THE SWEDISH WELFARE STATE AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS.

On realism and the priority of order

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Note to readers: This paper outlines an argument that I will try to develop at greater length in my dissertation, which will be a monograph in Swedish. I would be grateful for comments on the argument itself, but also methodological reflections. I will frame my dissertation as an attempt to do political theory in a "realist" key, and I'm thus very interested in finding the right balance between principled arguments and historical and empirical context.

¹ A previous version of this paper was presented at the MANCEPT conference, Manchester, September 7-9, 2016.
The decision

At a press conference on the 23th of November 2015, the Swedish vice prime minister Åsa Romson started crying. In the preceding years Romson and her party, the Greens, had profiled themselves as the most open and radical in its stance on migration, repeatedly demanding the dismantling of carrier sanctions and visa requirements for asylum seekers. But after being in power for just a year, Romson had agreed with its coalition partner, the Social democrats, to move sharply in the opposite direction. During the autumn of 2015, the number of asylum seekers had soared, some weeks approaching 10 000, and the year would end with a total figure of 162 000 asylum seekers, a doubling of the previous record year from the Yugoslav war. The government’s press conference in November, barely three months after the prime minister Stefan Löfven stated, at a Refugees Welcome rally, that ”My Europe does not build walls!”, announced many restrictions in asylum policy, both in terms of limiting access and in the generosity of its terms. For instance, the government activated an emergency clause in the Schengen Agreement in order to introduce ID requirements and carrier sanctions on travels from Denmark, a border crossing that had not required passports since the start of the Nordic Passport Union in 1954. All with the explicit purpose of reducing the number of asylum seekers wanting and being able to reach the Swedish border.

The immediate reasons for a more restrictive policy were the strains on public services, the lack of housing for asylum seekers, and the inability to process applications timely and with quality. In the longer run however, there is a concern for the sustainability of the welfare state. The so-called progressive’s dilemma might finally have caught up with Sweden, a polity that otherwise have been taken as evidence to disprove the thesis of welfare chauvinism: that the welfare rights of citizens are made to justify the exclusion of outsiders.1 What sets the present

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situation apart is the sheer numbers. The average number of asylum seekers have been around 25,000 yearly from the 1980's up to 2010. With that level Sweden have been the highest receiving country, per capita, in Europe for the last 30 years. Yet since 2010 the numbers show a steady increase: 44,000 in 2012, 54,000 in 2013, 81,000 in 2014, and 162,000 in 2015. The direct costs in the state budget for processing applications, housing of applicants, and a two year long support to receiving municipalities have increased tenfold since 2006. The cost is equivalent to the combined cost for the police, the courts and all higher education. Given the increased stress on the police and welfare services – stress that cannot even in the short run be solved by throwing money at it, since the lack is primarily in housing, public facilities, and trained personnel – there is no doubt that there will be further effects on welfare provision and public services to citizens.

The refugee crises surely constitute a case of genuine clash of values and priorities. There is agreement in the literature on migration that there is a trade-off between open borders and the welfare state, since both the sheer capacity of rich countries, and the willingness of citizens to pay, will not suffice to offer welfare rights and services to everyone crossing the border. A choice thus has to be made. While it is less obvious in the case of the right to asylum, the same hold for this subcategory of migration. Due to the increased worldwide number of refugees, the right to asylum being absolute in its formulation, and the lack of any burden-sharing agreements, there is the same choice to be made between the welfare state and a wholehearted commitment to the right to asylum (i.e. one which is not cynical and uses carrier sanctions and other methods that are obviously incongruent with the meaning and purpose of the right to asylum).

Redistribution”, and Möllerström (2016), ”Ethnic fractionalization and the demand for redistribution – Potential implications for the Nordic model”.


See for instance Carens (1992), ”Migration and Morality: A liberal egalitarian perspective” and Woodward (1992), ”Commentary: Liberalism and migration”, for a classic exchange about the priorities within liberal egalitarianism.

