as he defines them, are regimes that (1) persistently violate basic human rights for large portions of the population, (2) are extremely authoritarian, and (3) are impervious to reform efforts.

Buchanan restricts the justification for revolution to cases of resolute severe tyranny for two main reasons. First, revolutions often fail to overthrow a regime, and failure may provoke brutal retaliation against the people's rights. However, if the regime is a resolute severe tyranny, it already persistently violates the rights of its citizens; thus, if the revolution fails, citizens are not left in a significantly worse position than they were before, since their rights were already being systematically violated. Second, even when revolutions succeed, they risk establishing a new regime that is more oppressive than the one they replace. However, if the original regime was a resolute severe tyranny, then even a new, bad regime is not significantly worse than the status quo. Thus, Buchanan argues that, while it is clear that it is justified to revolt against a resolute severe tyranny, further reasons are necessary to justify revolution against other oppressive regimes, given the high risks revolution poses to society (Buchanan 2013, 296).

Even though Buchanan's perspective sheds light on the necessity of the just cause requirement, it is not entirely clear which specific rights a regime must violate to be considered

a resolute severe tyranny. However, according to Zsolt Kapelner, such regimes fall into what he calls "oppressive violent regimes," which violate citizens' fundamental vital interests, such as the right not to be murdered, enslaved, tortured, raped, or seriously wounded (Kapelner 2019, 447). In this sense, violently revolting against such a regime constitutes an act of self-defense against the government's threats to fundamental rights. Consequently, the violence employed in revolution is proportional to the violence the government itself threatens to inflict on the people.

However, a normative framework that justifies revolution solely in terms of self-defense leaves unchallenged oppressive regimes that do not commit such direct violations but nonetheless deny other fundamental rights, such as political rights. By restricting revolutionary justification to cases of severe violent oppression, revolutionary activity is not available as a political instrument to challenge the legitimacy of regimes that systematically suppress political participation without resorting to the kinds of brutal violations Buchanan considers (Kapelner 2019, 448). Given this concern, Mattias Iser argues that grounding revolution in the paradigm of self-defense and its attendant requirement of proportionality presupposes the existence of a just background order. In an oppressive regime, however, such a just background is absent (Iser 2017, 208). More fundamentally, this perspective ignores the fact that revolutionary struggle can aim not merely at the defense of existing rights but at the establishment of a political order in which all rights, including political rights, are properly recognized (Iser 2017, 216).

According to Iser, the role of revolution extends beyond the prevention of immediate harm. It also addresses systemic disrespect toward members of society who are treated as second-class citizens and denied the capacity to participate in shaping and reproducing the social norms of their communities (Iser 2017, 213). If political institutions are structured in a way that systematically negate these political rights, then members of society are justified in seeking a radical transformation of the political order. However, for revolution to be justified,

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it must arise in circumstances where there is no viable space for achieving such transformation through non-revolutionary means.

All these perspectives ground the just cause of revolution in the violation of either fundamental or political rights, the respect for both of which is taken to be an obligation of the state. However, grounding revolution in the normative notion of rights has long been debated, as it risks narrowing the scope of revolutionary struggle to the pursuit of a particular form of political arrangement, most often political liberalism. In response, the interest-based approach to revolution aims to avoid this bias toward political liberalism. Rather than justifying revolution on the basis of fundamental rights, it seeks a broader justification rooted in the interests of members of society. Among the different theories that elaborate this perspective, the most prominent in the tradition of political philosophy is the Marxist justification of revolution.

According to this perspective, the normative resources provided by liberal state theory are constructed to justify revolution only insofar as it culminates in the establishment of a liberal state. This state is framed as a neutral political arrangement that safeguards natural, pre-political, or universal rights, irrespective of the preceding political order. However, from Marx's standpoint, this normative framework is neither neutral nor universal but is instead structurally aligned with a particular economic arrangement, namely capitalism (Marx 1978a, 41). In this sense, the normative resources offered by liberal theories of rights, and more specifically the rights-based approach to revolution, ultimately serve to reinforce the formation and entrenchment of capitalism on a global scale. The core of this argument is that capitalism, as an economic system, generates an inherent conflict of interest between distinct segments of the population to which Marxism refers via the concept of class (Marx & Engels 1978b, 473 - 474). In this sense, there are two central classes in the capitalist system: On one side are the capitalists, who own the means of production, and on the other is the proletariat, who, lacking

ownership of productive assets, must sell their labor power to capitalists in order to subsist (Marx & Engels 1978b, 478 - 479). This analysis, instead of focusing on conflict of interest individually, analyzes the conflict of interest in terms of the position of members in one of these classes.

For Marxism, class conflict is embodied in a continuous struggle throughout history, where a dominant class imposes its will on a subordinated class (Marx & Engels 1978b, 474). This dynamic of domination is what Marxism identifies as the economic structure of society. However, the economic structure does not exist in isolation. Rather, it is reinforced and sustained by what Marxism refers to as the superstructure, which includes political, legal, and moral institutions, as well as other ideological products of human consciousness, such as religion, metaphysics, and morality (Marx & Engels 1978a, 154). In this sense, the preservation of the current system is, in reality, a defense of the interests of the privileged class in society. Moreover, the language of fundamental rights, rather than challenging this privileged position, was formulated to facilitate the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies. Rather than rejecting rights-based theories of rights outright, this account aims to reveal that these theories, in fact, reflect the interests of the capitalist class. Thus, rights-based theories are capable of justifying a particular kind of revolutionary struggle, but they are inadequate for supporting struggles that challenge the existence of the capitalist system. In this sense, the new perspective on revolution shifts the focus from protecting abstract rights to advancing the constitution of a political system that fulfills the interests of the oppressed class under capitalism.

The previous exposition, even if it contains some implicit normative elements, does not make clear which kinds of revolutionary struggles are justified and which are not. At first glance, it appears to resemble the position that all revolutionary struggles are justified if the revolution succeeds. However, as the narrative of Marxism makes clear, especially through Marx's analysis of the failure of the Paris Commune, the failure of a revolutionary struggle

does not imply that the struggle was unjustified (Marx 1978b, 651 – 652). There are two general considerations that this view takes into account regarding the justification of revolutionary struggles. On the one hand, there is a particular consideration concerning how the development of history responds to the development of productive forces. In this sense, a class becomes revolutionary when it transforms the relations of production, particularly when these relations are incapable of supporting the development of productive forces (Marx & Engels 1978b, 482). In this view, the revolutionary class is justified when it seeks to lead society toward a more productive state, one better able to meet the needs of its members (Marx & Engels 1978a, 197). According to this consideration, revolutions aimed at transforming relations of production in order to advance toward a more developed society are justified in revolt. On the other hand, the proletariat's struggle is justified because the elimination of the conditions of their oppression represents the achievement of a truly just society, one in which the division of society into classes ceases, leading to a truly free society in which members can realize genuine freedom (Marx & Engels 1978a, 199).

Both considerations can be reconciled in order to argue that the transformation the proletariat seeks arises from the contradictions inherent in the internal dynamics of capitalist society. These contradictions leave the proletariat in a position where their subsistence is systematically threatened, while they lack the possibility of achieving a flourishing life. In this sense, the transformation of the capitalist system under the leadership of the proletariat not only represents a change in the relations of production that better responds to the development of productive forces, but also leads society's members toward a better flourishing life, in which they will achieve a genuinely just society.

Up to this point, it is important to note that both the rights-based and interest-based accounts of revolution appeal to certain considerations of justice. In the case of the rights-based account, a particular framework of justice is necessary, one that concerns the respect and value

of rights. In the case of the interest-based account, the justification for revolution includes a perspective on the conditions under which society will eventually achieve substantive freedom, in which relations of oppression cease to exist. These considerations about both approaches to revolution will become relevant in the third chapter, where I will discuss the relevance of ideal theory in the normative analysis of revolution.