For more on the logic of migration streams and burden-sharing, see for instance Noll (2003), ”Risky Games? A Theoretical Approach to Burden Sharing in the Asylum Field”; Kritzman-
In this difficult issue, we as political theorists might give a helping hand, and do our part in spending intellectual effort on the very actual choices and circumstances that politicians are faced with. The movement of "realism" has certainly been pronounced in political theory in recent years, and one of its hallmarks have been the complaint against mainstream political theory that it has insulated itself from the empirical realities of politics. But it has been easier said than done. Already in 2012 Mark Philp advised that political realists themselves needed to "get their hands dirty", in the sense of actually doing political theory in a realist key, and certainly there comes a point at which one might start to wonder whether there is more to realism than methodological and meta-theoretical claims. Realism must live up to its claim to take politics and context seriously. This paper is an attempt to do just that, and move on from realism as a set of meta-theoretical claims and into actually conducting first-order realist theorizing.

More specifically, the paper discusses the implications of realism’s high valuation of political order, the insistence that "the first virtue of politics is order". I will critique one instance of what I would describe as an ideal-theoretical tendency in the literature on migration. Namely that of viewing the welfare state as primarily "a scheme of justice", and as something that is above and beyond political order. This neglects, I argue, the historical role of the welfare state in Europe’s transformation to social and political stability, and also illustrate the tendency of theorists to theorize as if we could start from a blank slate, neglecting that the welfare state, when in existence, becomes a particular form of order, which can be dismantled only at some peril.

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5 See for instance Rossi (2016), "Can Realism Move Beyond a Methodenstreit" who reflects on this issue in relation to recent works by Michael Freeden and Matt Sleat.


7 In suggesting, as I will do, that safeguarding the welfare state indeed is a valid justification for restriction on refugee migration, it is important to note that question about the response to the refugee crisis is only in part about the extent of one’s obligations and efforts in regards to the current refugee crisis, but also about the form. See for instance Wellman (2008), "Immigration and Freedom of Association" and Wellman (2016), "Freedom of Movement
The right to asylum and the priority of order

But first of all we need to appreciate the difficulties in arguing that a concern for the welfare state could justify restrictions of refugee migration. In the general literature on migration and borders there are three major grounds that may be invoked (or not) to justify restrictions on migration in general. The most controversial is cultural values and a group’s self-determination, often defended by communitarians such as David Miller and Michael Walzer. A second justification is the maintenance of the welfare state – both in sheer economic capacity and the citizens’ long-term willingness to support it. A third is the more minimalist condition that only when political and public order is threatened restrictions may be justified. On the side of migrants there is also crucial distinctions to be made: that between economic migrants and refugees. While the ordinary migrant move to better his or her economic and social well-being and life chances, the category of refugees is intended to pick out those whose circumstances give them no choice but to migrate (i.e. “forced migration”). The difference in voluntariness is given moral weight in that states’ sovereignty to control migration is restricted to economic migrants while the right to asylum overrides sovereignty. The stakes are simply higher when movement is motivated by persecution and war, in comparison with when the motives are to better one’s life chances from a baseline of acceptable political and social order. The burden for excluding refugees are thus higher, and it leads for instance Walzer to make the right to asylum an exception from his general defence of the state’s right to control migration.8

8 Walzer (1983), Spheres of Justice, s. 51. Indeed, Carens notes that Walzer is surprisingly strict in upholding the right to asylum “even in the face of very high costs” (Carens (2013), The Ethics of Immigration, p. 332, n. 43).
The case for giving priority to the welfare state in the face of the claims of refugees is thus a difficult one for two distinct reasons. One is the fact that welfare rights appear to go beyond the baseline of a political order. The other is the status of the claim to enter, which in the case of asylum is of a particular strong kind as compared to migrants in general. The "luxury" of welfare rights for insiders cannot override the fundamental needs of people forced to flee their homes.

There are good reasons for thinking that realists might nod in agreement to this feature of the literature, since it seems to square with their typically high valuation of order and fear of disorder. Realists, as Galston has pointed out, typically views order rather than justice as the first virtue of institutions. As Bernard Williams puts it:

I identify the "first" political question in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation. It is "first" because solving it is the condition of solving, indeed posing, any others.\(^9\)

On these grounds a realist would certainly be sympathetic to the claims that people living in anarchy or state persecution do in fact suffer from a worse kind of ill than mere poverty. Thus, in the frequent debates over the definition of "refugee", the emphasis in the Convention's definition on the political nature of the cause for migration might get support from a realist perspective, and thus be on the side that recommend keeping with the traditionally strict definition rather than the expansion that some theorists propose.\(^10\) At the same time the minimalist public order constraint seems to be a plausible ground for when a state in fact do have valid reasons for limiting such migration.\(^11\) In sum, the literature on forced migration give great weight to order/disorder: it is the threat of instability and disorder giving

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\(^9\) Williams (2008), *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, p. 3.

\(^10\) Cherem (2016), "Refugee Rights: Against Expanding the Definition of a “Refugee” and Unilateral Protection Elsewhere”.

\(^11\) The Convention is characterized by its obligations are absolute, in that it does not include any conditions under which a state can be said to have reached a limit or its fair share. From a philosophical point of view this is not at plausible stance, and even Carens and others who would argue for very stringent obligations on states concede that the state's functioning in maintaining public order remains a valid limitation of the obligations stated in the Convention. (ref Carens)
rise both to the strong claims of refugees and to the limits of a particular state's responsibility towards them.

Realists, who are typically preoccupied with navigating between the opposing threats of anarchy and state repression might then, when it comes to the issue of migration, find inspiration in the works of Judith Shklar.\(^{12}\) Herself a refugee, Shklar reflected on the peculiar situation of people suffering persecution or the collapse of political institutions. In her essays on the topic, she specifically attempted disentangle the question of political obligation from the more exclusionary demand for loyalty. She urged her readers to, amid growing numbers of refugees, to really consider "the call of conscience in the face of group loyalty".\(^{13}\) Her exchanges with Michael Walzer she described as "a dialogue between an exile and a citizen, and as such it was not born yesterday".\(^{14}\) Communitarian theorists, she wrote in "The Liberalism of Fear", lacked a sense of history, taking free and functioning political institutions for granted.\(^{15}\) History instead should inspire "suspicion of ideologies of group solidarity", and a focus on universal evils, and not giving in to "those who find liberalism emotionally unsatisfying" – just the kind of people who had created or supported the oppressive regimes of the 20th century, which in turn created the European catastrophe.\(^{16}\)

**The social democracy of fear**

In the writings of political theorists, the welfare state may be described as an institutionalization of a scheme of justice, and those inclined like Shklar would want to warn about the "ideologies of solidarity" that perhaps must be invoked to achieve

\(^{12}\) I leave to the side the question of whether Shklar should be labeled a realist.

\(^{13}\) Shklar (1998), "Obligation, Loyalty, Exile", p. 52.


it. But viewed in a different light, the welfare state is rather the creator and guarantor of social and political order, rather than something above and beyond. Shklar's "negative" political theory has sometimes been challenged as too pessimistic – Walzer wondered if there is not also a place for more positive ambitions, and Williams was anxious to stress that, "in good times", there is a place also for the "politics of hope". Welfare rights and public provision of education would be prime contender for such more ambitious politics. But the thought I want to pursue here is precisely that the welfare state can be justified on purely "negative" grounds – from the concern for order and stability – rather than as a realization of justice and equality. That is, to challenge the implications of realism's prioritization of order.

This can be done by further considering the case of Judith Shklar. As Walzer writes, her vision of politics was the result of a particular historical period and experience:

> This is a politics founded equally on the history of war and revolution in the twentieth century and on Shklar's own experience: as she escaped from the Gestapo, so should we all. The liberalism of fear is a bulwark against Nazism in particular and the secret police in general.