## 2.2 Luxemburg's Account of Reform and Revolution

Once a general blueprint of the normativity of revolution has been presented, it is important to evaluate in what sense reform and revolution are incompatible. A straightforward reading of the difference between them holds that reform operates within the legal framework of the existing system, whereas revolution breaks these limits to achieve its objectives. On this view, they are merely different strategies for attaining political outcomes, and there is no contradiction in asserting that both reform and revolution could, in principle, achieve the same goals. Revolution, however, becomes necessary in contexts where the existing political regime severely restricts avenues for meaningful change. If the legal system permits radical political transformation, then reform might achieve the same outcomes as revolution.

This reading of revolution was widely discussed by Rosa Luxemburg in her critique of Eduard Bernstein, who endorsed this interpretation. Luxemburg contests this view, arguing that reform and revolution are not simply alternative means to a shared political end but instead reflect fundamentally different aims. While reform works within the existing political structure, seeking to consolidate and ameliorate its defects, revolution seeks to transform its structural foundations (Luxemburg 2007, 90). Luxemburg states:

> That is why people who pronounce themselves in favor of the method of legislative reform in place and in contradistinction to the conquest of political power and social revolution do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer, and slower road to the same goal, but a different goal (Luxemburg 2007, 90).

For Luxemburg, the relationship between reform and revolution is not a matter of distinct methods of historical progress; rather, each corresponds to a different stage in the development of political change. Political revolution serves to transform the underlying economic and social structure of society, whereas political reform functions to consolidate and correct its defects within the framework of the newly established socio-economic relations. In this sense, the two processes complement one another in the dynamics of social change, yet they also exclude each other, each marking a distinct phase in the process of societal development. Given that they play different roles in historical progression, the attempt to achieve revolutionary aims through reform ultimately amounts to a renunciation of the goals that only revolution can realize.

There are two possible ways to interpret Luxemburg's view. The first holds that reform can never achieve changes that only revolution can bring about, treating the two as mutually exclusive. The second allows that, although some changes require revolution, others can result from either revolution or reform, suggesting that the two strategies may sometimes be co-extensive. The first position is more difficult to defend, as it is plausible that certain changes brought about by revolution could also be achieved through political reform. This is evident in cases where transitions from dictatorial regimes to democracies have been accomplished through gradual reformist efforts. While some political transformations have indeed resulted from revolution, the fact that they occurred through revolution does not entail that, under certain conditions and through particular strategies, similar outcomes could not be realized through reformist measures.[15]

The second reading aligns more closely with Luxemburg's intent, as her argument concerns the organization of workers to achieve a transformation of society that advances

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[15] Adam Przeworski presents a detailed exploration of the conditions under which a dictatorship may transition toward a democratic society through a process of negotiation among different political actors (see Przeworski, A. 1991. *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge University Press).

toward socialism. In this sense, the scope of change Luxemburg envisions does not merely involve modifying political structures but rather reordering the socio-economic foundations of society itself. Some political changes, then, are attainable only through revolution because they challenge the very basis of power that sustains the ruling class, as Luxemburg states:

> The fundamental relations of the domination of the capitalist class cannot be transformed by means of legislative reforms, on the basis of capitalist society, because these relations have not been introduced by bourgeois laws, nor have they received the form of such laws (Luxemburg 2007, 92).

In this sense, Luxemburg argues that there are forms of domination in society that are embedded in the more fundamental socio-economic relations, which are protected by the juridical order. This type of domination, operating at this foundational level, was identified by Rousseau. Rousseau explains how the seemingly neutral liberal political system ultimately serves to consolidate the economic inequalities that arise from the privatization of goods, such as land. Rather than representing the general will of society, the government, according to Rousseau, ends up consolidating a relation of domination grounded in these inequalities.[16]

Luxemburg, by the way, argues that although reform may not be capable of bringing about the structural changes needed to eliminate the sources of domination in capitalist societies, it is not entirely without value. In discussing the role of democracy as a valuable resource, she suggests that it enables the proletariat to pursue the political transformation of the entire system through the struggle for and defense of their rights. In this sense, political reform, from Luxemburg's perspective, helps the proletariat refine their understanding of their interests. Her suggestion shows that reform expands the domain of politics to its limits, thereby

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[16] It is also interesting that Rousseau argues that a revolution may seek to change the government without altering the socio-economic structure that preserves the dynamics of domination. In this sense, there are instances of political power that only end with the removal of the actors who reproduce the dynamics of oppression in society (Rousseau 2002, 136).

illuminating the necessity of revolutionary struggle as a subsequent phase. In this way, reform not only consolidates the political system but also prepares the ground for recognizing the need for revolutionary struggle (Luxemburg 2007, 93–94).[17]

One final consideration about Luxemburg's account of revolution is the role of the revolutionary process as a learning experience. She argues that revolutions are not always successful and entail numerous difficulties, as the political changes revolutionaries seek introduce new scenarios not previously considered. Rather than subscribing to a deterministic view of revolution, in which it is seen as a spontaneous process that eventually emerges when the system reaches its limits, Luxemburg treats revolutionary struggle as a long-term process, fraught with many failures, including failures in seizing power and in successfully transforming the socio-economic structure of society. However, these failures do not merely signal that the moment was not right for a successful revolution; instead, they provide epistemic resources that later revolutionary struggles can use to advance toward their political goals, even while merely pretending to seize power and pretending to realize their political goals once in power (Luxemburg 2007, 96).

## 2.3 Revolutionary Consciousness

As explained, Luxemburg's characterization of reformist and revolutionary change does not imply that reformist change entirely excludes the possibility of revolution. Luxemburg herself acknowledges that, although both play different roles, reformist efforts can lay the groundwork for an eventual transition to revolution. However, even if such a transition is possible, it is by no means inevitable. Advocates of reform in pursuit of justice may recoil or hesitate when confronted with the more radical demands of revolutionary change. This hesitation can stem from various sources. First, even if reformists recognize the presence of

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[17] This is a key point in which Luxemburg questions the authoritarian path of the Bolsheviks, as explored in *The Russian Revolution*. See Luxemburg, R. (2004). *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*. NYU Press.

oppression or injustice in society, they might believe that these problems can eventually be resolved through reform. Alternatively, if they consider reform incapable of solving the problem, they may conclude that these injustices or forms of oppression are insurmountable and must be accepted as an inevitable part of society's fate. The goal, then, would be merely to ameliorate the injustice, rather than pursue revolutionary change (Wolpe 1970, 116).

Secondly, a source of hesitation in adopting the revolutionary method arises from the nature of revolution itself: it directly challenges the existing political structure and often entails illegal, extraconstitutional, or even violent means (Smith 2018, 200). As a result, oppressive political forces predictably respond by intensifying repression, censoring dissent, imprisoning or killing activists, and fostering a climate of fear and intimidation to suppress what they perceive as dangerous ideas (White & Ypi 2016, 175). These tactics function as powerful deterrents to revolutionary activity.

According to Buchanan, revolutionary success is hindered by a collective action problem: since a revolution must receive widespread support to succeed, individuals who agree with the revolutionary struggle may face two possible scenarios. In the first scenario, their contribution is relevant to the revolution's triumph, but given the usual repression employed by the government, the costs of participation are particularly high when their involvement becomes more significant. As a result, the individual, seeking to maximize their own interest, tends to abstain from engaging in the struggle. In the second scenario, their contribution is irrelevant to the revolution's success because widespread support has already been achieved. Since involving themselves in the revolutionary struggle is a cost they do not need to bear for the desirable outcome (the success of the revolution), the more rational course of action is to abstain from participation (Buchanan 2013, 299).

Buchanan argues that the collective action problem endures even without assuming individuals are entirely rational and self-interested. This is because the risks of participation extend beyond the individual to affect the welfare of those they care about, such as family members. Engaging in revolutionary action jeopardizes both participants and their relatives, and given the uncertainty of the revolution's success, individuals may rationally refrain from participating (Buchanan 2013, 300).