This means, however, that what institutions and policies that might derive justification on "negative" grounds, is dependent upon one's interpretation and explanation of the calamities of the 20th century. For what were the causes of the regimes that created fear and terror? In the essay "What is Dead and What is Alive in Social Democracy" the historian Tony Judt invited his readers to see postwar politics and intellectual life as a duel between two rival stories of the rise of fascism and collapse of liberal institutions. It was Hayek versus Keynes. For Hayek and several other Austrian thinkers – all forced into exile by fascism – the key explanation lay in the excessive belief in and prerogative of state planning, and the state generally being viewed as the realization of communal goals. Such views raised the stakes of power, and led predictably to the end of democracy and pluralism. Conflict would be reduced, and peaceful cooperation would ensue, if the state were instead kept at bay,

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and out of economic and social planning.

For Keynes, however, the diagnose was quite different. It was economic and social insecurity – the turbulence of industrialisation, urbanization and modernity – that had made people susceptible to demagogues and totalitarian ideologies.

If there was a lesson to be drawn from depression, fascism, and war, it was this: uncertainty — elevated to the level of insecurity and collective fear — was the corrosive force that had threatened and might again threaten the liberal world.20

Thus, if we with Shklar ”fear a society of fearful people”,21 and at the same time share the Keynesian rather than the Hayekian diagnose of the 20th century's collapse, then we arrive, as Judt does, at a ”social democracy of fear”.

In this light, social democracy was the answer that the century had needed all along. According to Sheri Berman the historical role of social democracy was that it offered, in competition with fascism, an answer to the alienation and social disruption that industrialisation and capitalism had brought about, and which had not adressed by classical liberalism and to which marxism counseled passivity, expecting the inevitable end of capitalism. Social democracy had two pillars. One was ”the primacy of politics”, the idea that politics should set the stage and the rules for capital and markets, and thus let the economic forces be contained and made subservient to the citizenry. The other was a communitarianism for mass society, the idea of a community of citizens and the state as responsive to their collective good, in contrast to a vision based on inevitable (and international) class struggle.22

However, there were competitors as proposed solutions to the malaise of modernity. Fascism and national socialism in essence shared the two pillars: in the same way as social democracy, these ideologies of the right rejected the apolitical and passive approach that united, for very different reasons, liberalism and marxism, and instead


21 Shklar (1998), Political Thought and Political Thinkers, p. 11.

hailed the primacy of politics and the role of the state in shaping society, and it certainly offered to reinvigorate communal sentiments for the modern age. Fascism and social democracy was thus competitors, addressing similar needs, complaints and aspirations, but in very divergent ways. It is only in retrospect – with the great battle between fascism and democracy inevitably in our minds – that some may feel surprise at the many leftists who participated in the birth of what would become fascism, or the much greater numbers of ordinary voters who subsequently made a transition of creed.

Then, if what one fears is the rise of fascism and the tensions and disorder that such political movements bring about, it is not clear that Shklar's cosmopolitan liberalism is what one should put one's bets on. While Shklar insisted that theorists must develop a strong sense of history, the lessons of history might well tell against Shklar's own view. Simply put: few of the millions of people who now or in the past have been tempted by fascist or populist movements, would ever have been convinced or attracted to what Shklar would offer them. Rather, in the historiography of Sheri Berman, it was the welfare state, which arose during what Judt and others have called the "the social democratic moment", that defined the twentieth century’s change of direction towards peace and stability. The market forces were to be politically controlled, economic insecurity kept at bay, and an idea of a overarching political community in a mass society were envisioned – all resulting in "the reconciliation of things long viewed as incompatible: a well-functioning capitalist system, democracy, and social stability". Inspired by Durkheim and Polanyi, Sheri Berman’s view of what turned Europe from one of the bloodiest


24 Mark Lilla once suggested that, had Shklar lived to pursue her project of writing about exile and political membership, she would have to face the seemingly universal communitarian needs of humans. See Lilla (1998), "Very much a Fox"; Hess (2014), The Political Theory of Judith N. Shklar. Exile from Exile, p. 199-200;

25 One possible objection to Berman and Judt is that they overstate the role of social democracy and do not sufficiently acknowledge the role of Christian democracy in the development of welfare state institutions. This point however is not directly relevant to the present paper, which in the end is more concerned with the welfare state rather than the movement and achievements of social democracy in itself.

26 Berman (2006), The Primacy of Politics. Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth
regions in the first half of the century to one of the most peaceful, is arguably more empirically convincing than Shklar's recommendation.

**The welfare state as order**

This particular normative motivation – the social democracy of fear – is not everything that from a realist point of view may be said about the welfare state and political order. Let us now instead allow that the motivational force and philosophical justification of the welfare state has been more optimistic and ambitious, a realization of "a scheme of justice". It is no doubt likely that a more optimistic rhetoric of hope and progress was indeed crucial for gathering the support necessary to construct the welfare state. But even then, the realist may be wary of the claim that justice in migration demands, if it came to the crunch, a dismantling of the welfare rights of citizens.

Because even viewed as the realization of a scheme of justice, the welfare state, when in existence, influences people's decisions, life plans and expectations. It becomes a complex scheme of social cooperation. Swedes, who pay between 40 and 50 percent in direct and indirect taxes, are dependent on the state and its ability to provide health care, child care, education, and so on. It is not merely the economically insecure that rely on the safety net of the welfare state, but the vast majority of the population rely on the public services of the state. This is precisely why it functions to shore up social and political order.

This however have some peculiar effects. One might take note, as the sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge has, of the similarity between the function of the welfare institutions and that of the state monopoly of violence:

> Social security in general, and social insurance in particular – even if compulsory – are instruments which give a sort of guarantee to be able to cope with future adversities or difficulties. [...] This means that one is enabled to reckon with the future without too much particular individual effort. In this sense, the impact of these arrangements resembles that of the public monopoly of violence. Social..."  

*Century*, p. 17, 213.
security schemes reduce the necessity of being constantly on the alert for fear of (socially manageable) adversities in the same way that the monopoly of violence frees the citizen from the constant obligation of preparing individually for unexpected attacks.27

One might be struck by a curious similarity between Keynes and a certain Thomas Hobbes. Keynes thinking, as described by Judt, harboured a similar founding fear – the fear of insecurity and its detrimental consequences. The similarity between the two kinds of institutions warrants bearing out: both the monopoly of violence (the state in its minimal core) and the social security and public provision of goods functions to reduce individual insecurity, mutual suspicion and rivalry, and instead help to establish peaceful and trustful relations. But if so, one must also consider the flip side of this increased security. The welfare state and the monopoly of violence also share the feature that they work to reduce the sense of insecurity only to the extent that doubt and insecurity do not pertain to the system itself. Finding oneself unarmed when the public monopoly of violence falters is the worst imaginable scenario, and hence levels of trust are crucial – trust in "the system" and at bottom trust that others too will trust it. With the stakes being so high, a cycle of mistrust is always a possibility. In the case of the welfare state institutions, the dynamic of distrust and effects of system failure is not as easy to predict. Suffice to say that with the kind of taxes the citizens pay, few are able to set a side money for private alternatives of health care for the family, university education for ones’ children, or elderly care for ones’ parents. Citizens are thus "trapped” in this scheme of social cooperation, and hence they cannot then take lightly on issues of the state’s future capacity and commitments, and on the willingness of others to also play their part.