Moreover, Buchanan suggests that individuals assessing revolutionary participation may condition their actions on the choices of others. If widespread support for the revolution is insufficient, individuals might conclude, on grounds of fairness, that they are not obligated to contribute to the collective endeavor. This interdependence of expectations and commitments underscores how perceived inequities in shared risk can undermine motivation to act (Buchanan 2013, 300).

Several elements may play a role in motivating members of society to pursue revolutionary change. One such element is the presence of revolutionary parties or movements, while another is the development of widespread revolutionary consciousness among a significant number of society's members. The former refers to the organizational structures that encourage, guide, and support the revolutionary process, offering people confidence in the feasibility of success (White & Ypi 2016, 181).[18] The latter is the set of ideas that drive individuals to seek radical transformation (Hossler 2021, 206).[19] These elements are not isolated; as Lenin suggests, one of the main tasks of a revolutionary party is to nurture

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[18] Buchanan develops an interesting exploration of the different strategies that revolutionary parties may employ to motivate the enrollment of other members of society in the revolutionary struggle. These strategies go beyond merely providing organizational support to people involved in the revolutionary process. They range from coercive conscription techniques, manipulating people's emotions by provoking government violence against innocent individuals, or spreading false or distorted information about the government, to the use of terrorist tactics to instill fear in those who reject the revolution (Buchanan 2013, 301–303).

[19] It is important to consider that development of these revolutionary consciousness is not monolithic, it is shaped by the diverse perspectives of oppressed peoples as well as those in society who, though they may not directly experience oppression, are moved by the suffering and marginalization of others (Skocpol, 2015).

revolutionary consciousness among the working class (Kelly 2022, 321). However, it is also important that the individuals who form and create these political parties are themselves convinced of the limits of current political structures and the necessity of overthrowing them. In this sense, the development of revolutionary consciousness plays a significant role not only in the initiation and development of the revolutionary struggle but also in its conclusion (Wolpe 1970, 115).

According to Wolpe, the development of revolutionary consciousness necessarily involves perceiving an intolerable gap between the expectation of need satisfaction within the current socio-political system and the actual satisfaction it provides (Wolpe 1970, 115–116). It is worth examining this gap more closely, as Wolpe's presentation of it may not initially seem persuasive. People routinely experience unmet expectations, yet the mere fact that expectations go unfulfilled does not, by itself, prompt them to question the socio-political system. For example, a person may seek public recognition from peers, but failing to obtain it does not necessarily lead to a critical assessment of the broader system. Thus, for the gap to generate revolutionary consciousness, people must perceive it as a matter of injustice or oppression. However, even an unjust gap alone is not sufficient, as unjust or oppressive relations can exist as specific instances between individuals, such as in cases of theft, aggression, or rape. It is crucial that such injustice or oppression be understood as grounded in the structure of society. In this way, these circumstances transcend particular dissatisfaction or injustice, fostering widespread judgments about the systemic defects of the existing order.

However, even a systemic unjust expectation gap is insufficient. Even if the gap is perceived as intolerable, individuals may believe that it can be overcome without dismantling the socio-political system, as would occur in a revolution. In this sense, the reformist alternative may appear capable of satisfying society's demands. Alternatively, they may regard the gap as insurmountable and resign themselves to living within its constraints (Wolpe 1970, 116).

Given these considerations, the development of revolutionary consciousness requires three additional elements. First, individuals must recognize that reform is incapable of bringing about the changes necessary to satisfy their expectations regarding need fulfillment. This recognition entails an understanding that their demands necessitate the dismantling of core elements of the current socio-political system, which reform alone cannot accomplish. Second, revolutionary consciousness depends on the ability to envision alternative socio-political arrangements that could replace the existing system. Without a viable alternative, people are unlikely to engage in revolutionary struggle, particularly if no proposed change promises to eliminate the prevailing gap. Since this gap is rooted in the political system, even a general perspective on a feasible alternative is essential.

Finally, the third element involves an understanding of the reified nature of the existing socio-political system and the necessity of its de-reification (Wolpe 1970, 116). Reification consists in perceiving social structures and economic systems as independent, objective entities, rather than as contingent products of human agency. Under this perspective, economic and political institutions appear as immutable, beyond the realm of human intervention (Vandenberghe 2015, 202). De-reification, by contrast, entails recovering an awareness of these structures as socially constructed and, therefore, subject to transformation through human action. By recognizing the contingent and malleable character of these institutions, individuals can cease to regard them as fixed entities and instead view them as objects of potential modification through collective agency (Berger & Pullberg 1965, 209-210).

Taking the previous considerations into account, we can maintain that revolutionary consciousness must include the following elements: First, an awareness of the unjust and oppressive relations embedded in the socio-political structure. Second, a de-reification of socio-political structure. Third, an explanation of why reform cannot solve them. Finally, an envisioning of an alternative political structure that can overcome these problems.

All these elements reflect considerations of political theory. First, political theory provides normative principles that help us understand why and how the current political system suffers from deficiencies in fulfilling these principles, including the capacity to acknowledge systemic injustices and oppressions. Second, political theory helps debunk the reified character of the socio-political structure, justifying intervention through reform or revolution. Third, political theory explains why reformism tends to fail in addressing the deficiencies of the socio-political system: core elements of the political structure reproduce oppression and injustice. Among these core elements are normative components that support the system and ultimately contribute to the perpetuation of existing injustices and oppression. Finally, given the flaws in the political structure, political theory may contribute a new political framework that replaces the normative commitments of the previous system with one that more accurately reflects the values that originally motivated the pursuit of political change. All these considerations related to the development of revolutionary consciousness are crucial for understanding why the anti-idealist stance constitutes a form of ideological theory and may play a significant role in the argument presented in the next chapter.

**Chapter Three: Ideological Critique of Anti-idealism**

In the following chapter, I offer an ideological critique of anti-idealism. I argue that its core commitments—the rejection of ideals as dispensable, the reliance on internal standards for political improvement, and its anti-utopian outlook—lead to a political theory that (a) confines itself to short-range social criticism and (b) privilege reformist change over revolutionary alternatives. On one hand, (a) may reflect illicit social privileges, and on the other, (b) risks perpetuating these privileges. By doing so, anti-idealism meets the sufficient condition for qualifying as ideological theorizing.

After presenting both critiques of anti-idealism, it is important to distinguish between two positions that nonideal theorists take with respect to ideal theory:

> **The revisionist stance:** Proponents of this view contend that ideal theory should be revised to incorporate insights derived from theorizing about justice under nonideal conditions (Talisse 2017, 60).

> **The anti-idealist stance**: Advocates of this position maintain that ideal theory should be abandoned altogether, on the grounds that it is either useless or counterproductive (Estlund 2020, 258).

This distinction is crucial, as the following critique applies only to the anti-idealist stance and does not extend to the revisionist stance.

## 3.1 Anti-idealism as Short-range Social Criticism

Let us begin by considering why anti-idealism tends to confine itself to short-range social criticism. By rejecting ideal models, anti-idealism grounds its analysis of injustice on

internal normative standards. These standards may be drawn either from uncontroversial shared normative intuitions[20] (Huemer 2016, 230) or from a more developed social theory (Mills 2005, 169; Haslanger 2021, 22). However, both approaches risk entrenching a form of status quo bias.

Consider the reliance on shared normative intuitions. Three significant problems arise. First, in societies marked by deep disagreement about justice, the scope of such intuitions is narrowly constrained. As Talisse has observed, this limitation restricts the critique of injustice to the least contentious cases, leaving more complex and divisive injustices unexamined (Talisse 2017, 65). For example, consider Sen's reference to the apparent consensus that exclusion from medical access constitutes an injustice (Sen 2006, 221). While outright denial of healthcare access would likely be recognized as unjust, exclusion resulting from privatization may not be as immediately perceived as such. This is because prevailing beliefs about property rights and market freedoms often frame private owners as entitled to manage their businesses in ways they deem most profitable. If government intervention in healthcare is seen as an unjust restriction on economic liberty, then exclusion resulting from market dynamics may fail to register as an obvious injustice within the limited scope of that society's shared normative intuitions. Consequently, reliance on these intuitions may lack the critical capacity to expose and challenge illicit social privileges that remain embedded in precisely those areas where injustice is most contested.

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[20] Michael Huemer's concept of "uncontroversial intuitions" refers to widely shared ethical judgments about concrete, specific scenarios that transcend political or ideological divides. These intuitions are marked by ideological neutrality, concreteness, and broad consensus. By grounding arguments in such universally accepted moral premises, Huemer aims to sidestep ideological bias and speculative abstraction, emphasizing practical ethics rooted in shared human intuitions rather than divisive philosophical constructs (Huemer 2016, 230). As an example, he cites the intuition that it is morally wrong to prevent someone from accessing a market to purchase what they need to live. Drawing on this, he argues that the same intuition reveals why immigration restrictions are similarly unjust (Huemer 2016, 231).

The second problem is that our normative intuitions may reflect a preference for a particular socio-political structure. Gramsci's concept of hegemony helps clarify this concern. Hegemony refers to a set of ideas that dominate a society, sustained by the prevailing power structure (see Williams 1960, 586). These ideas, including specific moral values, propagate through political institutions and cultural norms, fostering acceptance of the prevailing political order and its power dynamics. Consequently, normative intuitions shaped by these hegemonic values may lack the critical leverage to challenge the system's foundational structures.

Let us make this critique more concrete. A common concern in political theory is that Western theorists develop socio-political analyses within contexts where liberal ideas dominate, shaping the very framework of political thought (Geuss 2005, 11). [21] Since anti-idealists appeal to internal normative standards, it is likely these standards are shaped by the core values of liberal ideas prevalent in Western societies. Yet, as Rousseau and Marx have argued in their critiques of liberalism, these seemingly neutral liberal ideas often serve to preserve forms of illicit privilege.[22]

Finally, and closely tied to the first and second concerns, is the issue that ideal theorizing may underpin the ostensibly shared normative intuitions. Political theorists are not isolated agents, unaffected by the historical trajectory of political thought. In this light, what is presented as a shared normative intuition may, in fact, be shaped by ideal theorizing that has evolved over time, thereby influencing the intellectual development of the anti-idealist. As a

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[21] Lorna Finlayson identifies this predominance of liberal theory in cases such as debates among realist theorists, who offer soft critiques of liberalism. These critiques reject particular styles of liberal theory but make no attempt to move beyond its overarching framework (Finlayson 2015, 3). There is controversy over whether realist theory qualifies as a form of non-ideal theory. One key reason for doubting this is the realist emphasis on the autonomy of the political domain (Williams 2009, 3), a thesis that non-ideal theorists, such as Mills, are not required to endorse. Nonetheless, realists share with a particular kind of non-ideal theorist—the anti-idealist—a rejection of appeals to idealized models of fully just societies (Rossi 2019, 2).

[22] A similar observation it is made by decolonial theory, which argues that Western social theory remains entangled with liberal values that favor the interests of colonizers in the relations between the colonized and the colonizer. This entanglement reflects a status quo bias, undermining the legitimacy of the voices and experiences of those subjected to colonial domination. By failing to question these liberal values, Western social theory risks perpetuating the very structures of oppression it claims to analyze impartially (see McCarthy 2009; Quijano 2020).

result, the anti-idealist appeal to shared normative intuitions may inadvertently perpetuate theoretical commitments initially forged by ideal theorizing. If the critique of ideal theory as ideological is sound, then simply rejecting ideal theory, as anti-idealism tends to do, without examining how its influence persists, may leave its ideological effects intact.

More sophisticated anti-idealists recognize the limitations of relying solely on shared normative intuitions and propose a better alternative: developing robust social theories that more adequately address the dynamics of injustice and oppression. These theories analyze the workings of power in society and its influence on normative concepts over time, allowing for deeper scrutiny of systemic injustices and their normative foundations (Mills 2005, 175). However, as David Estlund observes, prioritizing social theory too strongly may lead to analyses that rely on "intuitive or culturally current ideas about justice that cannot be philosophically sustained" (Estlund 2020, 17). For instance, a social theory might incorporate the widely accepted notion that meritocracy is inherently just, despite its philosophical vulnerability to objections concerning unequal starting points, structural disadvantages, and other critiques.[23]

In this sense, Estlund suggests that social theories, while ultimately appealing to the same shared normative intuitions they aim to move beyond, face all the familiar problems: they may fail to address contentious cases of injustice, reproduce hegemonic normative notions that support the preservation of unjust political structures, and inadvertently assume ideal theorizing without recognizing it. In each of these cases, the resultant social theory risks sustaining illicit social privileges.[24]

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[23] The example I provided is my own.

[24] One possible alternative that attempts to avoid the risk of involuntarily appealing to external normative standards is presented by the proposal of immanent critique, developed by Rahel Jaeggi. According to this perspective, it is possible to criticize society by evaluating norms, tracking the internal coherence between the aims of institutions, the current values of society, and their respective outcomes. In this sense, the lack of coherence reveals the limits of institutions and values and highlights the necessity of resolving this lack of coherence by

One might argue that ideal models risk being constrained by short-range social criticism, as they often draw upon intuitions shaped by the prevailing normative framework. However, two considerations mitigate this concern: (a) ideal models are subject to revision when informed by nonideal considerations, and (b) they can work alongside nonideal theory to challenge and expand the constraints imposed by the dominant normative framework.

Regarding (a), adopting a revisionist stance enables the development of alternative models that spark meaningful debates about the principles of justice, informed by insights achieved by nonideal theorists. Additionally, ideal models are open to evaluation and contrast in light of competing ideal theories. [25] Such debates, precluded by the anti-idealist rejection of ideal models, are crucial for expanding the scope of political theorizing.

It could be argued, as Mills does, that extending an ideal theory with nonideal considerations transforms it into nonideal theorizing, with the ideal components playing no significant normative role (Mills 2005, 178–179). Mills illustrates this through Okin's use of the Rawlsian original position, where the inclusion of sex and gender considerations shifts the theory from ideal theorizing to nonideal theorizing. This holds true even though the theory continues to rely on the ideal normative devices of the original position and the veil of ignorance. However, Mills's reasoning faces two significant problems.

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introducing new institutions and values that seek to achieve the intended internal coherence of the system (Jaeggi 2018). While this idea is attractive, it has several problems, as Rachel Fraser identifies. First, it involves a commitment to a demand for coherence that is proper to agents, rather than to agential entities, which entails a particular social ontology that, in itself, is controversial and requires further argumentation to be accepted (Fraser 2023, 106). Second, the identification of a lack of coherence within the system is not, by itself, a sufficient reason for changing or modifying society—unless a normative standard is provided to judge such contradictions as problematic. However, providing this normative standard involves appealing to external standards, which is precisely what the proposal seeks to avoid (Fraser 2023, 107-108).

[25] It is worth noting that ideal models are revisable, particularly in response to considerations raised by rival ideal theories. Importantly, ideal methodology does not preclude the use of reflective equilibrium as a mechanism for refinement. As DePaul observes, the dynamics of theory revision can operate at multiple levels, facilitating iterative improvements that better align with broader theoretical commitments. (DePaul 2005).

First, even if the resulting theory qualifies as nonideal theorizing, ideal considerations still played an indispensable role. They functioned as philosophical first insights, providing the foundation for nonideal theorists to advance their positions, even if they regarded the ideal model as flawed and in need of correction. This demonstrates that ideal theory retains its value, even when subjected to nonideal revisions.

Second, if we concede that incorporating nonideal considerations renders a theory nonideal, this undermines Mills's critique of Rawls as an instance of ideological ideal theorizing. As G.A. Cohen observes, and as mentioned in chapter one above, Rawls's theory was constructed with some nonideal considerations in mind, which are part of his description of the original position.[26] If Mills is correct that the inclusion of nonideal elements renders a theory nonideal, then Rawls's theory would itself qualify as nonideal.