The argument here is thus not the same as the previous section, that the welfare state can be motivated on realist grounds through its function of creating order, but that a realist may, given the existence of the welfare state, council against its abandonment, in the fear of disorder as a likely consequence. The realist priority of order is, for Geuss and others, conjoined with a sense for historical context: ”the concepts of 'order' and 'intolerable disorder’ are themselves variable magnitudes”.28 That means that as a theorist, one should be wary of theorizing like a founding father, "just off

27 Ferge (1999), ”And what if the state fades away?”, p. 231.
28 Geuss (2008), Philosophy and Real Politics, p. 22-23.
the boat” as Williams once put it, but rather engage into political thinking *in medias res*. The point here is that a decision not to construct welfare institutions and a decision to dismantle such institutions when in existence, are decisions that differ in very important respects, and they cannot be treated as simply two versions of the same choice. When the welfare state is in existence, though initially motivated by justice and solidarity, it influences decisions, expectations, and relations – it is a particular kind of order. We might be appalled, but if welfare rights are cut and public services are deteriorating due to the burdens imposed by large scale migration of refugees, more than a handful of those tax-paying citizens would feel that legitimate expectations have been unfulfilled, and a new insecurity has crept upon them. It is not difficult to imagine that social and ethnic tensions could ensue.

One possible worry about this argument is that the concept of "order" suffers a form of inflation, similar to what is sometimes claimed in relation to justice: that every minor difference or slight become cases of "injustice", thus diluting the concept of justice itself and the moral weight of claims of injustice. However, this does not take into account the distinction between the theorist definition of order, and the empirical question of perceptions of order/disorder among the citizenry. The first question is what actions, events and circumstances are recognized as constituting "disorder" (or as constituting valid complaints of disorder). The argument above does not rely on expanding the scope of this definition. It is the built upon the claim that other people’s perceptions and expectations change. The main thrust of the argument is based on the empirical claim that people, for good and bad, change their expectations, and that the actions that spring from those perceptions and expectations are likely to have de-stabilizing effects. "Inflation" is a possible accusation, but then it should be directed towards the citizens, not necessarily toward the theorist. The realist theorist can remain wedded to the basic and minimalist conception of order, yet acknowledge, as a matter of sociological analysis, that the threshold for "unbeareable" disorder – be it economic, social or political – has changed. That is the basis of his or her policy recommendations. It is not a claim that the scope of what events and actions counts as disorder should be widened (and thus not that the scope for when the methods and policies that are justified by reference to order are correspondingly widened.

29 Williams (2008), *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, s. 58.
This might seem a fine-tuned distinction, and one may worry that in practice it will get lost. Yet it is quite fundamental, in that it concerns the very basis of the distinction between "realism" and "idealism". It is a characteristic of idealistic political theory to be concerned with what people ideally should think and do, rather than with what politicians should think and do given what people actually think and do.

**Conclusion**

What does realism’s priority of political order entail in the specific case of welfare states facing large-scale migration? I have argued that while realism prioritize order over justice, it is not clear that they have good reason to accept the seemingly congruent argument in the literature on migration that the concern for order is the only valid grounds for exclusion, in contrast to concern for welfare right och cultural self-determination. Because the distinction between order and welfare may, on a plausible historical and sociological account, be found unsustainable. The rapid expansion of the welfare state in postwar Europe coincides with a change in fortunes: from an extremely violent first half of the century, to a half that saw social and political stability and peace. The welfare state in any case re-orders the order, so to speak, and it becomes difficult imagine that a rapid dismantling of those institutions would not precipitate widespread social tension and political instability. To insist on the distinction between welfare and order is, at least in the Swedish case, to treat the choice and the situation as if we were asking how to set up society "from scratch", in which case we could neatly discuss "order" and "welfare" as different values and ask whether any of them might warrant restrictions on migration. This indeed can be a theorist’s approach, but it does not represent the actual political choice.

This signals of course that at bottom we are also dealing with a methodological question as well as one of political ethics. The validity of the arguments above simply look very different depending on what background assumptions one makes. Some political theorists might take the view that the role of theory is to judge from a distance, offering views about what justice demands, and urging citizens and politicians to adopt more enlightened views and values – and therefore take care precisely not concern themselves to much with the circumstances of the choice. In Joseph Carens’ view the only disorder that normatively counts in regard to the public
order justification is the disorder which is immediately caused by migrants themselves, not any reaction among the citizens. This is on one level immediately sensible, since the alternative introduce a sort of moral hazard, with theorists adjusting their normative judgement in response to those willing to commit immoral acts (violence, tax evasion, voting for xenophobic authoritarians, etc etc). Theorists and politicians inspired by Weber’s ”ethics of conviction” would be willing to follow Carens view, thinking that if good actions have evil consequences ”the responsibility must lie not with the agent but with the world, the stupidity of men”.31

Yet, if one imagine oneself as a decision maker, with the responsibility for the consequences of the choices made, making a normative distinction based on different sources of destabilizing behavior seem a moot point.32 For the real question is: what would you actually do, if you for instance had the power to abandon carrier sanctions and visa requirements? If you dismantled these measures, would you have peace of mind, convinced that the immoral responses by members of society, brought about by the strains and insecurity that the your policy led to – are not your responsibility? Or would you adopt Weber’s ”ethics of responsibility”, in which the decision maker ”reckons with exactly those average human failings”, and do not ”shift the consequences of his actions, where they are foreseeable, onto others”.33

That great conflict between conviction and responsibility, or idealism and realism, cannot of course ever be settled. One may only make suggestions for what lines of thought and action would follow from them in any particular case, and perhaps lament the dominance of one or the other. That is what I have tried to do in this paper. Realists in political theory typically insist that it would be a shame if those trained to think about politics and morality did not themselves confront and consider the very actual situation and choices that politician find themselves in. Realism thus


31 Weber (2004), *The Vocation Lectures*, p. 84.

32 Strangely, Carens argument comes when Carens explicitly is saying that he is not discussing ideal theory, but the very actual justifications of actual border restrictions. That surely is a mischaracterization, since the argument simply invalidates the typically non-ideal consideration of non-compliance with fairness.

33 Weber (2004), *The Vocation Lectures*, p. 84.
tend to be agent-centered — that is, it "judges a normative statement according to whether one would want to adopt a strategy that relied on it".  

This offers a certain perspective on the political turnaround in Sweden in the fall of 2015. Unsurprisingly, the vice prime minister Romson and the whole government received severe criticism from two opposing corners: from one camp, the charge of betrayal of ideals, from the other the charge of having for so long being blinded by ideals and wishful thinking. Yet the tears of Romson perhaps should give us pause for thought, and lead us to reflect on the nature of political choice and morality. At least if we value a politics that offer a middle ground between idealism and cynicism. As Bernard Williams has remarked, given the nature of politics – as involving hard and tragic choices – we should be wary of treating politicians in such a way that, in the end, "the only persons attracted to a profession which undoubtedly involves some such (disagreeable) acts will be persons who are insufficiently disposed to find them disagreeable".  

Realists would of course claim that Romson had indeed been insufficiently inclined to truly reflect on the consequences of actually carrying out the proposals that most closely matched her ideals. But is she not merely a mirroring a corresponding failure of political theorists to properly engage with that kind of choices as well? How come, if politicians have to navigate such dangerous waters, political theorists get of the hook? Carens, for example, does not want anyone to derive "advice" from his open borders argument. His is not a policy proposal, but a description of what just institutions should look like. But then one must question the value of his theory, since it cannot reasonably be invoked even as yardstick for evaluating policies and institutions. In practice it of course will be read and trickle down in either of those two ways. Either it will, after all, inspire political actors and supporters to propose excessive idealist policies that even Carens would probably acknowledge be unfortunate. Or it will be used as an yardstick again existing policies and choices, and thus, since the gap between those policies and the stated ideals will be so large, it will:


36 Carens (2013), The Ethics of Immigration, p. 278.
breed cynicism about politics.