This leads to a dilemma for Mills's position. Either his ideological critique applies to nonideal theories as well, since Rawls's theory would then be an instance of nonideal theorizing, or it applies only to purely ideal theories, such as Cohen's. The first horn must be rejected, as Mills explicitly endorses nonideal theorizing on the grounds that it is not ideological. However, the second horn is problematic, since one of Mills's central targets is Rawls's ideal theory. Thus, the assumption that the mere inclusion of some nonideal elements transforms an ideal theory into a nonideal one significantly weakens Mills's original critique.

Regarding (b), anti-idealism, by focusing on practical constraints, often operates within unexamined normative frameworks, relying on assumptions that themselves may require

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[26] Cohen's argument is complex, but it begins by establishing that Rawls concedes too much in his interpretation of the application of the difference principle. If a person truly accepts the difference principle, they will not require special incentives to maximize their productivity. Thus, this principle does not justify such inequality. At least Rawls concedes that individuals are authorized to behave selfishly without violating justice, and this selfish behavior does not undermine justice, even if it contradicts the principles of the difference principle as correctly interpreted. In this regard, Cohen argues that Rawls's perspective is influenced by a particular view of human behavior, one that he takes as natural. For Cohen, this view is insufficiently ideal to adequately capture the notion of justice (G.A Cohen 2008).

critique. While ideal scenarios are abstract, they serve to interrogate these assumptions, exposing overlooked possibilities for radical change. For instance, while anti-idealists may rightly criticize the deficiencies of liberalism or capitalism, their reluctance to engage with ideal models often limits their proposals to incremental reforms rather than advocating for a comprehensive reimagining of the system. But how can ideal theory play this role? Let us consider the common critique by non-ideal theorists of capitalism as a source of various forms of oppression in society such an exploitation, domination, and alienation.[27] A regular defense of capitalism is that, despite its defects, it remains the best system available, given that competitive alternatives tend to result in inefficiency (Hayek 2013) or tyranny (Nozick 1974). Thus, even if a non-ideal critique of the current system is adequate, it does not necessarily imply that the system must be changed in light of our lack of alternatives. This is where ideal theorizing must play a role, motivating the exploration of theoretical alternatives, as in the case of market socialism, which opens the possibility of an alternative model that aims to reconcile equality, efficiency, and freedom (Roemer 1992, Schweickart 2011).

Another example of how ideal theorizing enriches non-ideal theorizing beyond the confines of the liberal framework is Ypi's account of Marx's concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which she interprets as part of a "limited legitimacy theory of political authority" that seeks to move beyond both liberal theories of legitimacy and anarchist critiques of authority (Ypi 2020, 1). In this case, Ypi develops a non-ideal theorization of a transitional state leading toward a Marxist ideal of communism as an authentically free society (Ypi 2020, 2).[28]

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[27] For more information about the different critiques of capitalism See Gilabert and O'Neill (2024), Leopold (2022), Vallier (2022).

[28] "I shall bracket the part of the argument that explains how capitalism historically comes about, what is wrong with it, and why we ought to replace it with a different set of social relations. Suppose there is something wrong with the capitalist system of production, and suppose that communism is a justified ideal. The question is what legitimacy does the state have in the transition from one to the other? Can the oppressed exercise power over their oppressors in a way that realizes the ideal of freedom understood along the three dimensions set out above? What kind of practices of will formation are needed to prevent the emergence of a new class of oppressors and the obstruction of authentic freedom? This is where the dictatorship of the proletariat makes its entrance. Marx

## 3.2 Reformist Bias

Regarding the perpetuation of illicit social privileges, anti-idealism's focus on working within internal normative standards leads it to endorse incremental improvements, which can be understood as reformist change within Luxemburg's framework. Reformist change seeks to correct the system's deficiencies that can be addressed without altering its core elements. In this sense, reformist change aims to help the system endure, insofar as, without these deficiencies, the system is workable. The problem, however, is that this type of change does not always challenge the illicit privileges of those who benefit from maintaining the system's core elements. The concern, then, is that reformist achievements may function as concessions, designed to placate the oppressed and preempt more radical demands that could threaten the system's foundational aspects, such as the existence or distribution of private property, the class structure of society, or the existence of the state (White & Ypi 2016, 176).

Let us now consider how the rejection of ideal models as normative goals also reinforces anti-idealism's resistance to revolution. As Gaus explains, attempting to transition to a different "neighborhood" by striving to achieve the ideal presents both epistemic and normative challenges, which should lead us to reject the pursuit of the ideal scenario. Given that moving to another "neighborhood" resembles efforts to alter fundamental features of the socio-political structure, this reasoning functions as a plea for reform rather than revolution.[29]

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introduces it to answer the question of the role of the state and the necessity of a transitional form of authority that stands between the overthrow of capitalist relations and communist society" (Ypi 2020, 3-4).

[29] In *The Ideal, the Neighborhood, and the Status Quo: Gaus on the Uses of Justice*, David Estlund argues that while Gaus at times appears to defend a widely acceptable weak conservatism, according to which "some conceptions of an ideally just society would be (if not wholly implausible) too conjectural to defensibly serve as a practical goal or orienting direction. If unnecessary injustice is risked or accepted as part of the plan, then setting out on that path is reckless" (Estlund 2017, 920), his argument against ideal theorizing as a guide to political action tends to collapse this weak conservatism into a more controversial strong conservatism. On this stronger view, "stipulating for simplicity that worlds that are very similar to the status quo will not be dramatically less just, the uncertainty about how much less just dissimilar worlds might be morally disqualifies them (renders them 'irresponsible') as appropriate directions of change" (Estlund 2017, 921). For Estlund, the main problem with strong conservatism is that rejecting transitions or improvements that move the current situation into another neighborhood is not in itself problematic, provided that the foreseeable advantages are significantly greater than the probable risks.

Two relevant considerations arise here. First, anti-idealists may do well by rejecting revolution, and second, reform can do just as well as revolution in fighting injustices grounded in the core elements of socio-political systems. The first consideration is problematic because it leads to the outright rejection of revolution, renouncing a valuable tool for fighting injustices. While revolution does not guarantee immediate improvement in society's well-being and the resultant society may fail (White & Ypi 2016, 176), Gaus's epistemic and normative challenge is not a sufficient reason to reject revolution outright. There are additional epistemic reasons to support revolution, grounded in the historical successes of revolutions that have advanced more just societies and effectively challenged illicit social privileges (Smith, M.N. 2008; Wahnich 2012). Moreover, as Luxemburg argues, the failures of past revolutions offer valuable lessons for avoiding similar pitfalls in future struggles. While caution is certainly warranted in considering revolution, this does not necessitate its outright rejection (Guerrero, 2021, p. 425). Furthermore, as Ypi contends, revolution serves to "reshape the boundaries of political feasibility and, secondly, play a crucial role in motivating future emancipation initiatives" (Ypi, 2014, p. 264).[30] In Gaus's reasoning, rejecting the move into another "neighborhood" denies access to new normative and epistemic resources that are critical for both political theory and practice.

Concerning the claim that reform can achieve as much as revolution, there are compelling reasons for skepticism that lend support to Luxemburg's arguments. Albertus and

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[30] Ypi's explanation of the contribution of revolution in reshaping the boundaries of what is politically possible, and how this motivates future political initiatives, draws from an analysis of the revolutionary thought of Kant and Marx. According to Ypi, the central point is that for Kant, revolutionary actions such as those seen in the French Revolution represent moments when moral principles enter the political domain, motivating the transformation of political reality in light of these principles. In this sense, revolution is presented as a moment in which "moral dispositions that may have previously been considered utopian become a tangible practical possibility" (Ypi, 2014, p. 275). The contribution of revolution to political development, then, is its potential to transcend the particular interests that dominate politics, allowing us to see the revolutionary motivation as a drive toward universality. In seeking this, revolution promotes the establishment of new political institutions that reflect this more universal perspective in ways not previously envisaged. Once revolution occurs, these experiences serve as a foundation, inspiring future initiatives that aim to guide society toward an order in which normative ideals may eventually be fulfilled in the political domain, through the new institutions and values created and articulated by prior revolutions.

Menaldo's analysis in *The Stickiness of "Bad" Institutions* underscores this point. They show that many democratic governments emerging from right-wing dictatorships have retained constitutions deliberately designed to safeguard the economic interests of elites entrenched under those regimes. On this point, they mention:

> The most typical and powerful way outgoing authoritarians and oligarchs can protect their core interests is by designing strong, biased institutions. More often than not, these are created by a constitution that also orchestrates a democratic transition on terms and via a timetable that best suit their interests (Albertus and Menaldo 2020, 68).

While these constitutions often include mechanisms for their potential replacement, the institutional frameworks they establish make it highly improbable that such replacements can be achieved through legally sanctioned means. Some elements that help preserve these constitutions, which are favorable to elites, include the implementation of "federalism, bicameralism, prohibition on citizen-led legislation via referenda, and supermajority thresholds for constitutional change" (Albertus and Menaldo 2020, 71).

Finally, let us consider how the anti-utopian outlook of anti-idealism may contribute to its reformist bias. Estlund criticizes the claim that ideal theory sets normative standards too high to be feasible. He argues that if the standards are correct, practical limitations concern how to achieve them, not whether they are valuable or legitimate to consider (Estlund, 2020, p. 86). Moreover, he suggests that what seems implausible today may become attainable over time, leading to moral progress that was once deemed unthinkable such as "women's right to vote; legal abolition of slavery; legal marriage and other union rights for gays and lesbians; avoidance of world war for over 70 years and counting" (Estlund, 2020, p. 260).[31] Thus, it

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[31] Estlund expands on this consideration, explaining that sometimes the anti-idealist stance becomes an anti-dreamer stance, one that focuses on the limits and difficulties of achieving a goal and suggests courses of action that fall within what normally works, achieving incremental improvements within current limits and obstacles. This perspective, rather than showing prudence, reflects a short-sightedness that negates the value of dreaming of

could be incorrect to dismiss ideal models due to apparent practical limitations regarding people's current willingness to fulfill justice's demands.

The anti-utopian outlook of anti-idealism rejects revolutionary struggles aimed at advancing society toward the ideal of a fully just order. Anti-idealists such as Huemer argue that political projects must account for facts about human motivation, especially greed and selfishness, and that political change must accommodate these traits. As a result, they exclude progress toward a fully just society from the realm of realistic political activity (Cohen 2001, 118). Estlund terms this perspective "complacent realism," which restricts the range of political possibilities to what current conditions make feasible or given (Estlund 2020, 5, 10). Furthermore, Estlund contends that while the normative theory satisfies the demand that *ought implies can*, the consideration that it is unlikely people will behave according to its normative principles is not, by itself, a sufficient reason to dismiss the normative theory. As he states, "The fact that people will not live up to them even though they could is, in that case, a defect of people, not of the theory" (Estlund, 2020, p. 84).[32]

Talisse offers a related critique, arguing that allowing facts about human nature to shape normative standards often results in lowering those standards to accommodate moral deficiencies that we can clearly recognize as problematic. For instance, Talisse identifies implicit biases against stigmatized groups as a strong cognitive tendency, which this approach risks normalizing (Talisse, 2017, pp. 66–67). Another example of how anti-idealism tends to

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a radically better future. Such dreaming is not, by itself, a road to disaster. When combined with considerations of prudence that account for risks and costs, the pursuit of this improbable and difficult outcome may lead to new forms of improvement that were not appreciated in the past (Estlund, 2020, pp. 258–259).

[32] Estlund engages in a deep discussion of theories that are unlikely to be fulfilled, which he refers to as "hopeless theories." He argues that even if these theories may not directly counsel a particular action and, in that sense, do not involve normative principles, this is not an adequate rebuttal. A hopeless theory may still be normative in a certain sense, as it can be evaluative and provide a perspective in which a person and society as a whole may behave better, even if the person ultimately fails to completely satisfy the principles of the theory (Estlund, 2020, pp. 118–119). Estlund reinforces his own perspective on the value of these kinds of theories by defending the distinction between what he calls non-concessive principles and concessive principles. While the first kind may involve principles of a hopeless theory, the second consists of "a requirement that is in place owing to our conceding certain violations of other requirements" (Estlund, 2020, p. 6).

accommodate normative evaluations in a way that preserves morally deficient behavior appears in Huemer's dismissal of Carens's market as utopian.[33] He argues that it aims to reconcile equality and efficiency by assuming that agents might find the same motivation for being productive in fulfilling their social duties as agents in capitalist markets find in making a profit.

To consider why Huemer's dismissal of Carens's market is problematic, let's look at Huemer's vision of an anarcho-capitalist system, which he presents as realistic because it accommodates facts about "normal levels of human selfishness and strife" (Huemer, 2016, p. 224). Given that both scenarios seem particularly far from our current political reality, what distinguishes them is their assumptions about the normal levels of human selfishness and strife. In this sense, we can identify two problems with Carens's perspective.

The first is the assumption that there is a lack of selfishness in the case where someone acts in a way that fulfills their duties. However, the point of Carens's market is that people behave selfishly by, instead of trying to earn more than others, pursuing public recognition as exemplary citizens who serve as models for the rest of society. There is no reason to believe that this is a scenario in which the supposed "normal level of selfishness" that Huemer identifies is absent.

The second problem lies in the judgment of what constitutes a normal level of selfishness. Huemer seems to appeal to the idea that a normal level of selfishness is one that is consistent with a well-functioning human being, but it is not clear why the functional actor in Carens's market would not be considered a well-functioning human being. Huemer presents an

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[33] Huemer explains Carens's market idea as follows: "Joseph Carens develops a theory to demonstrate how a society could achieve the socialist ideal of perfect equality without sacrificing economic productivity. Carens's proposal is that everyone should be taxed in such a way that after-tax income is equal for all; however, everyone should still voluntarily strive to produce as much pretax income as possible, driven by a sense of social duty. This system, which includes the stipulation that citizens act altruistically, can be called the 'Carens Market.' How could this be realized? Carens believes that we can socialize people so that they derive the same satisfaction from fulfilling their social duty as they currently derive from increasing their personal, disposable income" (Huemer 2016, 218).

intuitive case of someone who sacrifices completely for people with whom they are entirely unrelated as an example of what he considers a non-well-functioning human being, but this is not the case for the agent in Carens's market (Huemer 2016, 229)[34].

In contrast, ideal theory challenges the assumption that human nature is immutable and emphasizes how socio-political structures shape behavior and motivations. Revolutionary movements build on this insight, advocating for structural transformation as a means to foster more just motivations (Cohen 2001, 119). By rejecting the idea that human traits are fixed, ideal theory supports a revolutionary vision that seeks to transform both societal structures and individual motivations, demonstrating the potential for moral progress toward a more just society.

## 3.3 Objections and Replies

It may be argued that anti-idealism can endorse revolutionary change, given its commitment to denouncing the current injustices rooted in the system, something a critical analysis, such as Haslanger's, can indeed accomplish. If injustice is embedded in the system, there are compelling reasons to seek change that aligns with a revolutionary perspective. However, fostering a revolutionary consciousness in society requires more than merely asserting that injustice is embedded in the socio-political system, as Wolpe's reflection on revolutionary consciousness suggests; it also requires envisioning an alternative model of society that revolutionaries seek to implement. In this context, anti-idealists face two options. First, they can develop a model that imagines a society without a specific oppressive relation.

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[34] I do not find it compelling to consider the scenario of the radical altruist as an example of someone who, according to Huemer, is crazy or has a completely different motivational system (Huemer 2016, 229). In the past, there were people who sacrificed themselves for the well-being of others with whom they had no relation, and this does not imply that they were crazy. Not only that, but many people have also been willing to sacrifice themselves for ideals or causes they viewed as greater than themselves. Perhaps Huemer's judgment reflects a particular inclination to dismiss this kind of behavior as something he himself is not open to, rather than offering a clear or adequate argument about what constitutes a well-functioning human being.

Alternatively, they can propose a model that envisions a society free from all oppressive relations.

In the first case, the ideal theorist may object that the anti-idealist, while constructing a model that excludes a particular relation of oppression, inevitably involves some level of idealization, which at least partially undermines the anti-idealist stance. Perhaps some anti-idealists are content with not being fully anti-idealist, but this approach faces significant problems. A recurring argument in non-ideal theorizing is that relations of oppression are interrelated (Nash 2008, Davis 2011, Gines 2011). Thus, it is insufficient to imagine a world without a single oppression, such as racism, because that oppression is strongly connected to other forms of oppression, such as gender and class oppression. A model that abstracts from only one form of oppression risks failing to capture the complex dynamics of real-world oppression. To be adequate, such a model would need to abstract from all forms of oppression. But once this model is constructed, the result is an idealized model of a fully just society.

Therefore, anti-idealists face a dilemma when considering alternative models: either they remain partially anti-idealist and ignore the non-ideal claim that intersectional oppression is a relevant concern, or they acknowledge the intersectionality of oppression and thereby abandon their anti-idealism. The first option renders anti-idealists poor non-ideal theorists; the second forces them to relinquish their anti-idealism. Given that, according to the previous dilemma, the only scenario in which anti-idealism yields a satisfactory model is one in which the thesis of intersectional oppression is false, the anti-idealist must not only assume a weak position as a non-ideal theorist but also provide an additional argument against intersectionality. This demand places partial anti-idealists in an uncomfortable position, as they must confront the claim that any step in political transformation that disregards intersectionality likely leaves the root structures of certain forms of oppression intact, thus permitting a

transformation that, in the end, preserves rather than dismantles core mechanisms of oppression.

Aware of this risk, the anti-idealist might attempt to construct distinct alternative models for each form of oppression. However, two problematic outcomes arise. First, if all forms of oppression are regarded as equally or differently pressing, the partial anti-idealist must ensure that these models are mutually coherent. Fighting or challenging certain injustices or oppressions may inadvertently reinforce others, so the partial models must leave enough room to accommodate the other possible models generated by abstracting other particular injustices or oppressions. A model that addresses gender injustice may inadvertently overlook or downplay race or class inequalities, or vice versa.[35] Yet, the demand for coherence among these models would ultimately generate a framework broad enough to accommodate all forms of oppression, thereby replicating the very kind of idealization that anti-idealism originally sought to avoid.

Second, if coherence across models is not prioritized, there is a risk that addressing one form of oppression might inadvertently reinforce or reproduce another. At this point, the partial anti-idealist must decide which forms of oppression are most pressing, thus engaging in a comparative analysis of oppression. One possible strategy is to rely on intuitive judgments, but, as demonstrated in the discussion of short-range social critique, intuition alone is not a fully reliable guide. Another strategy would be to appeal to a more substantive theoretical framework, yet doing so would require a commitment to a particular conception of justice,

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[35] White feminism serves as an example of this phenomenon, being a form of feminism that primarily focuses on the struggles and rights of white women, while often sidelining or neglecting the racialized experiences of women of color. It tends to prioritize issues such as gender inequality in ways that assume a universal notion of womanhood, typically framed through the experiences of white, middle-class women. Historically, white feminism has not always addressed the intersecting forms of oppression faced by women who are also marginalized by race, class, or other social categories. By focusing exclusively on gender, it risks reinforcing racial structures, as it fails to challenge the underlying social inequalities that sustain racial oppression. For further reading, see Fulfer 2024 and Lebens 2006.

thereby drawing anti-idealists into the very ideal considerations they initially sought to avoid. In sum, in attempting to construct a model for radical social change, anti-idealists would appear to appeal to ideal considerations, rendering their position internally inconsistent.

At this point, the anti-idealist may object that I am overestimating the role of idealized models in fostering revolutionary consciousness, given the silence of many proponents of ideal theory on the subject of revolution. If ideal theory were more aligned with a revolutionary stance, then authors such as Rawls would have been more engaged in discussions about the role of revolutionary change in societal progress. This suggests that ideal theory may not deserve the revolutionary credit I have attributed to it, as the facts appear to contradict this assumption. My response to this objection is fourfold.

First, let me clarify that the aim of this paper is not to argue that ideal theory is intrinsically revolutionary. I believe it is possible to construct a conservative or merely progressive account of politics using idealization. The feasibility of such an account will depend on the content of the theory and the specific elements theorists include in their model. Idealization per se does not determine the political orientation of the theory.

Second, revolution is more commonly associated with non-ideal theory, and this fact could be one reason why Rawls does not devote much attention to it. But this lack of focus does not entail that revolution is incompatible with his theory as presented in *A Theory of Justice*. There is nothing in Rawls' framework that rules out revolution as a legitimate response to extreme injustice. Consider the following quotation:

> In this sense militant action is not within the bounds of fidelity to law, but represents a more profound opposition to the legal order. The basic structure is thought to be so unjust or else to depart so widely from its own professed ideals that one must try to prepare the way for radical or even revolutionary change. And this is to be done by

trying to arouse the public to an awareness of the fundamental reforms that need to be made. Now in certain circumstances militant action and other kinds of resistance are surely justified. I shall not, however, consider these cases (Rawls 1999, 323).

Third, while Rawls does not engage deeply with revolutionary alternatives, other ideal theorists have dealt directly with the right to revolution. Locke's theory, for instance, grounds revolution in the defense of natural rights.[36] And although there is debate over whether Rousseau's political theory is revolutionary in itself, it is well-documented that it had a profound influence on the leaders of the French Revolution.[37] Furthermore, even Mills acknowledges the revolutionary potential in Nozick's principles of justice in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Mills 2005, 180).

Fourth, it is essential to recognize that a theory is significantly shaped by the moral standpoint of the theorist who constructs it. Some ideal theorists may present accounts that serve only to vindicate their privileged position, and such accounts are obviously less revolutionary. However, engaging with non-ideal theory provides an opportunity to revise our moral intuitions and guard against ideological distortion. I do not claim that ideal theory is the sole or even the best way to do political philosophy, but I do maintain that both ideal and non-ideal theorizing are necessary for a comprehensive understanding.

A final possible objection from anti-idealism is that I place too much importance on theorizing in political philosophy. One could argue that political philosophy itself does not directly determine the occurrence of revolutions or reforms. Therefore, even if anti-idealism were to reflect an illicit privilege in favoring reform over revolution, this would not ultimately

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[36] One may object that Rousseau and Locke are not ideal theorists, but the notion of the social contract and the transition to it from a state of nature is far from being an analysis of how injustices or oppression are or were structured in society. Perhaps Rousseau's reflections on the origin of inequality could be seen as addressing this, but in reality, Rousseau presents a conjectural history that begins with the concept of the "noble savage," a figure he himself acknowledges may never have existed.

[37] For more information, see Lauritsen, H. R., & Thorup, (2011) M. *Rousseau and revolution* (Eds.).

result in the reinforcement of such privilege, because theory alone cannot bring about reform or revolution.

I offer two responses to this objection. First, if political philosophy has no real impact on political outcomes, this lack of impact would undermine not just my critique but political philosophy as a whole, including Mills's claim that ideal theory is ideological. If philosophy cannot influence practice, then Mills's argument against ideal theory loses its force as much as my own critique. The objection thus overreaches, threatening to invalidate a broader range of philosophical critique than intended.

Second, while political philosophy may not directly ignite revolutions or reforms, it clearly contributes to shaping the intellectual landscape within which political thought and imagination take place. Gramsci's concept of hegemony reminds us that dominant groups maintain power not merely through coercion, but by cultivating a cultural and ideological consensus that naturalizes their authority, rendering alternative systems unthinkable. For instance, neoliberal ideologies, by framing market logic as inevitable and individual success as meritocratic, obscure structural inequalities and stifle critiques of capitalism. In this way, political philosophy, though not itself the agent of change, plays a critical role in framing the conditions under which change becomes thinkable, not only by identifying the problems or limits of the current system, but also, and equally importantly, by envisioning an alternative to it. To dismiss this is to overlook the indirect but real influence that philosophical reflection has on political consciousness, shaping the range of perceived possibilities and the plausibility of various forms of political action.

**Conclusions**

This thesis offers an ideological critique of a particular stance within nonideal theory, which I refer to as anti-idealism. According to this view, the persistence of ideal theory in academic philosophy is not only futile but also problematic and should be abandoned in favor of exclusively nonideal theorizing. The motivation for applying an ideological critique to anti-idealism is drawn from Mills's argument that ideal theory itself is ideological. However, rather than directing the critique at nonideal theory as a whole, I focus on the specific attitude of authors who explicitly reject ideal theorizing.

The thesis begins by outlining the debate between ideal and nonideal theory, starting with Rawls's original formulation of the distinction and subsequent contributions, particularly Valentini's. Valentini articulates the distinction along three axes: strict compliance versus partial compliance, utopian versus realist, and end-state versus transitional theories. I highlight the advantages of Valentini's framework while also noting its limitations, particularly regarding the characterization of nonideal theorists as exclusively transitional. Additionally, I clarify the role of ideal theory, arguing that its purpose is not merely to identify current injustices but also to propose aspirational political aims for society.

Having presented the ideal/nonideal debate, I turn to Mills's arguments for regarding ideal theory as ideological. I identify the conditions Mills uses to classify a theory as ideological: namely, that it reflects and perpetuates illicit social privileges. For Mills, ideal theory is ideological because it mirrors the disengagement of privileged academics from the most pressing issues of oppression and injustice. Moreover, Mills argues that ideal theory perpetuates these privileges by relegating the discussion of urgent social injustices to a

secondary role. Its purportedly neutral framework, detached from current oppression, may in fact depict a fully just society that inadvertently incorporates or overlooks elements that remain contested. I end this chapter by presenting the anti-idealist stance, which draws on the work of authors such as Sen, Gaus, Huemer, and others, and involves the rejection of ideal models, the evaluation of political improvements by internal standards, and an anti-utopian outlook.

The second chapter examines the distinction between revolutionary and reformist change, arguing that while both can sometimes lead to the same outcomes under certain circumstances, some transformations are only achievable through revolutionary struggle. To develop this argument, I begin by outlining the concept of revolution, explaining that whether one adopts a rights-based or interest-based framework for justifying revolution, substantive normative considerations about justice eventually become central.

I then turn to Luxemburg's analysis of revolution and reform in the dynamics of social change. Luxemburg characterizes reform as corrective and stabilizing, aimed at improving the existing socio-political structure, whereas revolution seeks to transform the structure itself. On this view, certain forms of injustice, particularly those embedded in the political framework, are impervious to reformist measures. Consequently, when injustice is entrenched in the basic structure, reform proves incapable of overcoming it.

Finally, I argue that because systemic injustices and oppression are often entrenched in core institutional features, revolution is sometimes the only viable means of achieving genuine structural transformation. However, since revolution is a perilous endeavor, and because people are not always aware of the possibility of altering the existing socio-political order, revolutionary change requires the cultivation of revolutionary consciousness. Drawing on Wolpe's account, I explain that such consciousness involves envisioning an alternative socio-political arrangement that motivates agents to pursue radical transformation. This final

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consideration is significant because ideal theorizing possesses a distinctive advantage over nonideal theorizing in supplying such alternative visions, given its reliance on ideal models.

The final chapter demonstrates how the anti-idealist stance satisfies a sufficient condition for being ideological: namely, that it reflects and perpetuates illicit social privileges, while also tending to fail in short-range social criticism and exhibiting a reformist bias. The chapter's dialectic shows how anti-idealism's tendencies to treat ideals as dispensable, to rely on internal standards for evaluating social progress, and to adopt an anti-utopian outlook contribute both to its limitations in short-range social critique and to its reformist bias.

The limitations of anti-idealism's short-range social critique are explained in light of its lack of ideal-theoretic resources for judging and criticizing current reality. In limiting itself to normative appeals grounded in either uncontroversial intuitions or a more substantive theory, anti-idealism undermines its own critical capacities. The appeal to uncontroversial intuitions is problematic, not only because these intuitions fail to engage with genuine controversies about justice but also because they may reflect hegemonic ideas that ultimately serve to preserve existing structures of power and domination. The alternative, drawing on a more substantive theory, presents its own difficulty: either the theory incorporates ideal considerations, thereby compromising the anti-idealist stance, or it remains beholden to the same problematic intuitions.

The reformist bias of anti-idealism is presented in light of its rejection of ideal scenarios. By evaluating political changes exclusively in terms of what appears achievable within the current normative standards accepted by members of society, anti-idealism, such as Gaus's, restricts the scope of transformation to modifications that do not involve radical structural change. This reformist orientation is particularly problematic, given that, as previously argued, certain forms of oppression are embedded in the core elements of the political structure and

cannot be eradicated through reform alone. Thus, the preference for reform functions as a tacit plea to preserve at least the core features of the existing order, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of those very forms of oppression.

The chapter also explains how certain features of anti-idealism, particularly its anti-utopian outlook, tend to conduce to what Estlund terms complacent realism: a form of political theorizing that lowers the threshold of justice to align with a particular conception of human nature or feasibility constraints. This tendency risks conflating what is just with what is achievable under current conditions. In contrast, ideal theorizing is less susceptible to such complacency, given its orientation toward transcending existing social realities in the formulation of ideal models. By aspiring to articulate standards of justice that are not merely tailored to current observed moral deficiencies of human beings, ideal theory is better positioned to resist the reduction of justice to the contours of present-day feasibility. Additionally, the exposition involves the relevance of ideal considerations for nurturing the revolutionary consciousness that is necessary to motivate revolutionaries to seek radical political change.

Finally, the chapter ends by considering possible objections and replies that examine the possibility of nonideal theorizing contributing to nurturing revolutionary consciousness by providing its own anti-ideal models. I explain why, if this is attempted, the result will involve some level of idealization, or, in the best case, an insufficient model that is equally capable of reproducing injustices and oppressions in society.

It is also important to emphasize the connection between short-range social criticism and the reformist bias. Anti-idealism's inclination toward short-range theorizing reinforces its reformist bias. Because anti-idealism avoids commitment to a more substantive normative framework, it tends to focus on identifying and endorsing more immediately evident and

intuitively compelling improvements that appear achievable within the existing status quo. This in itself is not necessarily a problem. However, it becomes problematic if such an approach is taken to define what it means for political theory to be politically relevant. While it is crucial to concern oneself with specific, tangible improvements and to seek their realization, it would be a mistake to ignore that political theory may also aim at broader transformations, transformations that require deeper commitments to political partisanship, collective organization, and struggle. It is therefore of significant importance to resist the notion that political activity is confined solely to what can be pursued within the parameters of the existing legal order.

This project also leaves open the door to further investigation regarding in which sense, or to what extent, idealization may contribute to enriching nonideal political theory and which strategies may be pursued to avoid the risk of being ideological. For now, the risk of being ideological seems to be ever-present for both ideal and nonideal theory because it is possible to be unaware of which elements of our society and culture distort our understanding of justice. In this sense, caution recommends considering the risk as always present and, in that sense, rejecting the perspective that attributes ideological distortion to a specific kind of theorizing. This is important because it prevents us from lowering our guard while engaging in our preferred kind of theorizing.

Finally, it remains a matter for further investigation how and in which ways the contributions of both theories should be evaluated, as both may lead to incompatible outcomes. By this, I mean that while ideal theory may lead theorists to endorse a particular socio-political arrangement, nonideal theorizing may reject it, given its own methodological procedures. I do not have an answer to this question, and for now, it is clear that theorists will prefer one or the other depending on their own position. This is not an ideal response to the question, but as I have developed throughout this thesis, the ideal is not easily attainable. For this reason,

attempting to resolve this issue is itself an ideal that is worth pursuing, but I leave this to future

research.

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